

THE PRO APPROACH

BY BILL SPIGNER { bills@bowlersjournal.com }



The Positives and Pitfalls of Playing the Extremes

ROBERT SMITH HAS BROUGHT A LOT OF EXCITEMENT to the bowling world — dating back to his days as a youth star in Southern California, when he earned the Chuck Hall Star of Tomorrow award — with his powerful ball. ESPN’s Randy Pedersen nicknamed him “Maximum Bob” for his very high rev rate and amazing hook.

Robert has been a touring player for 10 years and has won seven PBA Tour events. When he won the 2000 U.S. Open, he was using balls drilled with the Sarge Easter grip — a combination of a fingertip grip for the middle finger and a conventional grip for the ring finger. He did this to cut down on his rev rate. He no longer uses “the Easter,” however, opting for a standard fingertip — but he

continues to experiment with his grip in hopes of softening his release and becoming a more versatile player.

Robert has always had the ability to overpower lane conditions. Last season, when he won his seventh Tour title after a three-year drought, he exhibited his extreme abilities. That tournament featured the Shark pattern, which requires players to move in deeper after the

pattern breaks down. In the practice session before the show, one of the players was using a ball with a lot of surface and throwing some shots in the middle of the lane. The Tour players will start out playing anywhere from the 8- to 13-board on a fresh Shark pattern to “erase” some oil to just outside of where the biggest blend of the conditioner starts. The player who was throwing shots around the fourth arrow wanted to eliminate some of the oil in the middle, thus forcing the others to play deeper than they’d prefer once the pattern broke down. By erasing some of the oil off the heads with the dull ball, when the players started to move in, their balls would hook earlier instead of sliding more. The strategy was sound.

In the title match, it was Robert against hard-luck bowler Brad Angelo. Brad was rolling the ball well and moving in a little at a time. He kept moving and eventually caught the area where the oil had been erased during the practice session. Brad now faced early hook, instead of more oil, when he

got to that part of the lane. He lost his reaction, so he changed balls and started searching for the answer.

When Robert stepped on the lanes for his warm-up shots, he saw what was happening and immediately moved way left. On that particular pair, the right lane has always hooked more than the left; it starts hooking more in the mid-lane and the back-end. On the left lane, the ball will get down the lane easier, but won’t finish as well.

Robert stood in front of the ball return on the right lane, took just three steps and launched the ball over the gutter cap; it went all the way to the arrows in the air, landing on the sixth arrow. The ball was about three feet off the ground before it came down.

Then he went to the left lane, took his normal five-step approach, and proceeded to do the same thing. The fans there and on TV couldn’t believe what was happening. He took three steps on the right lane and five on the left, yet was able to throw the ball with the same speed and loft on both — a feat requiring pretty incredible talent and strength.

Robert won the match and the title, and people at the center are still talking



People are still talking about Smith’s “jump the cap” performance en route to his seventh PBA Tour title.

about it. Even more amazing was the fact that this victory came after a hip injury had sidelined him for 10 months.

However, the ability to play the game at the extremes also hurts Robert in some ways. He has a problem playing the middle of the lane (from the 8-board to 15) when one needs to lower their rev rate and not hook the ball much. Ironically, Robert's least favorite pattern is the Shark because of the length of the oil and the difficulty in getting the ball to turn the corner. He likes the Cheetah the best, noting that he doesn't lose his carry angle. The Cheetah allows him to throw the ball as hard as he wants to the right, and with the oil being short, there's always friction for the ball to hook. But for one week, the Shark was Robert's best friend.

Most bowlers think that

big-hooking, high-rev rate players like a lot of oil. That's not always the case. With Robert's very high rev rate, the ball needs some friction to hook, and it's hard for him to control his ball in long, heavy oil. Think of a tire on ice; no matter how fast it spins, it's not going to move the car.

In bowling, we know the ball needs to find friction to hook. But if the rev rate is real high off the hand, when the ball hits dry, it jerks and is not very controllable. The bowler's job is to get the ball to roll in the oil and not jerk off the dry, so it's controllable. That's where Robert has had problems.

That said, Robert has a fundamentally sound game. His swing length is a little long (about 200 degrees), which makes him pull hard on the downswing. One of

the liabilities of pulling the swing appears during the release, when his upper body pulls back a little from the shot, thus speeding up his hand. The hand then lifts straight up through the back of the ball, producing a high rev rate. He doesn't get the extension through the ball that is required to tilt the axis and soften the hand.

On his step before the slide, when his ball is at the top of the swing, Robert's spine tilt is 50 degrees. When the ball gets to the bottom of the swing, his spine has straightened out to 40 degrees. It would be better if it were 35 to 40 degrees at the top of the swing, and ended up at 45 to 50 at the release and follow-through. That way, his upper body, shoulder, arm and hand would be traveling the same direction as the ball, which would en-

able him to get more extension through the shot and project the ball down the lane, rather than feeling like he has to throw it to his break point.

"I try to picture the line and angle to the break point," he says. "Draw a line back to the dots, and go. From there, it's a feel shot, but trying to get more control."

Robert needs a few more wins to have a Hall of Fame resumé, and I believe he'll get there. There's no doubt he's one of the most fun players to watch, and he knows the adjustments he has to make on the various Tour patterns in order to win.

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



Because his swing length is a little long, Smith must pull hard on the downswing, making it difficult to soften the hand when needed.