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Domination

E.J. Tackett, Liz Johnson soar as
2016-17 BJI All-American Team captains

THE PRO APPROACH

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Left-Side Lessons from a Star

SHANNON PLUHOWSKY has been one of the best left-handed bowlers — if not *the* best — in women's bowling for a long time. Her resumé is outstanding. Although she is listed as a non-champion in the PWBA's program book, she does have two major titles to her credit — the 2006 USBC Queens and the 2014 BPAA Women's All-Star, which replaced the U.S. Open that year.

She also has three PBA Women's Series titles from tournaments that were run in conjunction with the PBA Tour for a couple of years. In my book, she has five professional titles, including two majors.

Before turning pro, her youth, college and amateur careers were stellar — among the best ever. She was a three-time Junior Gold champion, USOC World Bowler of the Year in 2004, and was inducted into the World Bowling Writers' international Hall of Fame in 2014, based on her outstanding record in tournaments while representing the United States.

At 35 years of age, she has had a phenomenal career, and it's far from over.

Shannon bowled for Nebraska in college under the tutelage of one of the all-time great collegiate coaches, PBA champion Bill Straub. Because of Bill's teaching methodology, when you see his players, you know where they came from. All exhibit very good form with solid fundamentals.

Bill highlights a big push-away, a very loose and straight swing, and a rock-solid finish position. You can't argue with any of that, and he definitely puts his signature on the games of his players.

Shannon has very solid fundamentals,

but not quite the rigid application of them that you see with some of Bill's students. I asked her about it, and she said that he basically let her do what she was doing and kept working on making what she did better.

One of the Straub-instilled things on which she concentrates is her push-away, making sure it doesn't get too short — which is the opposite of many players today who work on an abbreviated push-away.

Another involves working at not pushing off hard with her trail leg into her last step. To this day, Shannon consults with Bill whenever she's struggling or needs to talk out something. Bill is a great coach to have in your corner.

There is one aspect of Shannon's delivery that I asked her about, wondering if anyone had ever tried to change it. She doesn't slide; instead, she "heal-toes" the last step and plants the foot.

Many times, coaches (myself included) will try to get their students to



Just as her heel is making contact with the floor, Pluhowsky's leg still has some flex to it unlike many planters who have their leg totally straight. This is something all planters should strive for to avoid the wear and tear on the hip and knee that planting can cause.

After her foot totally lands, Pluhowsky's swing is rather late relative to the completion of her last step. She has trained herself to get the ball to the release position without pulling it, which is common with late swings.

slide if they have this planting style. For the majority of bowlers, this type of last step prevents them from being fluid and, in many cases, limits their range of lane play. Interestingly Shannon is quite smooth and has a wide range of shots and places she can play on the lanes.

The typical “planter” will totally straighten out the leg on their last step before planting the foot. Shannon keeps some flex in her leg, which makes the landing of her foot much softer. When the leg straightens out, the upper body lags behind the leg. When the foot lands and comes to an abrupt stop, the leg starts to flex and the upper body will lean forward to get over the leg.

The drawback to this is that it causes the swing to become very late and steep, making it hard to release the ball parallel to the lane and stay down. History has shown most “planters” will muscle the ball a lot and loft it more than someone who slides. Shannon is the rare exception to the norm, as she releases the ball smoothly and without muscle in her swing.

Even so, she says she is always working on being smoother, which is a good thing for any “planter” to work on as it will provide greater consistency to their release. Take a page out of Shannon’s book and work at keeping your knee flexed throughout the last step. Don’t push off hard with your trail leg, as Coach Straub recommended for her, and don’t pull on the forward swing; it



Pluhowsky’s release position is as good as it gets. Her upper body is remarkably stable throughout the last step, which is no easy task for planters. All players should strive for Pluhowsky’s upper-body stability because fewer moving parts enable greater consistency.

LESSON PLAN

Shannon Pluhowsky’s ability to be smooth and not muscle her swing allows her to play anywhere on the lane, from the gutter to the fifth arrow, and she has made TV shows from all angles. Being able to play multiple angles is a key to success at any level of bowling, but it’s particularly important for left-handers.

With the very flat patterns used on the PWBA Tour, the bowlers often have to play the middle of the lane, which means the left-handers and right-handers cross each other’s streams in order to stay close to the pocket so their misses are smaller. Last year, Shannon led the U.S. Women’s Open playing the middle of the lane, and was the only left-hander to make the top 24 (only one other lefty even cashed). It was unfortunate that the lanes played very differently on the show and she wound up in second place.

Still, just getting there was an amazing feat, and served as a good lesson for all bowlers: Practice playing different angles, because versatility will always give you an edge.

— Bill Spigner

will help you be smoother and land that step smoother. It’s tough to change to sliding when you have been a “planter” for a long time, but you can still work on being smoother and more effortless.

One unique thing about Shannon’s bowling is the targeting method she uses on her strike ball and some spare shots. On her strike ball, she does kind of look at the arrows, but never sees the ball go over a target. She also doesn’t play a break point, which is the big thing that so many players today think about.

Instead, she “feels out” the lane, positions herself where she feels she needs to be, and doesn’t worry about what she hits, instead concentrating on the visual motion of the ball and the feel of her release and form.

The other thing Shannon does differently than most players involves hooking the ball cross-lane at most of her right-side spares (the same as right-handers hooking the ball at left-side spares), even on Sport conditions. She finds

where to stand, normally starting on board 10, to go cross-lane to the 10-pin. Then, based on how the ball hooks going across the lane, she’ll adjust her feet and/or target to get the ball to the 10-pin. She adjusts her other right-side spares off her 10-pin line. It’s a good system, but you need to stay in tune with how the lanes change, and you’d have to adjust your stance and targeting on the fly just like you would with your strike line.

For her left-side spares, Shannon does roll the ball straight. She is deadly accurate, and her way demonstrates that you can play outside “the book” and still be proficient.

Shannon lives a complex but fulfilling life. She is the General Manager at Capri Lanes in Dayton, Ohio; bowls full-time on the tour (thanks to her boss, Mike Irwin); and is raising her daughter, Autumn, with her partner, Megan Kelly. Her dad, Nick, travels with them on tour so Shannon and Megan can bowl.

I saw Autumn last year at the U.S. Open, and every time I ran into her, she was with a different bowler. She has lots of “moms” on tour, and she is the happiest little girl you’ll ever see. Today, the women’s tour is like one big family, and Shannon Pluhowsky — official titles or not — is one of its top players.

Bill Spigner is a Gold-level coach and a Team USA assistant coach. Archived “Pro Approach” columns can be viewed at billspigner.com.