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BREAKDOWN

THE SON ALSO RISES

Spigner Analyzes the Moves Behind Ryan Barnes' Rapid Ascent

TRIALS AND TRIUMPHS FOR COLLEGIATES IN TITLETOWN
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ANOTHER ROOKIE REIGNS SUPREME AT TOC
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IT'S SIN CITY AS PWBA TOUR KICKS OFF
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Photo 1



Line of Greats
Barnes' timing on the backswing in steps three through five is in line with major champions on the PBA Tour like Chris Via, Anthony Simonsen and Kyle Troup, and is right where he needs to be in the third step of his approach.

A MARVEL

He may be the product of a famed bowling family, but Ryan Barnes' meteoric rise is about much more than a name.

by BILL SPIGNER

The youth movement currently unfolding on the PBA Tour is nothing short of amazing, with four rookies winning this season alone and the most recent champion among them doing so in one of bowling's most storied environments — Alex Horton, who won the 2026 PBA Tournament of Champions at AMF Riviera Lanes in Fairlawn, Ohio, on April 26.

One 23-year-old who has made numerous shows between his 2025 Harry Golden Rookie of the Year season and his 2026 campaign is a player yet to join his fellow young studs in the winners' circle, but is almost certainly destined to do so soon: Ryan Barnes.

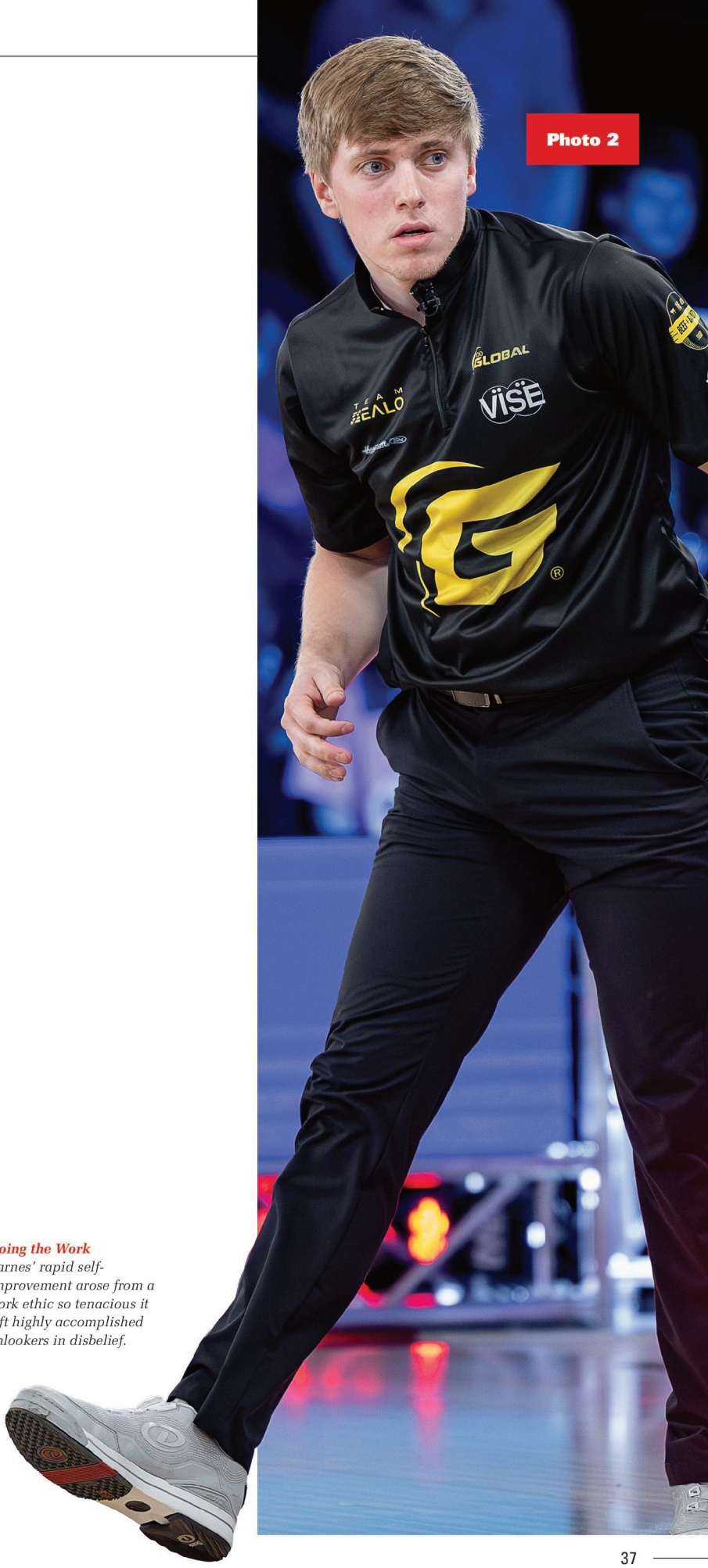
From his unflappable work ethic to improvements in his game carried out so rapidly as to leave experienced onlookers in awe, there is no shortage of reasons for youth bowlers to pull some plays from this star's book.

His lineage might suggest that Barnes was destined for the career he now pursues as a pro bowler, with legendary parents in 19-time PBA Tour champion Chris and two-time USBC Queens champion Lynda. Some might believe he was — dare I say it? — "Born to Bowl." But a life on the lanes was not always in Ryan's plans, which is what makes his rise here in his early 20s all the more astonishing.

In fact, Ryan had no interest in becoming a bowler when he was growing up. He did compete in youth league — well, one, when he was 12 — and, beyond that, bowled recreationally maybe a few times a year. Not exactly the origins of a young man who today is a threat to make the show at any tour stop at which he shoes up.

Instead, Ryan's passion was basketball, a passion his athletic father pursued as well. When COVID helped dash Ryan's hopes of recruitment to a college basketball program, he set his sights on Wichita State, where dad was a star with the school's celebrated bowling program. It was where another detour took shape in Ryan's career as he was, at the time, a conventional, one-handed bowler. That was about to change, and in such a rapid fashion that it left head coach Rick Steelsmith in disbelief.

While Steelsmith relies on bowling résumés to determine a given prospect's suitability for the program — Junior Gold finishes, Storm Youth Championship wins, Junior Team USA berths — Ryan had little bowling experience at the time. But he certainly had bowling in his blood and, as he soon made clear, the work ethic and athleticism to make the most of that attribute.



Doing the Work
Barnes' rapid self-improvement arose from a work ethic so tenacious it left highly accomplished onlookers in disbelief.



Doing the Work

Caught in a transition phase between one- and two-handed bowling at the time he first met with Steelsmith, Ryan was unsure which style he would embrace and at least as unsure whether he would make the team. Famous names may come in handy — and, in our sport, his was as famed as any — but, as the younger products of storied bowling families learn, Ryan would need to earn his way onto the squad. And the only way to do that was to work. Hard.

When Ryan went home, he committed himself to the two-handed style and worked his butt off to improve. It was in this way that, when he showed up for tryouts at WSU, Steelsmith says, "I was shocked at his meteoric improvement. It was the most improvement I've seen in my coaching career over such a short span of time."

Ryan earned his way onto WSU's developmental team, then spent the rest of his career at Wichita on the "select" team, which is its vaunted varsity squad comprising just a dozen players.

Practice? Yes, Practice.

A typical week for a Shocker bowler goes like this: They practice at their own eight-lane center on campus, which is a huge plus, and they do so for two to three hours per day Monday through Thursday, with Thursday being a classroom day emphasizing the mental game, team dynamics, and any topics that arise.

On the lanes, they bowl strictly on sport patterns, and on two to three different patterns a day at that. A major focus is spare shooting, and the center's string-pin machines enable the setup of any desired spare or combination. After practice, the players hardly are done, heading off to Andy Sykes' Amplify strength-and-conditioning sites.

In addition, Steelsmith works with players in pairs to give each closer attention. In the meantime, he emphasizes, their schedules are full and school comes first, so time management is a must to succeed both in the classroom and on the lanes.

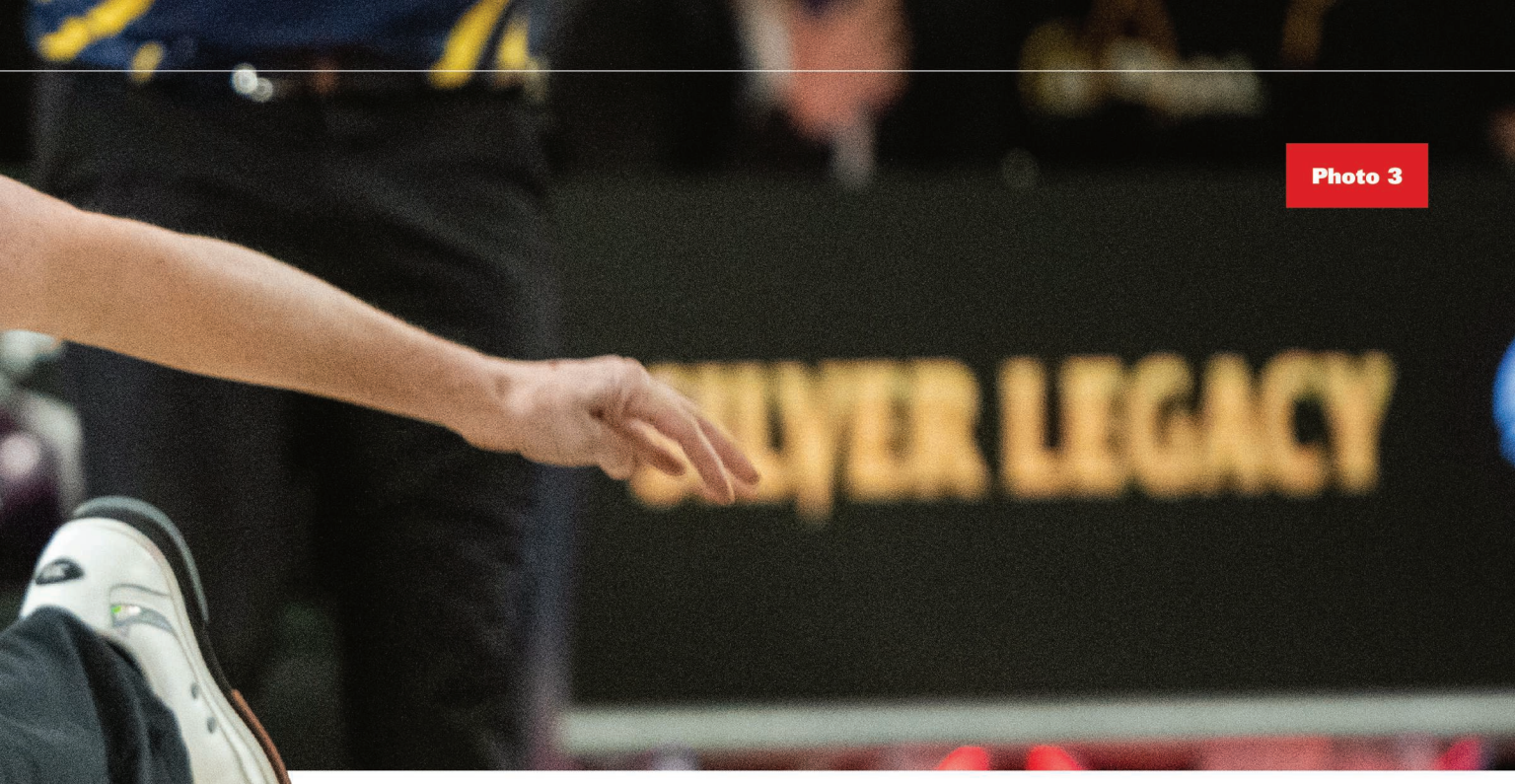
Rapid Improvement

The awe Steelsmith expresses over the rapidity of Ryan's improvement points to elements in the latter's training that any youth bowler would be wise to study. Those include:

- Video Made the PBA Star: Ryan's high-school basketball coaches used video to study game films and styles as a means of training players. Ryan brought that approach to his bowling training, analyzing the games of many two-handers to find his form using the style himself.

- Intentional Practice: Ryan's approach to practice ensures he does not waste a minute of his time, as he explores a variety of lane-play techniques — playing different angles, speeds, releases, and even lofts.

- Data Mining: Ryan uses Specto a great deal to evaluate everything he is working on and measures results with an eye toward consistency. This helps him



Target Practice
Ryan's legendary dad Chris taught him to see his ball roll through his target as Chris always has done.

bring better understanding to his shots and the lines he is playing.

- Coaching: While Ryan's family connections grant him access to elite coaching, his belief in the need and value of coaching is so strong that he would have sought it out in any event. Like his dad, Ryan believes in coaching not just as a source of help but also to have someone off of whom to bounce ideas — a person with whom to discuss what he is working on and find solutions where needed.

In addition to Ryan's work ethic, his dad observes that Ryan is doing things at age 23 that he himself was only starting to learn by age 28. While this is thanks in no small part to Ryan's WSU training, as the program continues to be a prolific source of eventual PBA Tour champions such as 2026 winners Brandon Bonta (PBA Players Championship) and Spencer Robarge (Pilgrim's PBA Ohio Classic), he also is engaged in a specific area of study that is yielding further dividends for him.

Having a Ball

Ryan has been conducting a major study of the bowling ball — cores, covers, drillings — to further understand the influence these factors exert upon ball motion and better determine when to use what. Specto comes to Ryan's aid here as well; he uses the tool to better understand what the ball is doing off his hand, down the lane, and through the pins. And when he does so, here are the technical details of the grip with which he tends to work, and some grip strategy he deploys…

- Grip: Semi-fingertip with the middle finger ½ reverse x 3/8ths left, with a 1 1/64th-inch hole Vacu-Grip in that finger. His ring finger is 5/8ths reverse and 3/8ths right with a 63/64th-inch hole and no Vacu-Grip.

- Versatility: Ryan changes the depth at which he inserts his fingers to change his rev-rate as needed — less to decrease and deeper to increase his rev rate, which was clocked at Team USA camp at around 550 RPMs.

- Axis Tilt: 3 to 4 degrees, which is good for versatility for a high-rev player.

- PAP: 5 inches over by 3/4ths of an inch up.

- Drilling Philosophy: Ryan slightly varies the way he drills asymmetrical versus symmetrical-core bowling balls, using taller pins in the symmetrical balls and shorter pins in asymmetrical equipment. Why? Well, for him, taller pins in the asyms tend to lock up, meaning they straighten out too quickly, resulting in weaker hits.

- Simplicity: Ryan is not one to deploy many different types of drillings. His favorite is 5 x 5 x 3, and he likes to keep drillings consistent, so he understands



Finishing Move
Barnes' position here explains his accuracy, as his slide foot, arms, hips and shoulders are square with the direction in which he is rolling the ball. His left arm stays in front of him until the ball is off his hand, which keeps his torso facing the direction the ball is going to travel, important for consistent direction.

what the ball is doing in relationship to what he is doing.

A Deadly Spare Game

Thanks to dad drilling into him the value of an elite spare game, Ryan is indeed a deadly accurate spare shooter. The lines he plays for spares are simple.

- **Single-Pin Spares:** Ryan developed his spare system himself using video of his shots to determine where the ball travels in relationship to where he is standing and looking. He leaves nothing to chance, instead taking a calculated approach — except when he leaves what he calls "funny" spares, in which case he gets creative. Here's his system for single pins…
  - **7 Pin:** He stands on board 25 and looks at 20.
  - **10 Pin:** He stands on board 35 and looks at 23.
  - **6 Pin:** He stands on 35 and moves his eyes to 25.
  - **4 Pin:** He stands at 25 and looks to 18.

Importantly, Ryan always deploys more of a forward roll for his spares to ensure that he takes the lane out of play.

Unpacking Ryan's Physical Game

One physical component to Ryan's game that he admittedly fights and works on is leaning too far forward early in his approach. This is not unusual for two-handers and, in fact, many turn sideways too fast, which makes their swing early at the beginning of their approach. Ryan, however, does not rotate early.

- **Stance:** Another important element of Ryan's physical game — his stance — closely resembles his dad's. Ryan also resembles his dad with many mannerisms, his reactions to shots, and the way he walks, among other characteristics that almost eerily mimic those of his father.

  One important thing for two handers to note about the stance is the position of the left hand (for righties). Ryan's left hand is in a good position; his middle finger of his left hand is almost touching his index finger of his right hand. This position provides the most stability of the left hand during the swing, and aids good hand-position during the swing while putting the right hand to the inside of the ball.

  Moreover, Ryan's setup is an interesting spectacle. He cups his wrist a good deal, resting the ball on his forearm. This can contribute to leaning forward earlier than desired, and it is different from what the successful righthanders on tour have been doing since the two-handed revolution took hold.

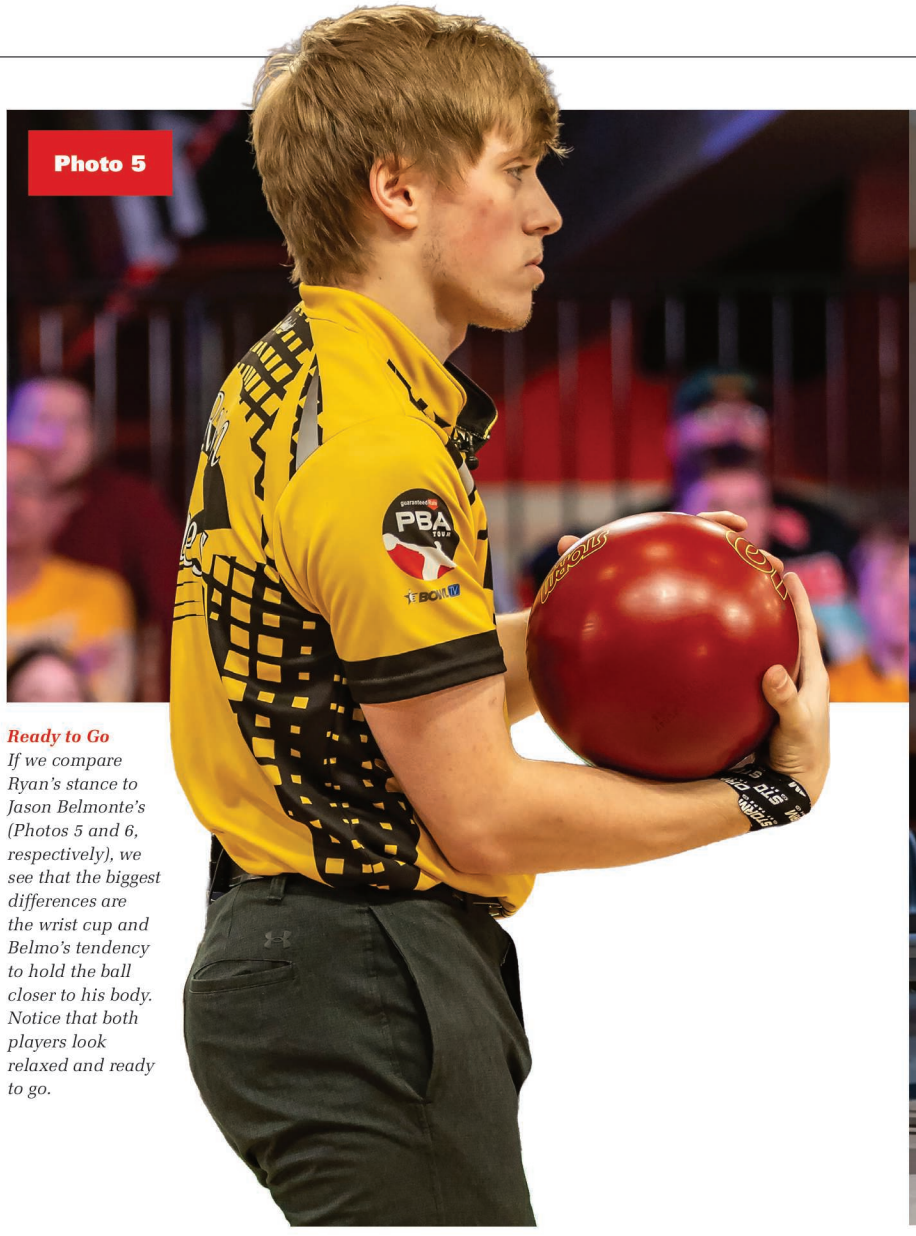
  I'll be honest: When I first saw this happening with high school and college players, I opposed it because the best were not doing it. After studying it further, however, I have changed my mind on the topic, and I will use it with some students should their individual needs call for it.

  If we compare Ryan's stance to Jason Belmonte's (Photo 1), we see that the biggest differences are the wrist cup and Belmo's tendency to hold the ball closer to his body. Notice that both players look relaxed and ready to go.

- **Approach:** As Ryan proceeds toward the foul line, his pushaway is long and straight which, combined with the ball resting on his forearm, can contribute to his leaning forward earlier in his approach than he wants. His timing on the backswing in steps three through five is right in line with major champions on the PBA Tour like Chris Via, Anthony Simonsen and Kyle Troup. As Photo 1 indicates, Ryan is right where he needs to be in the third step of his approach.

  Finally, his position at the release explains his accuracy, as his slide foot, arms, hips and shoulders are square with the direction in which he is rolling the ball (Photo 4). His left arm stays in front of him until the ball is off his hand, which keeps his torso facing the direction the ball is going to travel, important for consistent direction.

- **Targeting:** Ryan's targeting is pretty standard, as he looks at his breakpoint and then draws his eyes back to the desired board at the arrows. One different element in his targeting is that he never takes his eyes off his target at the arrows. This is a tendency he got from dad, who taught Ryan to see his ball roll through his target as Chris always has done. Committing oneself to doing





Ready to Go
If we compare Ryan's stance to Jason Belmonte's (Photos 5 and 6, respectively), we see that the biggest differences are the wrist cup and Belmo's tendency to hold the ball closer to his body. Notice that both players look relaxed and ready to go.

this on every shot is not easy; it requires a great deal of discipline. It also helps Ryan never pull up out of a shot as his hand extends through the ball in the direction of his target line (Photo 3). As Steelsmith says, Ryan's "work ethic and concentration are unmatched, right up there with the best." This is one way in which Ryan makes that patently clear.

- **A Hybrid Game:** If you ask Ryan what type of shot shape he likes, he will tell you that he prefers hold over hook. What he means is he doesn't like to swing and curve the ball, but rather a straight line to his breakpoint. Belmonte, in his heyday, liked to curve the ball a great deal and, as his record attests, he was the best at doing so. Simonsen, meanwhile, has been the best at going very straight. Ryan's game blends these approaches, as he plays straighter lines to his breakpoint rather than curving the ball. This allows Ryan to play along the blend of the oil in the mid-lane of the pattern, where most of the blend tends to be on the fresh — about the 15- to 30-foot area on most patterns.

Ryan's ability to play that area results from his skill at keeping the ball online so it can read the side-to-side blend in the area of the pattern where the most blend is found. Ryan really can do it all; he can play straight up the outside all the way to lofting the left gutter, following the oil line and its angle as it changes. His ability to do that comes from his college days, when he was practicing on multiple sport patterns — and the grueling tournaments in which his team competed. In team play, Ryan and his fellow Shockers attacked every pattern together in the same place and with a plan so that they could adjust as a team together.

- **Surveillance:** Though Ryan doesn't have a team on the PBA Tour, he keenly watches what others are doing and, in this sense, the players he watches are his team. He has no small measure of talent for gathering information — not just from what he sees his ball do, but also what he sees others do.

Going Forward

Ryan's goals this season are to finish in the top 10 in points and join his dad as a PBA Tour champion. There is no question that Ryan has the talent, the athleticism, and the work ethic to become a perennially top 10 player for years to come. Bowling on tour is a marathon; you'd better come prepared to handle the year-in, year-out grind to enjoy a successful career.

The bottom line is this: Ryan has what it takes, just like mom and dad. ■