

Bowler's Journal

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INTERNATIONAL

BREAKDOWN

BUCKING THE TREND

The secret to Junior Gold
champ Bella Castillo's
two-handed success

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BREAKDOWN BELLA VITA

How Bella Castillo has distinguished herself as a rare two-hander among girls, and why we are bound to see more of them soon.

by BILL SPIGNER

If 15-year-old Bella Castillo already wasn't a household name before she blasted through for her U15 title this past summer at the USBC Junior Gold Championships, where the No. 1 seed overcame Trishna Desai, 197-157, in the title match, she certainly is a household name now. She seems destined to remain so for a long time to come.

Her victory underscored the dominance of two-handers at the 2024 edition of Junior Gold but, among female youth bowlers, Castillo remains a rare bird as the style proliferates among boys while comparatively taking its time to catch on among girls.

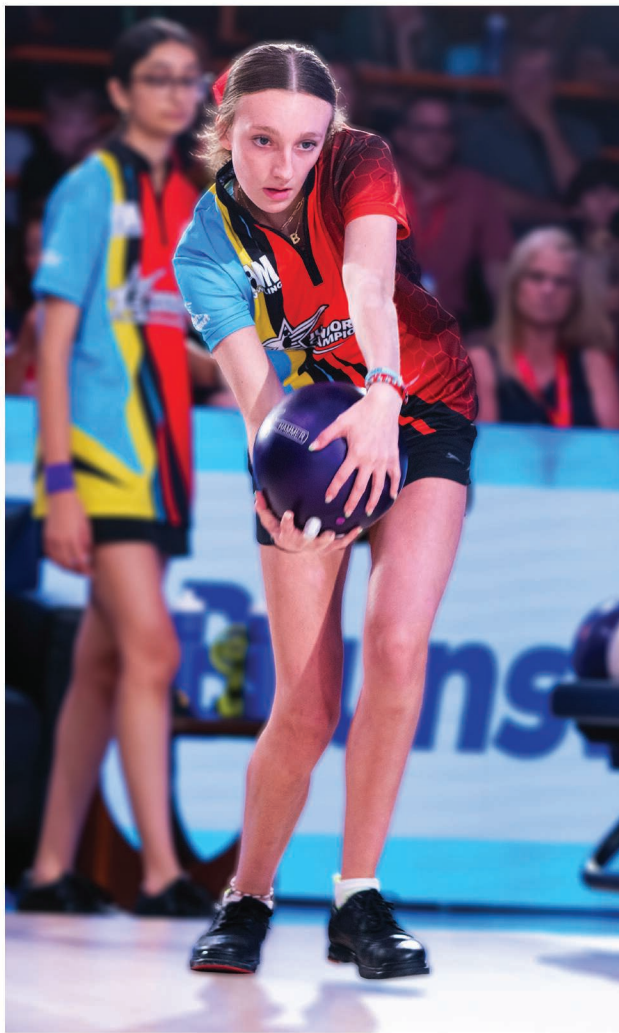
Self-Taught

Castillo's background helps put some context to just how transcendent a player she is proving herself to be in the youth ranks. Even at age 15, she already has been bowling for more than a decade, having started as a one-hander at age 4. Then, something clicked, and this game she toyed with for fun became a more serious endeavor by age 8. It was at this time that she adopted the two-handed style, a release she couldn't replicate one-handed and did not want to use a wrist device to achieve.

Enter Jason Belmonte — who else? — whose game provided a blueprint for her own. The largely self-taught Castillo endlessly studied the way Belmonte imparted rotation and revs on the ball, marveling at the apparent effortlessness with which the record 15-time PBA Tour major-title holder does so. Castillo found the style to be irresistible, and never looked back herself.

She took a quirkier route to the style than others, initially inserting her thumb in the ball until another two-handed superstar, this time fellow Texan Anthony Simonsen, suggested she go with a thumbless delivery as he and Belmo both prefer in their own games. She followed his advice and has bowled thumbless with a conventional grip ever since.

That transition is a familiar one to other PBA pros who have made the same switch and experienced phe-



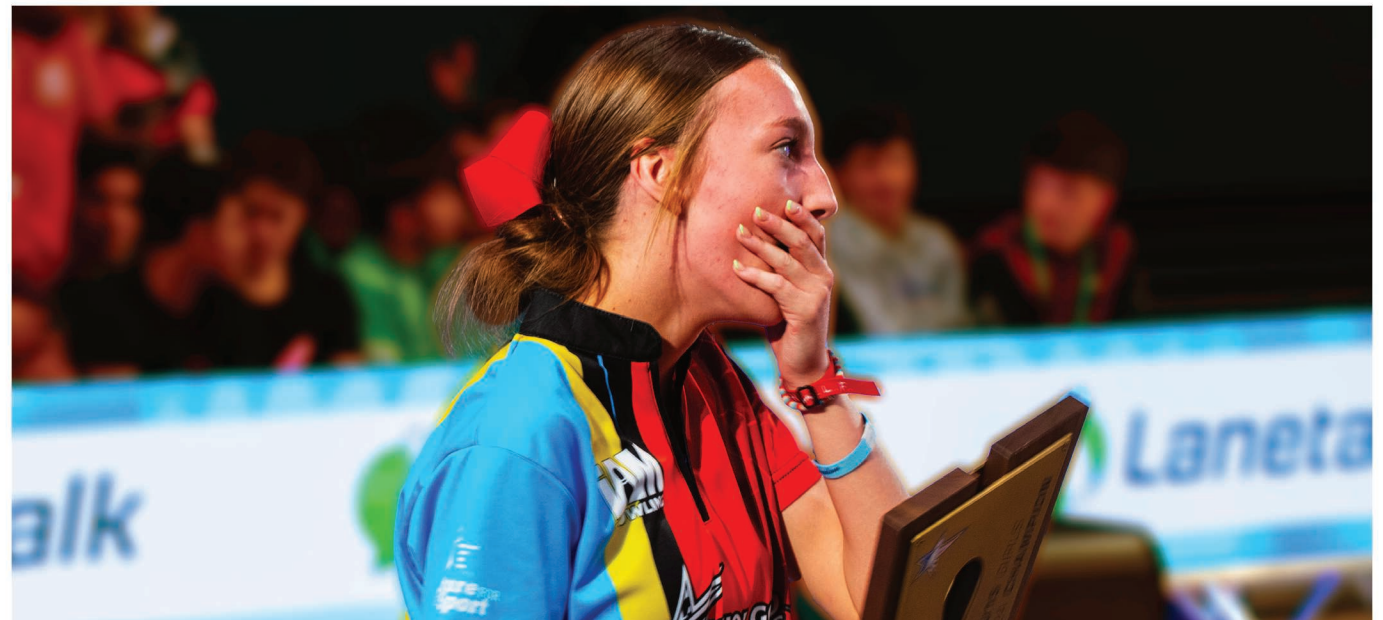
Timing is Everything

Castillo's excellent timing is similar to Belmonte's, with the toe of her right foot ready to leave the floor going into her fourth step.



Pointers (left)

Castillo's middle finger is pointing at the ring finger of her non-bowling hand at the top of her swing (right), which puts the bowling hand directly behind the ball at the top of the swing; Belmonte's middle finger on his left hand is more in-line with the index finger of his bowling hand, which puts his bowling hand more to the inside of the ball.



Trendsetter

Castillo's Junior Gold victory may help open the flood gates for the two-handed trend among female youth bowlers.

nomenal results in exchange. Players like Shawn Maldonado and Matt Russo each won titles after making the same switch, having previously used a thumb-in two-handed approach. As Castillo surely experienced, it can be a bit more irksome to try getting one's whole palm on the ball with the thumb inserted.

Personally, I consider the opposite hand to essentially play the role of the "thumb" for two-handed bowlers, as it stops supporting the ball just as the release starts. That said, the opposite hand position does have an influence on how one can turn the ball based on how it's placed on the ball.

Right at Home

Castillo finds herself in familiar company this year as a member of Junior Team USA's Developmental squad, the composition of which speaks resoundingly to the two-handed style's popularity generally, just as it speaks to the style's rarity among female youth bowlers. No fewer than 20 of the 22 boys filling out the main team and Developmental squads combined employ the two-handed styled. Among girls? You guessed it: There's one, and her name is Bella Castillo.

Which prompts a number of questions. Why are the girls not embracing the two-handed technique with nearly as much frequency as the boys? Is coaching somehow the culprit? Are there concerns among girls

about trying the style due to size, strength, speed, or perhaps all those factors?

It is likely a mere matter of time before we begin seeing more two-handed players among female youth bowlers. One reason for this is that girls' athletics are growing quickly and becoming very competitive, a trend likely to influence bowling in the form of more two-handed bowlers among girls as they increasingly will want to do what the boys are doing in the sport as two-handers. Other girls will follow suit as they find successful female role models like Castillo and themselves adopt the two-handed style.

The perfect time to start doing this is at the developmental stage of a player's game. While building a two-hander's game is much the same as building a conventional player's game, the two-handed style does present certain conveniences that make it attractive to youth bowlers. For one thing, it's easier to get better more quickly because a good release tends to be baked into the style. Then, let us not discount the lack of any thumb issues like calluses, swelling or irritation, or the fact that the two-handed release itself also is very short. With the form being far less challenging to develop than the release, well, why not start with a release and build the form around it?

These are among the reasons it seems inevitable that, with time, more female youth bowlers will find themselves right

at home among two-handed players.

A Sound Game

Castillo's ability to distinguish herself as a rare two-hander among female youth players derives in no small part from the remarkable soundness of her fundamentals. She takes five steps, starting with her heels off the back of the approach. Relative to the top male pros, Castillo's steps tend to be long. Belmonte, for instance, begins his approach in front of the 12-foot dots, making his approach about 4 feet shorter than Castillo's. But Castillo gets to the foul line more quickly than Belmonte — a big reason why she is able to roll the ball 18 miles per hour off of her hand.

Despite these differences in stride length and speed to the foul line, Belmonte and Castillo's final two steps occur at nearly the same speed. Castillo's legs are the power source for her speed and give her the ability to throw 15-pound equipment. It is in this way that Castillo's athleticism resembles that of athletes across the sports spectrum, as the legs and feet provide the foundation for stability and speed in just about any sport. This detail hardly escapes her; Castillo goes to the gym several days a week and often emphasizes leg work when she does so.

Castillo's game also features excellent timing, with her ball placement and pushaway closely resembling Belmonte's. That hardly marks the end of the similarity

A PHOTO FINISH

Castillo's finish position is as good as it gets, and that is true whether you are two-handed or one-handed. She has the right amount of knee bend to support the upper body's position over the slide knee, and her trail leg is long and straight with the pinky toe on the floor and facing down the lane.

Her follow-through features her hand above the elbow with the palm coming straight up from the release through the center of the face. This would not be possible without the torso angles being the way they are to allow this to happen naturally. I measure torso tilt, both side and forward, from a vertical zero line. Her tilt at release is about 40 degrees side and her forward tilt is about 65 degrees. This puts her arm perpendicular to the floor and in-line with her slide leg with the ball, meanwhile, out over her foot in front of the ankle. This is the perfect position to release the ball out onto the lane.

Her non-bowling arm is extended out from the body with the hand about waist-high. The palm of the hand is facing away from the lane with the thumb turned down, which firms up her left arm and shoulder. This is a power supply; it gives her a firm left side to counter-balance the right side.

Her finish position is something anyone can practice doing at home in front of a mirror without a ball. I have a video on YouTube I did during the pandemic to work on your finish position while bowling was shut down; you can go to Bill Spigner Bowling on YouTube to see and use it. I did this for one-handers at the time, but it works well for any style.

— Bill Spigner



Late and Great

Simonsen's later timing features the ball in front of his left knee at this moment in the approach.



The Belmo Effect

The largely self-taught Castillo began as a one-handed bowler but switched to two hands after studying Belmonte's game.

between her game and Belmo's. For instance, when the toe of Castillo's right foot is ready to leave the floor going into her fourth step, her ball is in the same position as Belmo's. It is my view that this is the best spot for a two-hander to be at this point in the approach. If the timing is any earlier than this, the body rotates sideways early, which causes a fast backswing with very fast feet and a very short pivot step — or no pivot step at all. In some cases, one might even observe both feet in the air simultaneously in an effort to get back in time. This can reduce leverage going into the slide, which results in less versatility.

We do see marquee pros who feature late timing and succeed handsomely in spite of it — Simo and Kyle Troup come to mind, both of whom have the ball in front of their left knee at this moment in the approach. In their cases, timing is key to the versatility they feature, and versatility is precisely what is needed to hang tough among the world's greatest bowlers. There is no shortage of it among the aforementioned pros, with Simo being the greatest straight player in the world and Belmo being the best at hooking it.

Speed Demon

The moment in Rocky II when Mickey sends Rocky chasing chickens because he needs "greasy, fast speed," he might as well have been observing what it takes to thrive as a two-handed bowler as well. And it appears that Castillo has taken that memo and, ah-hem, run with it.

While Castillo generates speed with her fast pace to the foul line, she also does so by changing her spine angle on the downswing. Going into her last

step, her spine angle is parallel to the floor. As she starts her downswing, her upper body comes up about 35 degrees by the time her ball is ready to be released. This motion of her upper body coming up as her ball is descending to the release speeds up the momentum of the arm, which enhances ball speed.

Comparatively, a player like Simo comes up very little because his strength enables him to stay down and roll it fast. This change of torso angle works for a two-hander because the backswing is short with a lot of forward tilt. When the ball moves forward on the last step, it descends in a more horizontal angle than it might for a one-handed player. This is because the one-hander's higher swing creates a steeper downswing; their spine angle needs to go from more vertical to forward going into the release zone.

The Role of the Non-Bowling Hand

For two-handers, the non-bowling hand is very important for supporting the ball throughout the swing, and it can have a great effect on hand position during the swing and the release. The key thing to look at is the relationship between the fingers on the non-bowling hand and the bowling hand.

One of Castillo's projects these days, she says, is to work on not getting around the ball as much. With the high rev rates two handers generate thanks to the palm of their hand being under the ball, all that axis rotation comes with a more sensitive reaction to oil and friction. In the oil, the ball skids, because oil is like ice. The dry part of the lane is like pavement to all that axis rotation, making the ball abruptly grab the lane and change direction.

When Castillo's rev rate was measured at Junior Team USA camp, it came to 450 rpm with that previously mentioned 18-mph ball speed off her hand. That rev-rate-to-ball-speed ratio is a good match, and a familiar one, as two-handers' generally higher ball speed normally means higher rev rates because of how quickly the fingers transition from the bottom of the ball to the top.

One detail I like to scrutinize as a coach is the middle finger on the non-bowling hand — specifically, which finger it is pointing to on the bowling hand. In Castillo's case, it is pointing di-

Finisher
Castillo's finishing position is as good as it gets.



**Rare Bird**

Castillo is the only female two-hander on Junior Team USA.

rectly at the ring finger of her bowling hand. This position puts the bowling hand directly behind the ball at the top of the swing.

When the torso rotates to square up to the direction the ball will travel, and the bowling shoulder lowers for the release, the motion will rotate the hand to the side of the ball with ease. To rotate the ball more from the inside, you would want to align the middle finger of the non-bowling hand with the index finger of the bowling hand.

In Belmo's case, the middle finger of his left hand is more in-line with the index finger of his bowling hand, which puts his bowling hand more to the inside of the ball. Pay attention to the relationship of your non-bowling hand's fingers to the bowling hand when building your hand position. Know where they are so you can experiment with adjusting them to get different hand positions for different releases or the release you want.

Castillo has joined the growing number of highly skilled athletes that have chosen to go to an online high school so they can travel, practice and pursue their sport full time. She is going to start bowling professional tournaments in a couple of years with the goal of becoming a full-time professional bowler. She might be our first female two handed champion. It's going to be fun following her career. ■