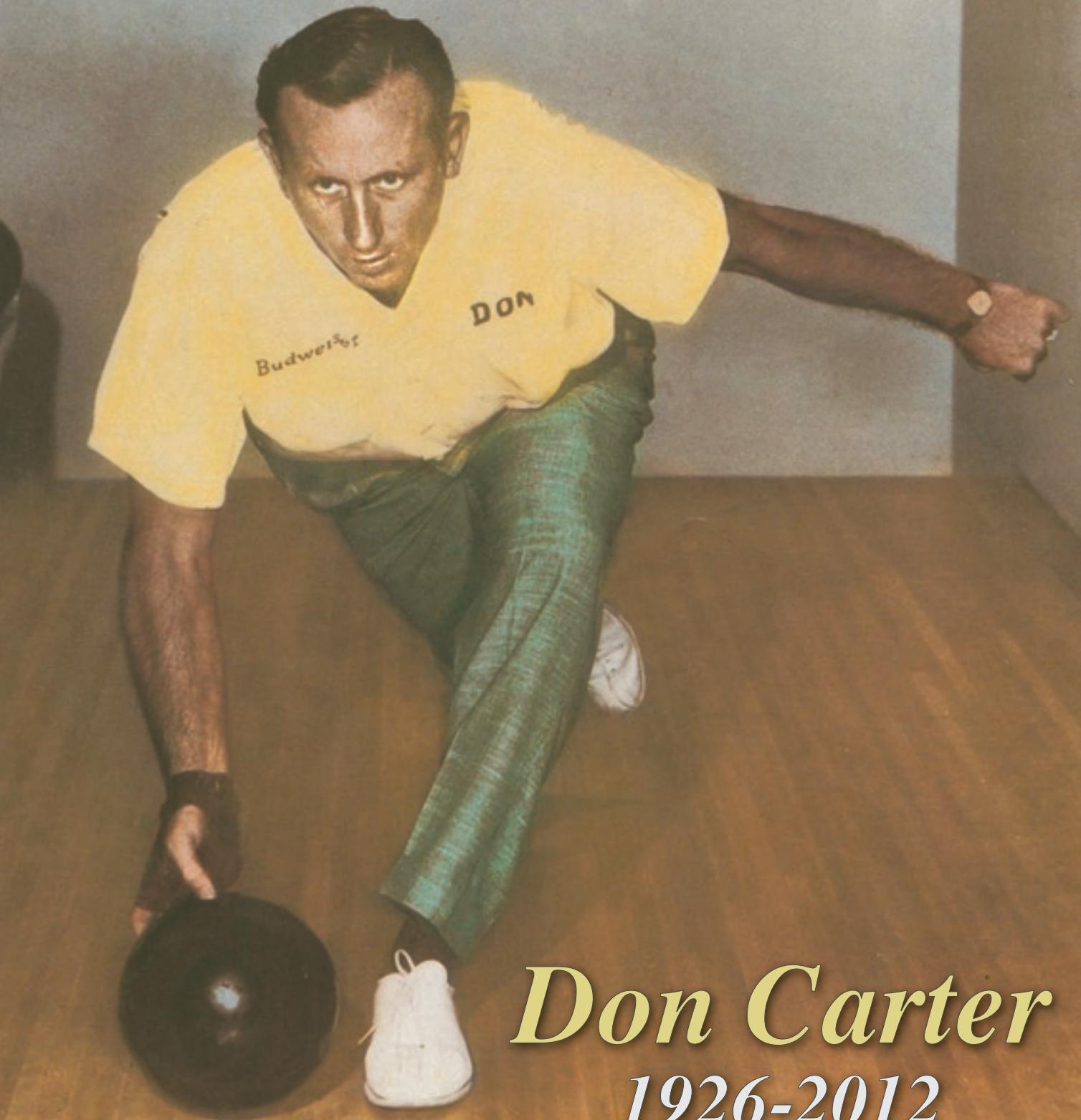


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# THE PRO APPROACH

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## Nothing Fancy... Just Effective

**FROM THE START OF HIS** professional career, Tommy Jones was destined for greatness. In his first full season on tour, at age 20, he cashed in 20 of 27 events and earned Rookie of the Year honors.

It took him three years to win his first title, but then in a span of three years, he had amassed 10 wins — something he did faster than any player in PBA history. After only six seasons, he was a virtual lock to one day be elected to the PBA Hall of Fame.

Tommy doesn't do anything fancy; he just does everything well. I'd classify him as a modern-day power stroker.

He starts his five-step approach from a very solid set-up: feet pointed straight ahead, ball held about waist level, with the weight of the ball equally distributed between his hands and his non-bowling side shoulder. He looks very relaxed and ready for action.

There is one aspect of his preparation that's quite different. When inserting his hand in the ball, he puts the thumb in first, while walking up to his starting position, then puts his fingers in. The thumb goes in, and then he places the palm of his hand and his fingers on the ball before putting the fingers in the holes.

Think of the thumb hole being at 6 o'clock and the finger holes at 12 o'clock. His fingers are pointing to about 10 o'clock after he puts his

thumb in and places his palm and fingers on the ball. Then he twists his hand clockwise to insert the fingers. This locks the thumb in the ball and sets it in position.

When the fingers are inserted, he has to lift them up; it's like he hooks the fingers into the ball. This gives him a very firm hand position without having to squeeze the ball.

To make this possible, the grip span needs to be on the relaxed side. T.J. said he learned how to bowl this way, and inserting his thumb first has resulted in the development of a large callous at the base of his thumb. When he tries to put his thumb in last, he can't get it in all the way. He says his method enables him to have the thumb hole tighter than most people would like, but he can relax his hand knowing he's not going to lose the ball at the bottom of the swing.

Most bowlers don't realize how much they squeeze the ball, or how much squeezing slows down the speed of the arm and hand through the bottom of the swing. If you have to squeeze the ball in order to release it on time, you need to have a tighter thumb hole.

Tommy's first step is more

of a slide; it's flat-footed, and mostly stays in contact with the floor. Brad Angelo and Chris Barnes also do this.



One defining aspect of Tommy Jones' game is his early ball placement. This second step of his approach leads to a very long third step.



T.J. starts moving his ball just before the first step is completed, and the placement of the ball into the swing is done before the second step is completed. At the completion of the second step, his ball is knee-high. At this point, he has established his spine tilts, which are going to be similar up to the release position. His tilts on step two are about 30 degrees forward and 30 degrees of side tilt — a lot for most bowlers. But his ball placement is early, and he needs to have these tilts at this point so the ball can swing past him under his shoulder and head.

Tommy's third step is

pretty long, and his swing travels about 160 degrees. That's a lot on one step, but most of the high-swing players see their swings travel a long way on this step.

Step four is shorter than three, and Tommy's backswing is complete as the fourth step finishes — right on time.

Step five is a long slide, and the slide is completed just as the ball is passing the right knee. This makes his timing a little late, but that's much better than being early. At release, he has about a 50-degree forward spine tilt and about 33 degrees of side tilt. His ball reaches the lowest point

of the swing for the release just as it passes his ankle.

Looking at Tommy's swing and footwork from a rear view reveals much of the reason for his long-term success: He possesses one of the best swings in the game.

The way he locks his hand in the ball by placing the thumb in first allows him to let the ball swing free and straight as a string. He doesn't resist the weight of the ball by cupping his wrist or squeezing the ball. His hand opens up during the backswing, following the lead of his shoulders opening, which places his hand on the inside of the ball at the top.

Tommy's footwork also is among the straightest on tour. He doesn't have a "clearance step," which many of the five-step players have on step two and/or step four so the ball and arm can swing under the body. His side tilt early in the approach allows him to walk straight because he doesn't have to clear the lower body out of the way.

On the downswing, just as his arm gets parallel to the floor, Tommy loads up his elbow (slight bend) and draws the ball inside so the arm, hand and ball are traveling in an inside-out path through the release zone. He doesn't cup his wrist to get under the ball; it's his elbow flex that places his fingers below the equator of the ball for the release.

Tommy has a very strong release, and can hook the ball with the best of them without over-working. When

the ball gets to the release, his bowling-side shoulder moves down, the elbow straightens, and he lets the weight of the ball roll off his hand. This produces a lot of speed, helping create a lot of revs.

Tommy is very well balanced at the release. Even when his trail leg comes off the floor, it drops back down in the right spot. He stays balanced and doesn't fall off to the right.

Some hip problems have affected his balance on spares to some degree. It's always more difficult to stay balanced when shooting corner pins — especially left-side spares for right-handers and right-side spares for left-handers.

Tommy always worries about his swing getting too steep on the downswing, and it's tough to change things you can't see and measure; a lot of it is feel.

The hard part is figuring out what causes the feeling at the end of the shot. Most bowlers can look at the beginning of their approach and see what makes them feel the way they do at the end.

You can control the set-up, the beginning of the approach and the finish. But in-between, you have to let the body go.

Tommy's one liability: playing outside. "I've been able to survive out there, and grind until the shot has been broken down," he says. "But I'm learning some tricks to stay there longer and use [playing out] as a tool rather than a chore."

That's good advice for anyone to follow: Work on your liabilities.

*For archived "Pro Approach" features, visit [billspigner.com](http://billspigner.com).*



Jones loads up his elbow in preparation for his release. He's perfectly in time at the end of his fourth step, then slightly late at the finish.