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THE PRO APPROACH

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Getting to a Successful Last Step

THE BEGINNING OF THE APPROACH leads to the end. While that may seem obvious, it's a key concept because an approach that does not begin well probably won't end well. That's why I devoted so much space to the subject, as well as the different styles of timing, in my two most recent columns.

The middle of the approach is one area of our game over which we really should have very little control. It's important to let that part be controlled by our ball placement and swing, thus setting us up for a successful finish. The last step, and where the ball is in relationship to the start of the last step, has a great effect on how we finish the delivery.

At this key point of one's approach, there are timing issues to be considered. The first involves the location of the ball at the completion of the next-to-last step, when the foot is flat, the body weight has transferred onto that foot/leg, and the opposite foot's toe is still in contact with the floor.

The position of the ball in relationship to the completion of the backswing is dependent on the height of the backswing. In the late 1970s (yes, I'm dating myself), when I first started teaching professionally, we would want the swing to be complete at this point. But today, with the much higher backswings and

more shoulder rotation, very few contemporary players are at the peak of the swing at the completion of this step.

Today, I look at timing of the swing in relationship to the last step entering the slide. Here's what I mean by "entering the slide": when the sliding leg's knee just passes the bowling-side leg's knee, and the toe of the sliding leg is just starting to pass the bowling-side foot and makes contact with the floor.

At this point, the backswing should be completed and the arm should be starting down, so it's moving in the same direction as the rest of the body. It's very important to allow the arm to swing freely from the top down, using gravity and upper-body rotation as power sources to increase swing speed without excessive muscle.

For many top players, the arm is at a right angle (about 90 degrees) to the spine entering the slide. Some of the players you'll see in this position are Chris Barnes (see page 43),

Mike Fagan, Parker Bohn, Mika Koivuniemi, Michael Haugen, Chris Loschetter, Pete Weber and Bill O'Neil.

Even "two-hander" Jason Belmonte achieves this position, with his upper arm and spine angle at 90 degrees.



Mike Fagan's arm is at a right angle to his spine as he prepares to enter the slide and complete his delivery — the best position for players with high backswings.

This is the best position for the more contemporary players with higher backswings. For most of these players, the ball is at its highest point of the swing or already descending at this time. Pete Weber's swing and Mike Fagan's swing start descending before the completion of the next-to-last step, which helps make the downswing easy.

For those with a swing that's still going up entering the slide, with a 125-degree or greater angle to the spine (a more vertical or steeper swing), more muscle or upper-body forward tilt is required to get the ball to the release zone. There are some great bowlers who have this type of timing — Tommy Jones, Jason Couch, Ronnie Russell, Rhino Page and Sean Rash among them — but it is much more physical and harder on the body in the long run. All these players exhibit lots of power and more muscle in the downswing

than the 90-degree players.

Then there are the players whose bowling arms are less than 90 degrees to their spines entering the slide, including Walter Ray Williams, Norm Duke, Ryan Shafer and Wes Malott. These players generally have shorter backswings and less shoulder rotation, and exhibit a more violent follow-through. They tend to be very accurate, and their bread-and-butter shot is straighter — although Malott and Shafer can hook the ball with the best of them.

All three types of swing positions work when entering the slide, but the 90-degree angle provides the best timing for power, a free downswing and a lot of touch.

Two areas at the end of the approach related to timing are when the foot stops and when the ball comes off the hand.

There are three ways to look at the timing of the foot stopping in relation to the release:



Because of his size and strength, Wes Malott can generate plenty of ball speed and power with a backswing that's much lower than many of his contemporaries.

1. the foot has stopped well before the release of the ball (Parker Bohn, Kelly Kulick and Mike DeVaney use this method); 2. the foot stops just as the ball gets to the bottom of the swing and the thumb has not exited the thumb hole (Norm Duke, Walter Ray Williams and Chris Loschetter); 3. the foot is still sliding when the thumb exits, and the fingers exit out in front of the bowler just as the foot stops sliding (Pete Weber, Chris Barnes and Mike Fagan — all modern-day strokers). This last type of

timing allows the bowler to have a “soft hand” at release.

Finally, the moment of truth: when the ball comes off the hand. It’s critical to understand the feeling of the ball being early, on time or late off the hand. A top player will know right at that point whether the release was correct, and won’t allow himself to be fooled into thinking a mis-timed release was correct.

The timing of the release helps you understand why the ball went in the direction it traveled, as well as the speed

and rotation of the ball. From the feeling of the timing of the release, you can backtrack to figure out what happened.

Some basic rules of thumb:

- An early release will cause the ball to slide longer and miss outside your target line.
- When the release is in time, the ball will go along the intended line.
- A late release will cause the ball to miss inside your target line and begin slowing down sooner than is ideal.

These “rules” are dependent on the swing being true and

the shoulders being consistent during the release. The more “off” the shoulders and swing direction are, the less accurate the shot will be in relationship to the ball off the hand.

Pay attention to the feeling of the ball off the hand, and start taking notes on how the ball performs relative to that “feel.” Your notes can provide clues to the source of timing problems.

For archived “Pro Approach” columns and more, go online to: billspigner.com.



Studying the approaches of Ryan Shafer (left) and Tommy Jones (right) demonstrates that there’s more than one way to achieve good timing and ultimate success on the lanes. Shafer is among a group of mostly veteran players with shorter backswings and less shoulder rotation, while Jones is among a group of mostly younger players who utilize more muscle and exhibit greater upper-body forward tilt.