

BowlersJournal

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BREAKDOWN

The Complete Package

Spigner
Breaks Down
EJ Tackett's
Lethal Game

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BREAKING DOWN THE MOST COMPLETE GAME IN BOWLING TODAY

How EJ Tackett became the most dynamic player on the PBA Tour.

by **BILL SPIGNER**





One of Ed Tackett's favorite stories about his immensely talented son EJ occurred on Christmas Day of 1999 while Ed stripped and redid the settee area of the bowling center he owned — a typical duty on Christmas day when the center is closed.

EJ, 7 years old at the time, kicked off a marathon practice session the moment dad got started with the job and kept bowling until dad finished that night — 54 games later — at which point it was, to EJ's horror, time to stop bowling and go home. EJ, reluctant to leave the lanes, cried the entire drive home.

Given the incredible amount of time EJ spent on the lanes as a youth, it is no surprise to now see him flaunting skills that require many years and countless hours of practice to hone — specifically his mastery of seeing the lane properly and getting his ball to do what he wants. With a game boasting plenty of similarity to power-game pioneer Mark Roth, EJ exhibits these skills with tremendous confidence and very little thinking. It would be no oversimplification to describe EJ as a player who does everything almost totally by feel, making him the polar opposite of one of his chief rivals on tour, Jason Belmonte. To say the least, it's working, as EJ is likely to chase down his third consecutive PBA Player of the Year honor for the 2025 season.

It is impossible to teach someone to be an EJ, but there is plenty of opportunity to learn from what he does and, to the extent possible, replicate elements of his game that might strengthen your own. On that score, let's take a much closer look at one of the most dynamic and successful games to emerge on tour in recent PBA memory...

Forebearers

Tackett's power game is reminiscent of greats like Mark Roth and an idol of his in Tommy Jones.

**Locked In**

Ef's stance is athletic and ready for action.

Process

There is no mystery or nuance to EJ's process for determining the way he wants to play the lanes — he simply bases it on what he sees the ball do on a given pattern. He does use oil-pattern graphs to give him some info and get a head start. There are three variables that matter most to him here:

- The volume of oil
- The length of oil
- The type of oil used

He deploys his well-trained eye to figure out how to play the pattern and adjust to what he sees the ball do based on the oil and topography of the surface. EJ is a master at knowing whether the ball reaction he sees results from the shape of the lane or from the oil itself.

Angles

EJ plays the game by angles, creating ball shape to fit the angle he feels he needs to play and constantly adjusts accordingly based on what the ball is doing. The high rev rates on today's PBA Tour ensure that transition occurs quickly. Add to that environment today's oil-soaking bowling balls that remove oil from the lane, as well as the use of plastic and low-flaring urethane, and versatility becomes indispensable to success.

This is where EJ rises to the challenge more than most, as his powerful game affords him the widest range of lane play on tour, and he is the fastest among his tour peers to make adjustments.

The U.S. Open title he won this season provides a case in point. There, he spent one round throwing the ball straight as a string, and another hooking the lane on lighter-volume oil. Put simply, there is not another player on tour at this time who rivals EJ in the lane-play arena.

Stance and Hand Position

EJ's stance sets the tone for his game, as it is athletic and ready for action. His head is over the ball while both hands are over the right edge of his foot. This helps set up his posture with slight side and forward tilt — just enough so that his nose is over his toes. He keeps his legs very straight, but not stiff. Effectively, EJ is starting his release right from his stance. From there, the only thing he thinks about is his release.

EJ predicates his stance on playing his desired angle by picking out a pin for direction — say the 6 pin on a full rack — then drawing his eyes back toward himself to visualize the angle at which he wants to see his ball travel the lane.

From here, he sets his hand in the position he wants it to be for his release, and it is here that a few key details help illuminate EJ's process for executing his release properly and effectively...

1. **Index Finger:** EJ adjusts the extent to which he spreads out his index finger depending on what he needs his ball to do on a given shot or pattern. If he needs more forward roll, he keeps it closer to his middle finger. If he needs to turn the ball more, he moves it farther away from his middle finger.
2. **Pinky Finger:** EJ either tucks his pinky to generate more revs and/or loft, or he leaves it flat for a smooth, normal release.
3. **Wrist:** EJ also adjusts the extent to which he flexes his wrist in his stance to either increase or decrease his rev rate as needed.

These keys are driven by EJ's sharp instinct for knowing what to do in any given situation and visualizing the feel of his next shot to make it happen.



Thumb and Thumb Hole

EJ is meticulous about the feel of his thumb hole. Before he inserts his thumb, he blows air into the thumb hole to add a little warm moisture as a means of securing his grip and preventing his thumb from slipping out. EJ does this on every shot, but not always the same way. This depends on the environment. In a colder setting, EJ will use more warm moisture for a better grip. In warmer settings, he uses less.

Additionally, EJ uses two sizes of thumb tape — 3/4 and 1/2-inch. For a player with EJ's ball speed, it is important that the ball hang on to him without excessive grip. The warm air and tape provide that measure of security. While he does use a little grip pressure with his thumb — starting in the stance to ensure the ball stays on his thumb securely — he uses no grip pressure whatsoever in his fingers.

Ball Placement

EJ completes his ball placement at the end of his second step, with his right elbow in the same place over his right foot as it was in his stance. Basically, as EJ straightens out his arm, he moves the ball out a little, down and leaning a little more forward while keeping his head in front of this step. This puts him in perfect position for a level-height, one-handed, free backswing. EJ has called Tommy Jones one of his childhood idols, and it is in this moment of his approach that he most vividly exemplifies Jones' style. His ball placement and swing height are very similar to Jones, and his setup and start lead to a great backswing.

Armswing

The position of EJ's hand when the ball is passing his right leg on the backswing goes a long way toward freeing up his armswing. His wrist is neither cupped nor cocked, and the fingers are pointing down at about 5 o'clock and in line with his forearm. This position makes the ball feel weightless as the ball travels back in the direction his fingers are pointing — away from the body.

These variables help create EJ's distinctive reverse-loop swing, or what is commonly called a "figure 8" swing. With the ball out away from his body at the top of his swing, his downswing draws into his side, setting up the process for bending his elbow and increasing his downswing speed. Think about this like a figure skater starting to spin with arms extended out with a slow rotation. As the arms draw into the skater's body, the skater's rotation increases in speed dramatically.

Release

As EJ begins to get into his release position, his nose is still over his toes as it was in the stance. At this point, however, he has his knees flexed and is using more forward tilt. The position of his upper body is interesting here, as he is bending forward and sideways from the waist the way two-handers tend to do. This creates lots of space for his swing to draw closer to his body and travel inside-out to the release under his head.

It becomes clear here that EJ really has a side armswing. His torso has rotated and tilted, with both arms at the sides of his torso. His swing and release are very torso-driven, as tends to be the case with high-swing players because it is impossible to get a high swing without the torso rotation from the hips.

EJ starts loading up and bending his elbow when his arm is parallel to the floor. Cupping his wrist slightly helps him start bending his elbow, at which point his arm is drawn closer to his body and sets up the inside-out direction the swing will travel to the release.

By the time his slide foot has stopped, EJ has loaded up his arm, his ball is closer to his ankle, and the bottom of the ball is higher than the ankle. Having the ball above the ankle allows it to move forward on a descending angle. The bending of the elbow and the release of it is the essence of developing a world-class release, which EJ most certainly possesses.

But we're not done, as it is now time for his thumb to exit the ball. Just before this happens, his elbow and wrist have straightened out and the ball is in front of his toe. With the ball descending from above his ankle to down the lane in front of his toe, his shoulder lowering, and his arm and wrist straightening, the ball comes off his hand with maximum speed.

This process generates EJ's 550-plus rev rate with no physical effort but, instead, masterful use of gravity. It all happens so fast that it is hard to see, let alone replicate. EJ's release takes but a fraction of a second, which is to say that understanding the feel of the ball coming off the hand during that split second is critical to understanding what his ball is doing.

Release Point

As EJ gets into his release position, his nose is still over his toes as it was in the stance except now, he has his knees flexed, more forward tilt and a swing.



Post-Release

Right after his release, EJ's hand is following through in the direction the ball is traveling. This is a must for any player. This extension through the ball allows his fingers to go from low on the ball to the top through extension rather than any up-swing lift. EJ's typical hand position at this point is something I like to see, as his thumb is still pointing to his ring and middle finger. This demonstrates that he is not using his thumb to hang onto or manipulate the ball for rotation. His palm is facing forward, which gives him tremendous accuracy as everything is proceeding forward in the direction he wants his ball to travel. He keeps his thumb pointing to his middle fingers all the way through his finish.

Takeaways

EJ is a generational talent who features the most complete game in bowling today. Period. And this is despite the fact that he is essentially self-taught. His only coach has been his father and, even then, his role has been to tell EJ whether or not what he was doing looked good. To the normal bowler who can't spend hours on the lanes learning through trial and error, getting a coach is critical to development.

On tour, Motiv ball rep Brett Spangler serves as EJ's eyes and as his mentor. Spangler can see the small things that go wrong physically, but equipment plays a hugely important role in EJ's performance — learning what the balls do and why they work differently from one another. EJ has two pro shops and, under the mentoring of Spangler, has really learned the geometry of the bowling balls.

Five specific keys bowlers back home can glean from EJ's game are the following:

1. Have a shot plan for every delivery you are going to make — before you step onto the approach.
2. Build your stance with the purpose of ensuring your ball will travel in the direction you want it to follow.
3. Build your hand position in the stance to achieve the release you desire.
4. Let your ball swing your arm and let your feet go as fast as they naturally need to move to stay in time with your swing.
5. Once you get going, invest total concentration in your release rather than on hitting your target. Remember: You have decided direction in your stance by picking out the line you want the ball to travel.

While no coach can mold a player into EJ Tackett, plenty of players can do far worse than study, and perhaps try to practice or even master, key parts of his game. ■

Extension through the Ball

EJ's extension through the ball allows his fingers to go from low on the ball to the top through extension, rather than up-swing lift.

