



THE PRO APPROACH

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Old-School and Modern Techniques Help Make Bill O'Neill 'The Real Deal'

IF YOU DIDN'T BELIEVE that Bill O'Neill was "The Real Deal" prior to the PBA's 2010 World Series of Bowling, you have to believe it now. After topping a world-class 252-bowler field for 60 games and advancing to match play in four of the five "animal pattern" events, there can be no doubt that O'Neill's run at PBA Player of the Year last season was no fluke.

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.



Left: As Bill O'Neill takes the second step of his delivery, the ball placement is complete. Right: At the completion of the third step, the ball is in what the late Don Johnson liked to call the "pro zone" and O'Neill is still walking tall.

Bill is a very fundamentally sound player, utilizing a semi-controlled swing. In his stance, his feet are slightly staggered, with the big toe of the left foot a couple of inches ahead of the right, and the right toe facing out slightly for comfort.

He stands very tall, with his feet, hips and shoulders facing straight ahead toward his target. He holds the ball midway between his waistline and shoulders, with his hand a little above his slightly cupped wrist.

During his first step, Bill's upper body remains very erect — there's no forward spine tilt — and he starts his ball placement during that step, moving it a couple of inches. He keeps his vertical spine angle throughout his second step, which is old-style textbook.

Bill has a very slight upper movement (a couple of inches) with his ball at the start of the ball placement. The completion of the ball movement is right on time with the end of step two. His left hand is

still in total contact with the ball at this point, and doesn't come off the ball until it is middle-of-thigh-high, part-way through step three.

This is where Bill's style differs from many of the young free-swingers: He controls the ball into the swing instead of pushing the ball out, letting the left hand leave the ball early and dropping the ball into the swing while tilting forward and speeding up the steps. He starts his forward tilt when the ball is past his right knee at the completion of the third step and it's at about 25 degrees.

When I was cutting my teaching teeth in the late 1970s, Hall of Famer Don Johnson referred to the ball being in this spot at the completion of the third step as the "pro zone." Bill is right there, and Don would love it.

At the completion of the fourth step, the ball reaches the top of Bill's swing, his spine tilt has increased to about 33 degrees, and the swing has completed a

180-degree arc. The swing traveled 90 degrees from the completion of step two to step three, and another 90 from step three to four.

From the top of the swing to the release, Bill increases his forward tilt and his bowling shoulder lowers to get the ball right next to the ankle for release. This portion of his game is in the modern era of tilting and lowering the shoulder on the downswing to load up the wrist and elbow, and increase the speed of the hand through the release zone.

Bill gets enough knee bend so his head stays right over his sliding foot at release, and the head, shoulder, arm and ball are all stacked for the release (from a side view). At release, the ball is a couple of inches off the floor, and Bill starts the exit of his thumb just as the ball is ready to pass the ankle. The fingers leave the ball about 10 inches in front of the toe of the sliding foot. His spine angle and the lowering of his shoulder continue through

the release, enabling him to lift and turn through the back of the ball out onto the lane.

What also helps him greatly with his release — and is more evident among high-rev players — is the unloading of the wrist after the thumb comes out. This unloading, or allowing the wrist and fingers to flex back, has to start with the wrist and/or the elbow cupped slightly so the fingers are under the ball when the thumb starts to come out.

But the unloading, as it's termed, has to be natural. With the wrist slightly cupped when the thumb comes out, you want to let the weight of the ball flex the wrist back. When you hear on TV that the player "grabbed" the ball, it means he didn't allow the weight of the ball to release it off the hand; you always want to use gravity to help release the weight.

Consciously trying to unload the wrist is very risky because you have to actually think about doing it at the right time, which is very

challenging. Bowlers like Bill have learned to load up the wrist and elbow on the downswing and let the weight of the ball unload the wrist and fingers through the release. You need a soft hand to do this effectively, meaning very light grip pressure.

From a back view, the one thing that Bill has changed since he came out on tour is the direction of his ball placement. When I first saw him, he placed the ball way

outside his swing line. But he was still very successful because he placed the ball into the swing, and the controlled placement of the ball allowed him to realign the swing on the way back. So by the time the ball reached the top of the swing, it was directly behind his head.

He has changed it a lot, and I believe that adjustment in his ball placement allows him to be even more consistent and, thus, more versatile.

Bill has a very nice blend of old-school timing and footwork that helps him with his more modern downswing and release. He is very versatile — as he proved at the World Series — but his meat and potatoes is playing the middle of the lane. His greatest success has come on longer patterns, regardless of the side-to-side blend of the oil.

One of the other old-school things he does is having his hand follow through directly

down his target line. He keeps the cup of his elbow up, and after the release his elbow is behind his hand and facing his target line. Many of the young players today don't do that.

Bill O'Neill has become one of the tour's elite players, and I'd be surprised if he didn't remain that way for a long time to come.

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Left: At the top of O'Neill's swing, note how the ball is directly behind his head. Right: After the release, the cup of his elbow and his hand both follow the ball down its target line.