

THE PRO APPROACH

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How Mike Fagan Combines Power and a Smooth Delivery

MIKE FAGAN IS THE KING OF SWING with a magical release. Mike, 29, has been an exempt touring player for eight years, and this past season was his best as he won his first individual PBA title and finished eighth in earnings. He has been quietly flying under the radar while developing his enormous talents.

Mike is a five-step stroker with a powerful release. His style is so smooth and

effortless that it's difficult to imagine that he could possess so much power. I'd

call him bowling's version of golf's Fred Couples. His five-step approach

starts with a very comfortable set-up: feet staggered, left foot forward and knees very slightly flexed (just enough to keep the legs loose). He holds the ball a little above waist high, his hand under the ball with a straight wrist and his elbows comfortably at his sides. His shoulders face



Mike Fagan utilizes the "over the bar" pushaway, which involves raising the ball about 6 inches above its position in the stance and pushing it out slightly. The pushaway actually is completed on the second step of the approach.



straight ahead with the right one just a little lower than the left, and the ball directly under his right eye. From behind, you can't see the ball.

On step one Mike starts moving the ball, which normally would be considered early. He raises the ball about 6 inches and slightly out on this step. Hall of Fame coach John Jowdy has to love this move — it is Jowdy's famous over-the-bar pushaway.

On step two, the pushaway is complete, with both arms fully extended but not locked.

During step three, Mike's swing advances 180 degrees — the most of any exempt tour player. When I measure swing length, I use 180 degrees (a half-circle) as the starting point to see if a bowler's swing has enough

length relative to his ball placement/pushaway and timing. Mike's swing doesn't stop there; it continues up to a total of about 225 degrees of swing, almost perpendicular to the approach — also the greatest of any exempt player.

He also has arguably the most free swing in bowling today. It reaches the top midway through the fourth step, and by the time the fourth step is complete, the swing is starting down — much like Pete Weber's. Mike is in a great position at this point: his chin out in front of his leading foot, and his right shoulder stacked over his right knee and foot.

His last step is a slide, and when his arm is perpendicular to the approach, the right shoulder and the back of his hand are over and by

the ankle. This puts the ball just ahead of the ankle when his thumb starts to come out. He has about a 55-degree forward spine tilt at this point, with enough knee flex to allow his upper body to get into this forward position and get the ball very close to the floor for his release.

During Mike's release, his upper body continues to tilt forward (up to 63 degrees) and his slide doesn't stop until the ball is off his hand. Continuing to slide and leaning more forward while he releases the ball allows him to have what is referred to as a "soft hand" release, with extension through the ball. It's much easier to have a soft hand if the upper body is leaning forward through the release, the slide is not complete and — most

importantly — the fingers are very low on the ball and the hand is behind the ball.

Bowlers who utilize this type of technique, including Chris Barnes and Pete Weber, can release the ball without trying to rip the holes out and still get a ton of revs.

Mike's finish position has a lot of straight lines. His upper body continues to lean forward after the release and his knee straightens out, but he still has a little flex when finished, and his right leg is very straight with the big toe of the foot pointing down the lane. All this shows that his forward momentum through the release doesn't stop; the release is gravity fed, with no upswing resistance through the release and finish.

From a rear view, his



The left photo shows Fagan's hand position between his second and third steps. On the right, the ball and arm complete the tuck inside. The thumb is at 12 o'clock, the fingers at about 9:30 and the wrist firmed up.

swing looks as impressive as it does from a side view. Remember, in his stance the ball is directly under his right eye and you can't see it from a rear view, but his backswing is as straight as an arrow. He can manage this because step two is left, and when his step crosses over, his spine tilts about 33 degrees and his bowling shoulder lowers. This creates space for the arm and ball to swing directly under his right shoulder and head. From there, the ball goes straight to the top of the swing.

On the downswing, when he starts loading up his wrist and elbow to dig under the ball, the arm draws inside (close to the body). His swing is now inside-

out for his magic release.

Mike's hand position throughout the swing and up until the thumb comes out also is very different. It starts at the beginning of his backswing when the ball passes his body; his hand is totally on the inside of the ball with his wrist relaxed. On the downswing, his hand stays there until he loads up.

When he's ready to start the release, his hand position also is totally unique to him. His wrist is cocked with the thumb at 2:30, the fingers pointing toward 9 o'clock and he has a slight cup in the wrist. As his thumb comes out, the fingers turn from 9 down to 6 o'clock, then continue turning up through the back of the ball, exiting at

11 o'clock. If you divide the ball vertically in half from a rear view, he turns it up through the middle, never going around the outside.

Mike's grip helps him do what he does. He tucks his pinky, and uses a conventional grip in his ring finger and a fingertip grip in his middle finger. The conventional drilling addresses past wrist problems, and he says he can bowl pain-free with this type of set-up.

When his wrist is cocked and ready for the release, his finger holes and his tucked pinky finger are stacked vertically.

Mike is predominantly a self-taught bowler, and many of the things he does have been developed through trial

and error. He's a big believer in fundamentals, and says when he starts running into trouble he goes back to the fundamentals — great advice for anyone in a slump.

Mike has great fundamentals that support the unique aspects of his game. He continues to work at refining his game, and is trading in some power for accuracy that he says will develop him into a more successful player with greater longevity.

The best is yet to come for Mike Fagan.

Bill Spigner is a Gold-level coach and a member of the ABC/USBC Hall of Fame. To view archived instructional features on top pros, visit billspigner.com.



Left: Just before the thumb exits, the pinky finger is tucked, the ring finger with the conventional grip is right below the pinky, and the middle finger with the fingertip grip is below the other two fingers. Right: The thumb is out and the fingers are going through the ball.