

BowlersJournal

MARCH 2014 • \$3.95

INTERNATIONAL

Close Shave

**Belmonte Clips
Mallot at the
Barbasol
Tournament of
Champions**



THE PRO APPROACH

BY BILL SPIGNER { bills@bowlersjournal.com }



McNeil's Keys to USBC Open Success

MATT McNIEL IS ONE of the best known amateur bowlers in the country, most his notoriety coming from his accomplishments at the USBC Open Championships.

McNeil won three USBC Open eagles in three years. In 2010, he captured the all-events title with a record 2326. Then, in 2012, he won both the doubles and all-events, becoming the first to win all-events twice since the late USBC Hall of Famer Frank Santore did it in 1950 and '53. Obviously, it is not an easy thing to do.

Matt is a left-hander with a smooth five-step delivery. He has a few things in his game that are out of the ordinary, but he makes it all work.

In his set-up, Matt's bowling-side shoulder is about 6-7 inches lower than his opposite shoulder. The stance is staggered, with the ball about waist-high and his wrist slightly cupped and relaxed — all in all, a good set-up and normal in today's game.

Matt takes five steps. When his second step starts, he moves the ball out slightly and unfolds his bowling-side arm. By the time the second step is done, his right hand has left the ball and the ball is knee-high, a bit early for his swing height. His shoulders and hips have opened significantly at this point, and he has increased his side tilt from about 14 degrees in his stance to about 32 degrees by the completion of step two.

The openness of his body and side tilt is considerable at this point. Also, his hand position has opened, putting the hand to the inside of the ball. That's not unusual, but the combination of his



Entering the fourth step, Matt McNeil's ball is outside of his right shoulder. But because of his side tilt, the ball is directly above his left foot. When his left leg clears out for his release, the ball can drop straight down from this position without having to wrap around his body to get to his release.

side spine tilt and his hips, shoulders and hand opening during this step lead to a series of unique movements.

Midway through step three, he rotates his hand clockwise, placing it to the outside of the ball. This helps make the ball feel lighter, and does not cause the ball weight to influence his balance which, at this point, is compromised because of the side tilt and his body being so open. Also, his left foot turns almost completely sideways on this step because of the body being so open.

By the time this step is done, his hand opens back up and is on top of the

ball. At the end of the step, his swing is way inside and the ball looks like it is outside his right shoulder. But because his body is so open and he has a lot of side tilt, the ball actually is not in as bad a position as it would appear to be.

Matt's fourth step is quite short, which is better than too long, and is caused by the open body and the sideways left foot. The swing is still very much inside, and normally one would have to realign it on the downswing. But Matt doesn't have to, because he has 52 degrees of side tilt at the completion of his fourth step, which creates a lot of space for

Reprinted/Posted with permission from *Bowlers Journal International*.

his swing to drop down to the release on an inside-out path without having to make any compensating moves to realign the swing from the top down through the release. His hand position at the top of the swing is on top of the ball, and the wrist is cupped.

On the downswing, Matt's shoulders square up and his hips stay open. Because he doesn't lose any of his side spine tilt, he has a lot of space under his body so the ball can drop to the release on an unobstructed inside-out path. He also increases his forward tilt from about 17 degrees to 45 degrees at release, which allows his ball to be by his ankle just as he is ready to release it.

Matt's turn and lift are down through the ball, and he rolls the ball early onto the lane. He has a clean, quick release that is totally performed with gravity — no upswing resistance. His fingers are pointing down to about 8 o'clock when they come out, completing the figure-8 action of his hand from the beginning of the approach to the release.

You don't see that very often today. It was a method used in the 1960s to help create hand action. At that time, bowlers strived to have very square, level shoulders and hips throughout the approach, and the figure-8 hand action made the ball feel lighter. (I know: I'm really dating myself.)

There's a lot going on in Matt's game, but it all matches up well. He has great touch and knowledge of the game.

I asked him about his keys to success at the Open Championships, where he averaged 250 for 27 games in 2010, '11 and '12. He is on the left side of the lane, so a lot of what he does would not transfer over to the



Midway through McNiel's third step, his body is open and his hand has turned to the outside of the ball, completing half of his figure-8 hand action during the swing.

right side. Right-handers need to start out playing the lanes the same as the lefties, but the lanes change more on the right because of the amount of play. The Open Championships use a symmetrical Sport-compliant pattern which, if not played correctly, can be quite difficult.

To help readers prepare for the 2014

Open Championships, I asked Matt four strategy related questions...

How do you look at the lane?

"I see the lane more front to back and less left to right — mainly because, as a lefty, I am forced to play closed angles most of the time, especially at the Open Championships. I always try to get my ball to pick up sooner. I try to play the fronts and middles as much as possible."

What type of adjustments do you make?

"Once I find a line, it's usually smaller adjustments. I may tweak my tilt, roll or speed to allow myself to stay in the same part of the lane or to get through a game. Also, I make small parallel moves, usually to the right."

What types of balls do you use — symmetric or asymmetric?

"I have had equal amounts of success with asymmetrical and symmetrical equipment."

What's your favorite drilling for the Open?

"Pin-down layouts that read the lane sooner, transition smoother and flare less are what have worked the best for me. Usually, a solid cover with some

surface is what I use, especially since we have moved to fresh [conditioner] on every squad."

Matt is currently attending Wichita State for his Master's degree, and is working on his game with the USBC Hall of Famer and noted coach, Rick Steel-smith. Even with all his success, he's still working to improve his game, hoping to one day be a competitive PBA Tour player. Matt definitely is one to watch for in the future.

Read archived "Pro Approach" columns online at billspingner.com.



(Left) McNiel's body position is very open starting his fourth step, and his wrist is cupped. The open body and left foot at this time make his fourth step quite short, similar to a lot of "two-handed" bowlers.



(Right) McNiel has increased his forward spine tilt without losing his side tilt going into his release position. The hips have remained open, allowing him to retain his side tilt and create space for his swing to get to the release unobstructed. It's a great set-up for his release after a lot of complex but smooth moves during his approach.