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THE PRO APPROACH

BY BILL SPIGNER { bills@bowlersjournal.com }



His Game May Not Be 'Classic,' But Shafer Succeeds by Repeating Shots

RYAN SHAFER HAS FOUGHT through a lot of obstacles to be one of the PBA's best players over the past 13 years. He's definitely one of the most underrated and unluckiest players on tour.

Ryan started bowling at a young age at his father's bowling center. He would go there everyday after school, and on Saturdays, he'd bowl in the junior league and then watch "Pro Bowlers Tour" on ABC. After the show, he and some friends would imitate their favorite pros — not a bad way to learn how to bowl.

Ryan tried to imitate Steve Wunderlich for a while, moved on to Marshall Holman (by starting bent over from the waist), and then decided to hit it like Mark Roth. But he couldn't repeat shots, and ultimately developed the unique game he has today.

Ryan enjoyed early success with the "big boys," climbing from 212th place early in the 1986 U.S. Open all the way to an eighth-place finish — a pretty good way for a 19-year-old to start his pro career.

Also at 19, Ryan was diagnosed with Type 1 Diabetes. He is insulin-dependent because his pancreas produces no insulin at all, and this required him to take injections and monitor his insulin five to six times per day. When taking the injections, he had to chase them with food every three hours.

This made it difficult when he was bowling long blocks.

So, in 2005, he decided to use an insulin pump. He says this allows him to be more accurate with his insulin intake and control the lows and highs while bowling. With the pump, he is given low doses of insulin every hour, and he can lower the doses while bowling because blood sugars drop while exercising. The Diabetes doesn't keep him from doing anything, as long as he is diligent with his preventive measures.

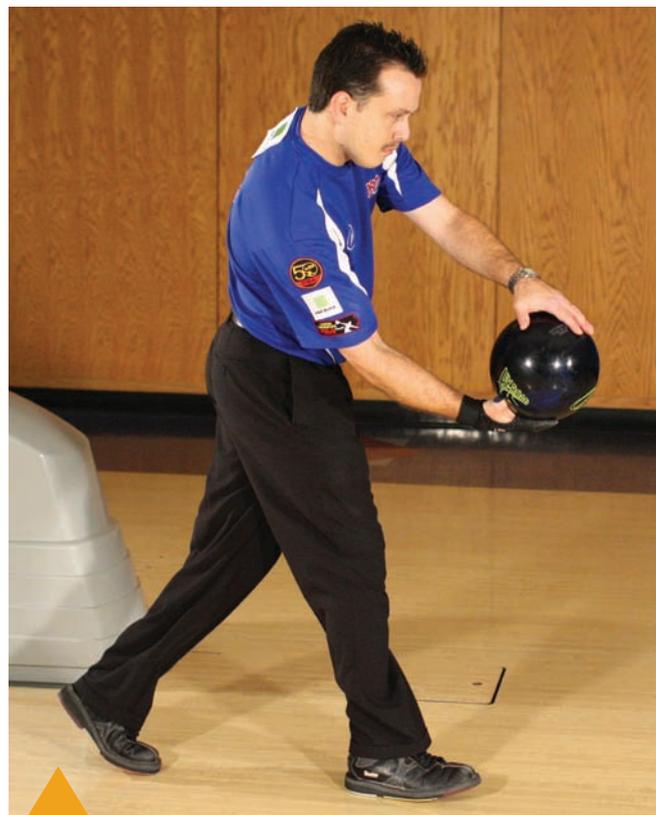
Besides eating correctly and taking the insulin properly, he has a great off-season regimen: He bowls five days per week for an hour-and-a-half to two hours per session. He also goes to the gym for an hour and 15 minutes at a time, doing 45 minutes on the treadmill and 30 minutes of weight training, mostly for his legs.

Ryan has eight Tour titles, which would be a good career for most. But he has 11 championship round appearances in majors, with four second-place finishes. His winning percentage on TV is very low compared to most multiple title-holders. In

2000, he made 11 championship round appearances in 19 tournaments — a pretty amazing season — and won

two of the events. But because of his incredibly bad luck on TV, he has never been viewed as one of the Tour's elite bowlers by the PBA or the media, even though he should be.

Ryan's overall success in major tournament stems from the fact that he likes tough



Shafer has a very erect stance, and places the full weight of the ball on his bowling hand — not recommended by most coaches, but a method that helps simplify the process of getting the ball into the swing properly.



lane conditions. "I wish every week was the U.S. Open," he says. "There's no help on the lane. I can play fall-back, straight up 12, or slow-hook it. It all depends on the volume of oil and what squad I'm on."

Conversely, he hates the Cheetah pattern. He says there is too much help on the lane and it doesn't differentiate between good and bad shots. "If I won the lottery," he says, "I would buy the PBA and outlaw [the Cheetah pattern]; it is not a professional lane condition. I need to become terrible to bowl well on it."

Ryan is a five-step player who has some unique things about his approach. In his

set-up, he has his right shoulder about 30 degrees lower than his left — more than normal or recommended.

Looking at his stance from a side view, he stands very erect, with his right hand under the ball and his left hand right on top of it, so the complete weight of the ball is in his bowling hand. A lot of instructors teach and believe that the weight of the ball in the stance should be in the opposite hand. This may work for some, but is not necessary for most. If you hold all the weight in the opposite hand, it's difficult to get the bowling hand under the ball in the stance and in the right

position to start the movement of the ball. Also, when you start the ball in motion, you have to transfer the weight back to the bowling hand, which can be difficult to achieve consistently. There's just too much going on.

With Ryan's set-up, his pushaway is good and right on time. His timing to the line also is good, with his head-high backswing coming down as the left knee just starts to pass the right going into the slide.

Another unique thing about his delivery is his spine angle and knee bend. Ryan has more side tilt (about 40 degrees) than forward tilt (about 30 degrees) when the ball is ready to be released; this is very unusual. With the extra side tilt and lack of knee bend, the upper body is not balanced well for his release.

At the point of release, Ryan straightens out his left leg and lifts up through the ball with a lot of force. Because of this position at release, and subsequent action of the release, he falls off to the right after the ball is gone. But the most important thing about his release action is that his right shoulder stays lower than the left and never lifts up, and the shoulders are perpendicular to the line on which he wants the ball to travel.

Ryan is a very aggressive player who can play anywhere on the lane except the twig (meaning straight up the gutter on the first three boards), which he really doesn't want to learn how to do. He is a very adept at lane play and understanding ball reaction — two of the most important things a bowler needs to be able to do. Ryan's early experimentation with differ-

ent styles helped him learn a lot of different "looks," and that has helped him evolve into a master of the game.

He keeps his ball drilling very consistent, with 5.5 to 6-inch pin placements. He would either have no extra hole, or vary its placement to tweak ball reaction. He has no favorite drilling, but likes predictable ball motion so that he can manipulate the motion with his hand. A lot of bowlers look for the ball to do everything, but it should be viewed as a tool to complement what you can do with it. He uses a lot of different equipment, but doesn't want the drillings to dominate what the balls do.

Ryan's targeting system also is simple. He likes to target anywhere from the foul line to the splice (just past the arrows), preferring to use the dots for his strike ball. If the lanes are hooking, he looks longer; if they're tight, he looks shorter.

For spares, he targets at the arrows and uses a plastic ball that he throws hard and straight at most spares. For his corner pins, he stands 15 and looks at 18 to make the 7-pin, and stands on 38 and looks at 21 for the 10-pin. He moves accordingly off those two pins for the rest of the spares.

"Don't bowl like me — it's too hard to repeat," Ryan cautions. "Repetition is the most important thing in the game."

That said, Ryan is living proof that all styles can work in bowling — if you can repeat shots and play lanes correctly. Whatever your style is, learn to perfect it.

Bill Spigner, a member of the USBC Hall of Fame, is a Gold-certified coach. Learn more at billspigner.com.



Shafer lifts up through the ball with great force at the point of release. His shoulder position is perfect for consistent targeting, even though he falls off to the right after releasing the ball.