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THE PRO APPROACH

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When Mika Gets in 'The Zone,' It's a Major Problem for Opponents

MIKA KOIVUNIEMI came to America in 1999 from Finland, where he was born and raised. The 6-foot-4, 195-pounder already was an established international bowling star, having won championships in 11 countries.

It didn't take Mika long to establish himself as one of the top players on the PBA Tour. For most bowlers, it takes three to five years to gain the knowledge and experience to be a solid weekly performer on tour. But Mika's first win came within a year in the 2000 USBC Masters, and his second came at the 2001 U.S Open — hence his nickname of "Major Mika."

He won his first non-major event (as well as his second) during the 2003-04 season, and also bowled a 300 on TV. He made seven TV appearances that season, won the George Young high average award (222.73) and was voted PBA Player of the Year — all in just his fourth full season on tour. Pretty amazing.

Mika is known as one of the PBA's most fearless players, and his TV record of 31-19 is second best among current exempt players. In 27 appearances, he has averaged 226.22 on TV. He even proclaimed himself as the "lefty's worst nightmare" because of his 13-2 record against the portsiders.

Mika has always been an exceptional athlete. He was competitive in hockey, basketball and soccer in high school. This athletic foundation for his physical development gave him

the strong body he still has. These days, he trains very hard during the off-season with the advice of a personal trainer. During the bowling season, he works out about once a week and does some running most days. By being physically prepared, he is able to maximize every shot.

He claims the strongest part of his game is when he can "get in the zone" mentally, but admits it's not always easy to get there, given all of the distractions at a typical PBA Tour stop. But as the tournament wears on and the number of players decreases, it becomes easier to focus. Ideally, "the zone" makes it seem as though there is nothing around him except the lane and the pins, and he develops a much sharper sense of feel for the delivery of the ball and its reaction on the lane.

Mika uses a deliberate five-step approach. In his stance, he holds the ball about waist-high and very close to his body. His pushaway starts with the second step and is completed at the end of that step, right on time.

During his third step, the ball swings back very freely, and the arm travels about 135 degrees — a sign of a very loose swing from the shoulder, much like Steve Jaros, and very different from

Parker Bohn's 90-degree swing movement in his two steps after the pushaway.

The ball reaches the top of Mika's swing during the fourth step. It then starts down slightly as the

fourth step is completed, much like Pete Weber; both players have high backswings, and this is the best timing for high swings.

On Mika's downswing, he curls his arm to about a



The ball reaches the top of the swing during the fourth step of Mika Koivuniemi's five-step delivery — good timing for high-swing players.

50-degree bend at the elbow. This significant bending of the arm positions his fingers under the ball without having to cup the wrist.

Mika has always been a turn-and-lift player, using a lot of loft — unlike a lot of power players. He lofts the ball because of the position of his shoulder and upper body when the middle of the ball is by his ankle. His shoulder is about 6 inches behind his ankle and his arm is still fully loaded, so his forearm is on the upswing when the ball gets to the ankle. This is a very strong position for turning and lifting the ball.

At this point, Mika's upper body is in about a 50-degree forward tilt. Importantly, he maintains his upper body forward tilt, and the body continues moving forward through the release until the right shoulder is just ahead of the ankle. This forward movement of the upper body keeps his hand moving through the ball as the arm unloads in front of his sliding foot.

This is another sign of his great strength, especially in his legs, because his sliding leg stays in the flexed position he had when the ball was by the side of his ankle.

He developed this style

of power in his game because of the very demanding conditions on which he grew up in Finland, where the oil patterns were flatter, the heads usually broke down faster, and the back ends would get quite tight. The lift-and-turn with speed method helps the ball retain energy and finish strongly, whereas an earlier rolling ball will hook early and die in the backend. Mark Roth was one of the best at turning and lifting as he grew up on tough East Coast conditions.

Watch Mika from behind, and you'll see he has a straight in-out swing. Once the pushaway is complete, the ball goes in a straight line inside to the top of the swing. On the downswing, the arm and ball travel down along the same line as the ball had traveled on the way up; there is no loop in the swing.

The second and fourth steps of Mika's five-step approach cross in front of steps one and three, respectively, enabling his body to get out of the way of the swing. His strength allows him to load up the arm on the downswing and still keep the swing inside-out to the release zone.

Mika has about a 40-degree side tilt when the ball gets to the ankle, which complements his 50-degree forward tilt (from a side view). The two angles of his spine allow his ball to travel in the correct direction when it gets to the ankle. From a rear view, when the ball is at his ankle, ready to be released, the center of his ball is directly below his left ear — another sign that the swing has maintained its inside-out path to the release. This is something all bowlers should strive for: the ball un-

der the head, or partially inside the head under the body.

Mika is a traditional spot bowler, using the arrows and the boards at the arrows for all of his targeting and adjustments. He concentrates on watching the ball cross his target, then watches the ball all the way through the pins.

His spare shooting system involves a self-designed system wherein he utilizes one target on all conditions, using a plastic ball and throwing it straight. He will occasionally use resin and hook the ball for double-wood spares such as the 2-8 and 3-9.

Mika has an unusual grip. His finger pitches are 7/8 reverse, which would be a lot for most bowlers. He went to this extreme with his pitches on the advice of coach Ron Hoppe, who helped him when he first came to the States. Hoppe had him change both his finger pitches and ball rotation. Mika says the finger pitches were designed to keep him from hitting up on the ball as much, and to hit his target better.

Hoppe also had Mika lessen his axis rotation, which had been 90 degrees. The pitch change and the use of less axis rotation (not letting his fingers rotate around the ball as much) enable him to better follow through toward his target.

"There are no short-cuts," Mika says about improving one's game. "You need to work hard to get to your goals, and you need to believe in yourself."

That says it all.

Bill Spigner, a member of the USBC Hall of Fame, is a Gold-certified coach. Learn more at billspigner.com.



Extreme finger pitches enable Koivuniemi to release the ball without "hitting up" on it too much.