



THE PRO APPROACH

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The Ongoing Evolution of the Game, and How Teaching It Has Changed

IS BOWLING A DIFFERENT GAME now than it was ten, twenty, thirty, forty years ago? Has teaching changed over the years, and do the same principles apply today as in the past? Are the bowlers different now than they used to be?

Personally, I think it's the same game I began learning to play in the early 1960s and am still working at learning. Although there have been major technological advancements, just as there have been in every other sport, the objective in bowling always has been and always will be to figure out the right angle to the pocket for the best chance to strike.

The first really dynamic

change came when the soft polyester ball became the dominant ball. Before that, there was basically hard plastic and rubber. With the softer ball, players were able to throw bigger hooks. And that trend continues with the current crop of urethanes and exotic weight blocks.

To complement the evolution of the bowling ball, much harder finishes were developed for the wood lanes.

Then came the introduction of the synthetic lane. Since then, the lane conditioning machines have become very sophisticated — to the point where the lane man knows exactly how much oil is applied to each board.

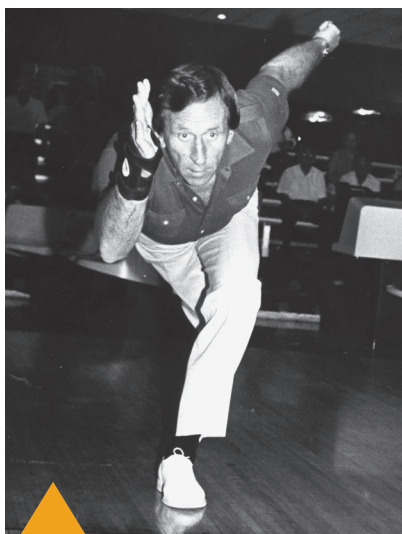
During the 1960s, accuracy was the key to success. The style that was taught and developed at that time was fairly simple. Most of the bowlers played the second

arrow because the lane finish would wear in that part of lane, and it was beneficial to keep the ball very straight in that track area. If the ball was rolled wide of the track, it wouldn't hook back.

So, players learned to bowl with their shoulders very level and square to the lane. The backswing was low, the upper body was more vertical, and the turn on the ball was minimal — not a lot of side roll. Control was the key. Even those with a lot of power, like Carmen Salvino, couldn't hook it like today's players because of the lane surface and balls.

In the late '60s and early '70s, a different style of player emerged. The swing was higher and the turn on the ball was greater. Barry Asher, Johnny Petraglia and Don Johnson were some of the top players of the time. They still exhibited the square shoulders and more vertical spine angle, but had more hand action.

Johnson was the best of that era. He had great timing, a very loose swing, a rock-solid finishing position and could play anywhere on the lane. Don developed a very square upper body position, but was able to initiate a lot of hand action. He did this through his "figure-eight" movement



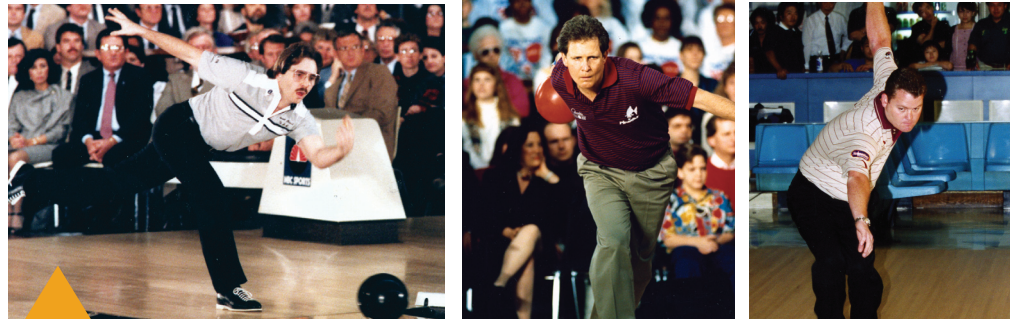
A 45- to 50-degree forward spine tilt has been evident in the games of top stars of several eras. In the 1960s, it was Don Carter (left). In the '70s, Earl Anthony. They don't get much better than that.

during the swing. The thumb would rotate counter-clockwise in the backswing, and the wrist would be arched back with the palm on top of the ball as the ball passed the body on the way back. At the top of the swing, the hand would rotate back to square and the wrist would straighten out, and on the forward swing, the fingers would work their way under the ball, then rotate the ball at release.

As the '70s continued, a whole new crop of talent was emerging. Mark Roth became the father of the modern power game; he had the high swing with a lot of hand action, speed and revs. But he still had the old-style square shoulders. Wayne Webb was one of the very successful power players who opened his shoulders. He had the high backswing, open shoulders, and got lots of lift and turn. He was wild when he first came out on Tour, but was very dangerous when he had a "look." Webb developed into one of the top players of the '80s when he tamed down his ball.

The '80s saw the introduction of urethane balls, starting with AMF's Angle, which out-hooked the soft plastic and rubber balls. There was a saying in the late '70s and early '80s on Tour: "Crank, you go to the bank; stroke; you go broke." The urethane balls carried the oil down quickly, and the power players could hook the ball around that oil and also use it for hold down the lane. The straight players used the front end to get the ball into a roll, and the carry-down for hold in the backend. That has always been part of bowling, but in the era of the low-flaring soft urethane, it was more prevalent.

The early '90s saw the



Other stars who have exhibited 45- to 50-degree forward spine tilts have included (from the left) Mike Aulby, David Ozio and Jason Couch. Even so, many coaches still teach tilt of just 15 percent.

resin urethane balls come into play, with exotic cores that produced a lot of track flare and covers that soaked up the oil. This dramatically altered how the lane conditions would change with play, as the oil on the front end was erased much faster.

This resulted in a renaissance for straighter players, with Walter Ray Williams winning 23 times and Norm Duke 16 times on Tour. Mike Aulby, Parker Bohn III and Brian Voss also had good runs through the '90s. The new balls helped them get more hook, and the balls hit harder. So, accuracy and fast, precise lane adjustments were required.

This trend has continued through today, with stars like Pete Weber, Tommy Jones, Jason Couch and Wes Malott combining big hook balls with great accuracy.

So, do we teach the game differently today than 40 years ago? Yes... and no.

Through all of bowling's eras, bowlers with a number of different styles always have managed to win. Over the course of a career, solid, repeatable fundamentals have been and remain the key to success.

The fundamentals are good timing, swing, balance

and release. With these four attributes, one can develop a wide variety of shots and repeat them. Bowlers always have had to adjust their release, speed, loft and where they play the lanes, and the ones who adjust the best go to the bank.

What makes teaching different is that we now have a wider variety of lane conditions and balls to use. The fundamentals are the same, but much more has been added to the teaching equation.

One problem many bowlers have is relying too much on the ball to produce results; they don't look within to figure out how to play the lane. Today's top players, however, are not ball crazy; they are very smart in recognizing what the lane is giving them to play on.

A bowler now needs to understand ball reaction and pin carry. This requires an understanding of ball fit, how to "work out" a ball, taping the holes and ball dynamics. It also requires knowledge of how specific balls react on specific lane patterns. In short, there's more to know, and thus more to teach.

We can see that teachers are different today, but what about the bowlers? The biggest difference is that the

best of the big-hook players use more upper body rotation. The high-swing player's timing is more advanced to accommodate the length and height of the swing.

The other big difference is in forward spine tilt — 45 to 50 degrees at release is more common than the old 15-degree tilt that has been taught forever... and continues to be. That said, when one looks at top stars in all eras, the 40- to 50-degree tilt was not uncommon. In the '60s it was Don Carter; in the '70s, Earl Anthony; in the '80s, Mike Aulby; in the '90s, David Ozio; and today, Jason Couch and a lot of others.

Today, more good coaches are being produced than ever before. PBA Tour players are representing their companies in advanced clinics around the country, getting heavily into lane play. They will help build the foundation for the next generation of bowlers — who, in some ways, will be very similar to bowlers of generations past... and also very different in ways we can't yet foresee.

Bill Spigner is a Gold-level coach, three-time PBA champion and long-time pro shop operator. Visit his Web site at billspigner.com.