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## POWER TOOLS

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# STEPHANIE ZAVALA'S ROAD TO RENOWN

HOW THE PWBA'S ROOKIE SENSATION DEVELOPED HER DEADLY COMBINATION OF POWER AND ACCURACY.

BY BILL SPIGNER





**W**ords like “historic” or “unprecedented” sometimes get tossed around a little too freely in sports, but the feat within Stephanie Zavala’s grasp at the halfway point of the 2021 PWBA Tour season would define both: With two titles already to her credit in her rookie season, Zavala is vying to become the first player in the history of women’s professional bowling to win Player of the Year and Rookie of the Year in the same season.

Zavala is no stranger to success on bowling’s biggest stages: She has been successful at all points of her career — making Junior Team USA, becoming a collegiate All-American in her senior year with Sam Houston State, and now quickly becoming a marquee name in the pro ranks. She is one of the increasing number of youth and college bowlers who gain incredible experience bowling major events on extremely demanding conditions that prepare them for anything bowling will throw at them.

All that experience didn’t come without a lot of hard work and help. No one can do it alone today, as there are just too many hidden variables to learn to be successful. The big ones include the physical game and the mental side of the game (which incorporates many things), understanding lane patterns, topography, bowling balls, and how the patterns change from start to finish — commonly called “transition” today. And, possibly the biggest of all — knowing yourself. It’s hard to mix and match all those things, but doing so is necessary for success at the highest levels. Zavala, for her part, checks every box.



Hybrid Last Step: Zavala's hybrid last step starts with her toe up and heel down (left), and she keeps her head forward with sufficient spine tilt and knee flexed. So when her foot flattens out (center), it slides a little and she has a smooth transition from the start of the last step to the release (right).





## Combining Power and Accuracy

Growing up, Zavala's only coach was her father (Armando) until college when Sam Houston State head coach Brad Hagen took over that role. Hagen had taken on the job to start up the program there in 2010 and developed it into a perennial top team in the country. The program's NCAA National Championship in 2014 was the college's first NCAA Championship in any sport. So Zavala was in good hands with Hagen, a coach who has a proven track record of developing players and teams.

One thing Hagen inherited when Zavala surfaced in his program was the powerful release she developed at a young age. Going into college, power wasn't an issue; the issue became how to harness that power to compete successfully at the higher level of college bowling. Combining power with accuracy can be an issue on tougher lane conditions if the physical ap-

proach hasn't been refined enough to be consistent. At a young age, the body isn't physically developed enough to support the weight of the ball during the swing, so the body will do a lot of things outside of what's considered fundamentally correct to support all the forces involved with a big release and faster ball speeds.

When Zavala started college, Coach Hagen began the process of refining her physical game. By then, her physical strength had developed enough to control the forces used for power without a lot of moving parts. He did this without taking away her powerful release, which was and is the hallmark of her game.

## Losing a Step... On Purpose

Hagen switched Zavala from five to four steps so he could work on getting her push-away changed to unhinging the ball, keeping the ball close to her during the start. Her old push-away was





**The Reverse-Loop Swing:** While many might think otherwise, Zavala's back-swing (shown below and on page 68), which is out away from her body, is the signature of a very good, loose swing. The great Don Johnson called this type of swing a "reverse-loop," which really helps increase speed on the forward swing (page 69) without the use of muscle.



out and to the right with her hand opening excessively, resulting in the hips and shoulders opening early and causing the swing to go inside quickly on the back-swing.

The great thing Zavala did, which made it work up to college, was she would walk way left, about 20 boards. She was walking away from her swing so her body wasn't in the way of the forward swing. This enabled her to project the ball along her intended target line, which was very inside-out without the ball being trapped behind her back — a great athletic move. But at the collegiate level, where accuracy is critical to success because of the very demanding conditions and the highly refined talent, her extra moving parts were getting in the way of accuracy.

Going to the four steps — unhooking the ball in front of her right foot and keeping the shoulders, hips and feet straight ahead — changed her back-swing path and hand position to the top of the swing. Keeping her hips and shoulders square to the foul line and her ball placement much shorter, earlier and in front of her right foot instead of out to the side where it was, allowed her arm to now go outside on the back-swing and be right of her head (from a rear view) at the apex of the swing instead of left of her head.

## The Secret to Zavala's Closed Hand Position

With everything now being straight ahead, her hand position closed. This put her hand on the outside of the ball (with the thumb rotating counter-clockwise from a rear view) as it passed her body on the back-swing even though she still had her wrist cupped, cocked and very open in her stance. This hand position was not planned; it just turned out that way because of the squareness of her hips and shoulders and maintaining a very loose swing.

The closing of the hand helps the ball play lighter on the back-swing because of the hips and shoulders not opening as much, which complimented

## How Zavala's Pre-Shot Routine Pays Dividends Both Physical and Mental



Zavala's pre-shot routine is one that anyone can follow. Just before she sets up, she takes a deep breath, then tells herself three letters: HSP. "H" for HIT the ball with the fingers — which she has the callouses on the finger pads to prove — but not grab it. "S" for SMACK, meaning to finish with her hand all the way through until it smacks her back. She does this without muscling it there; it's the completion of a very fast hand through the ball, which many great women players do. And "P" for Post, which is finishing with her legs and feet in position to support all the forces of her game like a tripod under her body providing stability for her release, which is very important. She keeps herself posted until the ball is at least halfway down the lane. She uses that time to watch the ball and reflect back to how she thinks she rolled it and gather information about the lane to be able to make adjustments. Blocking out all other thoughts to focus just on these three aspects of her game each shot helps Zavala maintain a quiet mind and a simple thought process before and through-out each shot, and the benefits this brings to her mental game are immense.

— Bill Spigner

Hit, Smack, Post: Zavala's excellent hand position and time differential between the thumb and fingers exiting helps generate her high rev rate ("Hit," top), while her back-smacking follow through embodies the free completion of her shot ("Smack," middle). Finally, her manner of posting every shot ensures needed stability at the line ("Post," bottom).



the refinements to simplify her upper body movements. This in turn allowed her to walk on a straighter path because the ball wasn't going inside too soon, which was forcing her leftward walk to clear the body out of the way for the forward swing.

The end results were a straighter walk and a reverse loop in the swing, with the hips and shoulders straighter ahead, and these changes improved her accuracy exponentially without sacrificing her power. She became, as coach Hagen says, a player who had an exceptional strike ball and now was able to add an exceptional spare game — a complete player ready for the pro tour.

With the beginning of her approach refined, she still was able to keep her great release. Her swing got higher and, on the forward swing, still tucked inside-out just as much as before but in a manner that required much less work. A swing that's out on the way back and draws into the body on the down-swing is looser and can speed up. A swing that's too far in generally has to slow down and is more muscled on the forward swing in order to remain inside-out through the release zone.

## Momentum to the Line and Ball Projection

One other thing that was adjusted because of the changes early on in her approach was she could lean into the shot at the release instead of pulling up out of her posture. This adjustment helped her extension through the release and enabled her to project the ball better along her intended target line. This, too, increased her accuracy.

Zavala starts her approach from the 15-foot dots, which is a long approach for four-stepper. For her, though, it helps create a lot of body momentum to the line to get the speed needed for her high-rev release. She says that she has a rev rate of about 450, which might be the highest on the ladies' tour today. Her PAP is  $3\frac{3}{4}$  over and  $1\frac{1}{2}$  up. These measurements indicate that she has a lower track and higher tilt.





Combined with a high rev-rate, this allows her ball to cover a lot of boards without losing energy as it gets back to the pocket, giving her a lot of entry angle. Increased angle means increased carry when hitting the pocket.

## A 'Hybrid' Final Step

She does have one very distinctive thing about her game. Zavala is a heel-toe planter on her last step, which slides a little after the plant. She has a long third step, and her fourth is long as well. Historically, planters are more one-dimensional than players that slide, and better at straighter angles because of the abrupt stopping of the last step. The thing that makes her planting different than most is she never loses her knee bend. Right now, school is out on her long-range versatility having a hybrid last step. History has proven many times that it takes something unique to become great, and this is one way in which Zavala fills the bill.

## The Long and Short of It

She says her favorite angle is standing 25 looking 15 with the ball going out to about the 10 board. She also likes longer patterns. She says her weakness, in fact, is shorter patterns that require playing straighter angles. That makes total sense given her powerful inside-out release. Considering how far she has come with her game, I have no doubt she will become better at her weaknesses.

While there is a lot to be said about being great at one thing and not trying to be all things on all conditions, it also is essential to find ways to survive when you don't have your best stuff or your favorite angles are not available. Zavala is pretty good at that already — because she knows who she is.