I want to share with readers a practice drill that I use with all of my bowlers. This drill can aid you in improving your feel for good timing, a free swing and a solid finish. I call this the 5-step drill but some readers might just as well refer to it as the Wayne Webb drill. Why? Well, this drill has many similarities to the old approach of the 20-time titlist and PBA Hall-of-Famer Wayne Webb. You be the judge. Independent of what you call this drill, it will help you improve significantly.

Wayne Webb and Marshall Holman both demonstrated bowling prowess with a simplified stance and approach. In both examples, the bowling ball was held low in the stance and the pushaway was initiated by pushing the ball upward to aid in the achievement of a smooth and free swing. The ball-side arm was held straight in the pushaway and led to swinging the ball with a smooth pendulum swing.

As a youth bowler, I often experimented with this approach and found it to yield a feeling of fluidity in the approach. As a coach, I have often reflected on this simplified approach to bowling. Could this approach help bowlers as a practice drill by improving timing and freedom in the swing? I believed it could when I first began to develop it as a drill and now I know it can, due to the improvements I have witnessed in bowlers after using my approach to the drill.

Keeping it simple

With some reflection, I realized that this simplified approach could be used as a drill to aid bowlers in achieving an improved approach through supporting the development of better timing and a freer swing. After developing the idea, I experimented with this approach as a drill with my students. What resulted was a very smooth, lower and slower approach with the achievement of natural timing, and a swing that was freer than before.

In essence, as my colleague jokingly named this drill, the 5-step drill appears similar to the stance and approach of Wayne Webb. Webb used this style to win the 1980 Firestone Tournament of Champions. Specifically, the ball is held at the side and pushed upward in the second step to begin the approach. It is my belief that this is the most holistic drill ever, due to the emphasis on establishing good timing, a free swing, and solid leverage finish. Since it is lower and slower, the bowler can actually develop a better feel for great habits that can translate to their normal full approach. My bowlers do this drill at every session for 10 to 15 minutes.

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And, this drill completed properly leads to improvements in timing, swing and release.

To illustrate the immediate effectiveness, when I first arrived in Malaysia, I conducted a clinic for coaches in the eastern part of the country, in the state of Sabah. In this coaching clinic, I introduced the 5-step drill to them and explained why this is an effective practice tool for timing and the swing.

As a dedicated coach, Ricky Loh, the Chief Coach of the national Elite Sports program in the state of Sabah, immediately taught the 5-step drill to his team on the evening he learned it himself. And, they used this drill on a daily basis. Within weeks, one of his athletes won on the next stop of the national Sports Excel – Nestle Milo junior circuit averaging 202 for 14 games in qualifying. She led qualifying by nearly 400 pins and won the title with a 220 in the final. What was unique is the fact that she used the 5-step drill approach rather than her normal approach. Her decision to use the 5-step drill approach was based on the fact that she felt that her timing was better than her normal approach. This is one of dozens of success stories realized through the use of this drill.

Elbow, knee, heel

To begin the discussion on implementing the 5-step drill, I must share with you my approach to timing. The specifics of my approach to timing, are an important element to the effectiveness of the drill. Specifically, in my teaching, I ask bowlers to focus on achieving a vertical alignment of the elbow-knee-heel in the pushaway. Imagine the elbow being directly over the knee before the ball descends into the swing. This provides a concrete reference point for the bowler that he can use when bowling. Thus, with this specific reference, each bowler can better repeat quality shots. And, as you know, repeatability is the key to greatness in our sport.

From my review of thousands of bowlers in video over more than 20 years of coaching, I have found that this intersection of elbow-knee-heel allows bowlers to smoothly change ball height in the stance while realizing a feeling of good timing. Consequently, they can make a change in the height of the ball in the stance quickly without worrying about changing foot speed or a possible problem with the swing.

As long as the bowler achieves the intersection of the elbow-knee-heel, with a free arm swing, a feeling of good timing will be achieved. Try it for yourself. Make an effort to get the elbow over the knee in your pushaway. You should feel an amazing amount of stability and can change the height of the ball in the stance with confidence.

With the 5-step drill, the first two steps are very important, with the second step being critical. In the second step, the elbow-knee-heel intersection is the cornerstone of completing the 5-step drill correctly in good time. If this intersection doesn’t happen, the bowler will not repeat shots that are similar. So, as you attempt the drill, especially in the beginning, play close attention and focus on getting the elbow over the knee. This will allow you to regulate timing and effectively implement the drill.

Begin the drill with the ball directly at your side with your fingers located in the six o’clock position or directly behind the bowling ball. This places the ball directly in the swing and target line. The balance arm should be firm and placed at 8 o’clock for righties or 4 o’clock for the lefthanded bowler. During the first step, the ball travels with the bowler.

In the second step, you will push the ball toward your target as you make the second step. The goal is to push the ball upward from the shoulder until the elbow intersects the knee and the heel strikes the ground. This is approximately the same height as your hand, under the ball, being at the top of your pocket. By focusing on this intersection, you will set up a natural timing that will lead to the last three steps being slightly faster than the first two. Now, simply go through the motions of steps three, four and five ending with a good finish. As an observer, you should see a natural timing cadence of one + two + three-four-five. You can clap this natural timing as X + X + XXX. It will feel very good to you if your swing is free. Be careful not to lift the ball at the elbow.
How to do the 5-step drill

Begin in the stance with the bowling ball at your side, fingers directly begin at 6 o'clock. In addition, place your balance arm, firm, at 8 o'clock.

As with the normal 5-step approach, take your first step without moving the bowling ball. The ball should move with you in the same position in the stance. Coaches, watch that the ball doesn't go behind the body. This will change the natural timing effect.

In the second step, push the ball upward with the shoulder until the elbow intersects with the knee. The underside of the hand is about the height of the top of your pocket. Keep the arm straight. At this point, relax and let the ball descend into the swing. Keep going with the last three steps and finish in a solid position.

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As you see in photos 6 & 7, you only push the ball to a point that your elbow “intersects” your knee. In other words, a line could be drawn from your elbow directly to your knee. This is a reference point that will aid you in not moving the elbow too far from the body for improved timing consistency. In a normal pushaway, focus on achieving the same intersection of the elbow over the knee.

As a coach, I strive to develop systems that are easy for bowlers to implement and easy-to-use for coaches. To achieve this, I use reference systems. In this article, the reference for establishing good timing is to achieve the elbow-knee-heel vertical intersection in the pushaway. As in my last article on altering axis of rotation, the reference point allows the bowler to repeat good shots more easily, due to the concrete reference. Remember to use the elbow-knee-heel reference in the pushaway. Specifically, when you take to the lanes next to practice, take 15 to 30 minutes to try the 5-step drill.

As you are trying the drill, focus on the elbow-knee-heel intersection in the pushaway, a necessary element of doing the 5-step drill correctly. Try this in your normal approach as well. If you are practicing with someone, ask them to watch to see if you got the elbow over the knee in the pushaway. Also, ask them to watch that your swing is lower than your normal approach. If not, you are likely muscling the ball into the upswing. You can also videotape yourself as you do the drill.

If you want to improve your timing and swing, this is the best drill for helping a bowler holistically. But, you need to commit to the details of the drill. Be sure that you are doing it correctly by moving the ball in the second step to achieve the elbow-knee-heel alignment. Follow these instructions closely and you will see results in the near future. As with many of my bowlers, you might just use this approach in league or a tournament, due to the great timing feel you will realize.