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THE PRO APPROACH

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A Salute to Coaching Pioneers

I'VE BEEN ACTIVELY INVOLVED in organized bowling competition for 50 of *Bowlers Journal International's* 100 years — starting as a bowler, then a writer, teacher, pro shop operator, bowling center proprietor and numerous other roles.

Through it all, there have been many changes in the bowling business and sport, some good, some not so good. Right now, we are in a downward trend with committed bowler participation. Even so, one segment that keeps expanding is coaching.

When I was learning how to bowl in the 1960s, there was no professional coaching in my area. Like most of my contemporaries, to become a higher skilled bowler, you had to be mostly self-taught. You watched what the pros did on TV, as well as the better bowlers in your area.

The game was simpler 50 years ago. The lane conditions were predominately track shots. The balls were made of hard rubber, with pancake-shaped weight blocks, and didn't hook a lot. What few professional coaches there were had less to teach: basically getting a bowler into a good approach and a simple hand position in order to get some hook.

That part of coaching has never changed, but going beyond the basics has dramatically over time.

Some of the early innova-

tors in coaching established the foundation for lane play. Bill Bunetta developed the 3-6-9 spare-shooting system that's still basically followed today, although the numbers have to be modified

Ball was and still is a great foundation for measuring and fitting today. He also authored *Balance*, which was "a study of the influences of imbalance and gyroscopic inertia upon the performance of bowling



Dick Ritger (left) not only was one of the greatest players in PBA Tour history, but he also lent his name and teaching skills to a pioneering bowling camp program. Another pro bowling star, Don Johnson, also got involved in bowling camps, and later became a sought-after teaching pro based in Las Vegas.



path for young bowlers to pursue. Along with that exposure for bowling came a desire and need for more accessible advanced coaching. Some of the star players in the '60s and '70s started writing instructional books and teaching.

The most significant thing that helped coaching take off was the formation of the first bowling camp. Jerry Croft and Terry Rae were the brains behind this concept. They saw camps for other sports and felt bowling needed them, too. They conducted their first one in the summer of 1977 in Issaquah, Wash.

They not only had the foresight to get the first-of-its-kind bowling camp started, but wisely hired Dick Ritger to be the first lead instructor. Dick, armed with his Physical Education degree and his professional bowling career background, structured the camp material. He developed a skill drill/science-oriented program that could accommodate large groups.

The basis of Dick's teaching program was a progressive, systematic, structured series of six skill drills. Those drills are pushaway, timing, secondary timing, steps, perfect release and balance. All camp teaching is based on these principles.

The great Don Johnson one time stated that Ritger was

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Bill Bunetta developed a spare-shooting system that is still in use — updated for modern lane patterns and equipment — today. Above, he gives a “chalk talk” at one of the thousands of clinics he hosted during his coaching career.

the best “three-minute coach” he ever saw, meaning that he could evaluate a bowler’s delivery in that amount of time and offer corrections. Quite a compliment from Don.

Dick worked for PBC for two summers before splitting off and starting his own camps and clinics. In the fall of 1978, he was invited to Holland to run a camp program, and that was the start of the Dick Ritger Bowling Camps. That one camp program in

Holland was the launching pad for an extensive international teaching career.

Dick is probably the most traveled coach we’ve ever had, and his work worldwide provided the stepping stones for many international programs. He logged more than 2 million air miles in 87 trips to 28 countries on five continents. Dick truly is the father of international coaching. Some of his camps are still running today.

After Dick left PBC, the company turned into the Don Johnson Summer Bowling Camps, with various sites throughout the U.S. I was hired by Don in 1979, and got my teaching career started because of PBC. So did many other top teaching pros. PBC is no longer in business, but it will be remembered for bringing coaching into the modern era.

Coaching was further advanced at the highest

level in the 1970s because bowling ball companies had representatives who spent their time following the PBA Tour, initially providing equipment to the players. Those reps saw thousands of balls rolled down the lanes by highly skilled professionals, and developed very sharp eyes for good and bad shots and ball motion.

At its top level, coaching is sometimes easier because the mistakes are a lot

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smaller. But the stakes are a lot higher, and if a player is struggling with his game, he needs eyes to pinpoint the smallest of mistakes.

One of the all-time great coaches in that regard was the late John Jowdy, who had coached before becoming a tour rep for Columbia 300. John definitely was the father of the ball reps on tour who became great coaches.

Another coaching innovator was Tom Kouros, who also was teaching before he started traveling with the tour. The difference with Tom is that he did it on his own dime for research, which he turned into the all-time best-selling *Par Bowling* books, which remain good reads today.

Tom also formed the Institute of Professional Bowling Instruction, to this day the only bowling program ever sanctioned by a state board of education (in Illinois). Unfortunately, that program never picked up steam.

Another pioneering coach at that time was Fred Borden, headquartered in Akron, Ohio, at Eastgate Lanes and then later at Stonehedge Place. Between tour stops



Clockwise, from upper left: Tom Kouros wrote the book — literally — on high-level bowling instruction. Two editions of *Par Bowling* were the game's best sellers ever. Fred Borden helped countless pros — without charge — through the years, and even offered them free practice at his centers in Akron, Ohio. John Jowdy, who passed away earlier this year, also was a teacher of the pros and the first pro tour "ball rep."

in the area, many players would go to see Fred.

He worked with lots of the pros over the years, and opened up his centers to them for free practice. He'd always help any pro who asked for his advice, and went on to become Head Coach for Team USA.

Also during the mid-1970s, college bowling was starting up, and there was a need for coaches at that level. This was a very important beginning for coaches, having a paid professional position to pursue. There were not many then, but now we have a lot of coaches who are being paid to share their knowledge, experience and leadership.

With college bowling blossoming, we soon saw high school bowling starting up — and bowling has been the fastest growing high school sport in recent years. Unfortunately, most of those coaching jobs are part-time positions without a lot of funding.

Today, you can't possibly become a high-level player without a lot of help. The lane patterns and the bowling balls are too complex for one to learn them on their own. Fortunately, we have many bowling camps, teaching programs and certifications available.

The coaching world owes a big thanks to Jerry Croft and Terry Rae, who provided that very important foundation more than 36 years ago.

Bill Spigner is a Gold-level coach and a member of the USBC Hall of Fame. Archived "Pro Approach" columns can be read online at billspigner.com.

COACHING TODAY

There are more high-level coaches in bowling today than ever before, thanks to the coaching department of the United States Bowling Congress and the continuing education program of the International Bowling Pro Shop & Instructors Assn.

USBC Coaching conducts certification clinics on a regular basis, with bronze, silver and gold designations representing ever higher levels of knowledge and coaching proficiency. Those certifications can be used by IBPSIA members to obtain continuing education units, part of that organization's ongoing effort to promote the importance of quality coaching.

"We work closely with Carolyn [Dorin-Ballard] and her team at USBC Coaching," says Bill Supper, IBPSIA's Executive Director. "With today's technology, ball drilling and coaching really need to go hand in hand. That's why certified IBPSIA members represent the crème de la crème among pro shop operators."

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