

THE PRO APPROACH

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Michael Haugen's Heel-Toe Final Step: Is It Right for Your Game?

2007-08 WAS A BREAKOUT SEASON on the PBA Tour for Michael Haugen Jr. Not only did the 12-year pro break through for his first title in Merrillville, Ind., but he parlayed that victory into a triumph in the PBA Tournament of Champions. Will anyone ever forget his come-from-behind triumph in the title match over Chris Barnes?

After two fair years and being dangerously close to losing his Tour exemption, what accounted for Michael's amazing turnaround?

He says he went back to doing what he does best. Like almost all players, he had been exploring the perimeters of his game. His goal? Again, like almost all players, it was to hook the ball more.

Well, he had trouble doing that. It took a very intelligent decision for him to go back to his "A" game, which involves rolling the ball very straight.

Some bowlers get so wrapped up in trying to be what other players are, they lose touch with who they are. While it's wise to try to add more types of shots to your bag of tricks, you must make sure that they complement the game your body allows you to play. This requires solid understanding of how your game functions, so you can make small adjustments without getting lost — something that is very difficult to learn.

When Michael went back to his straight game, he also decided he would play all the patterns outside, around

the first arrow, to start.

The only pattern that provides difficulty in this regard is the Shark, because of its length. The Shark can be played out on the fresh, but because the lanes are oiled to 44 feet and there's a heavy concentration of oil in the center, the shot moves into the center of the lane very quickly. This pattern normally requires a strong release to carry the corners, especially as the shot moves in. Straight players can keep up on this pattern for a while, but after four or five games, the shot gets out of their reach. Haugen finished 14th last season on the Shark in the tournament at Hawthorn Lanes in suburban Chicago, so he can compete on it.

Michael has a very fundamentally sound five-step approach. He has very good timing, a full 180-degree swing arc, and a very straight backswing that tucks inside on the way down — just enough so he can get some side roll and tilt.

One unique thing about his game is that he doesn't slide; he heel-toes his last

step, a move that commonly is called planting. He enters his last step just like all the players who slide. His leg has a lot of knee bend, his toe is down (almost touching the floor) and his heel is

high — just like other players look before they slide. But as his left foot moves forward, his leg straightens out and the toe points more upward. Then the heel hits the floor, followed by the sole, planting the foot on the floor.

The problem with this type of final step is that the leg goes from bent and ready to slide, to straightened out. So, when the foot plants, the knee has to re-bend to get



Going into his last step, Haugen's form seems reasonably typical and/or "textbook." The sole of his foot is parallel to the approach, and a long slide appears imminent.

ready for the release. While this is happening, the upper body has to wait for the foot to get firmly planted on the floor and the knee to bend before the body weight can transfer over the last step for the release. With so much happening on the last step, it limits the number of things one can do to a bowling ball.

One of the big problems — besides the extra moving parts — is that most bowlers also straighten out their spine angle as the leg straightens out. So, the upper body is now moving away from the release as the swing moves forward. Michael does not do this, however. He has a perfect 45-degree forward spine tilt when entering the slide, which is when the knee of the left leg is just starting to pass the right leg, and just before the toe would nor-

mally touch the floor. From that point to the release zone, Michael does not lose any forward spine tilt. As a matter of fact, he actually leans a little more forward; when his arm is perpendicular to the floor, ready to release the ball, his spine tilt has moved to 55 degrees. From a side view, this puts his arm directly in line with the sliding leg and the ball next to the toe of his left foot. At this point, his thumb starts to come out, his hand continues to travel forward, and his body tilts slightly more forward, helping provide extension through the ball.

There have been some very successful heel-toe players in the past, including 10-time Tour champion and PBA Hall of Famer Dave Ferraro, and six-time titlist Ron Palombi. However, for the majority of bowlers, it's better if they

can slide because there's a lot less going on with the slide leg, and it's less stressful on the knee and hip.

I would *not* recommend changing a "planter" to a "slider" if their game has matured and they have been bowling for a long time. So much is happening on that last step, it's very difficult to change years of muscle memory without weeks or even months of practice and struggle. I really don't like to see people getting worse in order to get better. It's better to work on the swing path, release and spine angles than to worry about the type of last step. But if you are a young or new bowler in the very developmental stages of your game, by all means work on sliding.

The forward spine tilt is something that is very misunderstood. I use BowlersMap

software to calculate my angles, and there are other programs that also can do this.

To me, the perfect spine angle when the ball is ready to come off the hand is 45 degrees. You look at this from a side view when the ball gets to the bottom of the swing and the bowling arm is perpendicular to the floor. With the 45-degree tilt, the ball should be at the side of the sliding foot with the proper amount of knee bend.

I would look at a range of 35 to 55 degrees as being acceptable. Parker Bohn's tilt is 40 degrees, Pete Weber's is 50, Mike DeVaney's is 48, Chris Loschetter's is 51, and Michael Haugen's is 55. Interesting, isn't it?

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As Haugen's long last step continues, the sole of his foot pulls up. This causes him to plant — not slide — at the moment of release.