Junior Gold provides a venue for the best youth bowlers in the United States to showcase their skills as they strive to earn a spot on Junior Team USA. In addition, it provides many with an opportunity to experience sport bowling conditions and advanced lane transitions that they have never seen before.

To be successful in Indianapolis, a bowler needs to bowl well on each of the three patterns: short, medium and long. This requires a successful approach to lane play, equipment preparation, release variation and a strong mental game. A holistic approach will yield the best overall performance.

For those 2000-plus elite youth bowlers who will participate in the upcoming Junior Gold tournament, this discussion is designed to help you be prepared to bowl your best. This article consists of a number of random discussion points to reflect upon to help you improve your performance this summer.

Mental game will make or break many

In the PBA Tour Trials last summer, the difference between making the cut and not making the cut was a mere three pins. Forty-five games on five different patterns, over five days; becoming an exempt player came down to the tenth frame for three different players. Do you think the mental game made a difference in performance during the week for these three, as well as those who missed the cut by a few pins? Think about how potentially stressful this was. These bowlers were attempting to become exempt on the PBA Tour to earn a living as a professional bowler. These bowlers were throwing each shot to earn a spot that would earn money to feed their families. Now, that is potentially intense pressure.

This situation could be recreated at Junior Gold. Last year’s Junior Gold tournament went down to the final game for more than two dozen bowlers. Specifically, on the boys’ side, a total of 32 bowlers missed the initial cut of the top 105 by 30 pins or less after 18 games. That is less than 2 pins per game. This summer, there will be several successes and many failures at Junior Gold and it will come down to the tenth frame of the final game as well. How will you be prepared for success at this moment?

Many talented players will arrive in Indianapolis with big aspirations. But, possessing big aspirations can lead a bowler to think about the outcome rather than the process. Almost immediately, their mental

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outlook will set the stage for failure and potentially giving-up in the moment. Many will need to bring a box of Kleenex to conceal or deal with their emotional meltdown. But, this can be avoided by choosing to come to the event with a positive mental outlook. Accordingly, emotional regulation is a key to becoming the best athlete that you can become. And, this requires discipline and practice.

Make a conscious effort to be patient and present throughout the entire competition. The talent pool is too deep to allow a tidal wave of emotions, creating an undertow that will pull a bowler under. Go into the competition with a commitment to not give away one single shot. Always give 100 percent. This is a championship mindset, and it is critical for success. But, if you make a mistake, which you will, let it go immediately. Don’t dwell on it.

Specifically, do not let yourself become negatively emotional. With a renewed focus on being patient and present, this sets you up to be better at just doing the best that you can on every single shot. Approach it like a job, your responsibility. Observe your ball reaction and don’t judge the outcome. Rather, watch your ball reaction. There is a substantive difference between observation and judgment. Observing ball motion is the process of closely watching the ball path to determine needed changes as the shot evolves during lane transition. This is not grounded in emotional response and requires a clear and calm mind to do it effectively. Transition your thinking from striking to just hitting the pocket.

**Make it simple: Hit the pocket and make the spare**

Too many players put more emphasis on striking than on sparing. Both are important to success in tournaments where the competition is close. The patterns are challenging and will require a sustained focus throughout the competition. Those who can be positive throughout the experience will perform at a higher level. Those who let negative emotions creep in will under-perform. But, this takes practice. You must make a conscious effort to not let yourself get emotional.

During a visit to the Training Center before the WTBA World Championships, Walter Ray Williams Jr. told me his philosophy of lane play. Simply put, Walter believes in hitting the pocket and making the spare. This simple, yet eloquent philosophy allows a bowler to maintain a positive outlook on bowling. Since he focuses on hitting the pocket rather than striking, he is more successful from a mental perspective. Moreover, this places the same amount of focus on spare shooting. Perhaps, this is a philosophy that would work for you as well.

I see many youth bowlers get brought down because of emotional negativity when they don’t carry a shot. Simply put, every leave is due to deflection. For 99 percent of leaves, you really deserve what you got. Just accept this fact and move on. It does a bowler no good to linger by getting upset. For those who get trapped into over-reaction on a single shot, you will give several shots away, due to not being calm during subsequent shots. And, this often turns into a downward spiral of frustration. Did I mention that the cut can go down to the tenth frame and no single bowler can give shots away and be successful? Think about it. A “hit the pocket and make the spare” philosophy is the key to being your best.

**Track your movements**

In tournaments in which you change lanes, you will encounter a variety of different transitions, depending upon who bowled on that pair previously. Focus on observing ball motion with a calm mind. This will lead you to a process of making educated moves in target lines, equipment and release changes.

At Junior Gold, bowlers have a variety of knowledge and experience. This will reveal itself in some bowlers playing the lanes incorrectly and playing all over the lane. Many changes will be required to maintain an adequate scoring pace to stay competitive during the event. One strategy to help you succeed is maintaining a constant tracking of your target lines. Specifically, track the following information: slide, visual targets, and focal point.

There is an additional benefit to this process. If you move to a pair that was similar to a few games ago, you can review your target line tracking sheet to determine where you were playing during that game. A move to that line will help you make better decisions during that game by instituting an informed decision rather than several guesses.
In essence, you are attempting to not give one shot away by just doing something. With a disciplined approach, you will be able to track target lines and make moves that are going to keep you in the pocket more.

Don’t focus on your physical game during competition

Don’t think about your physical game during the tournament. If you think about physical execution, it can be extremely detrimental to your performance.

When you are mastering something new, your cerebral cortex is at the center of the learning process. This is the location of your conscious thought. And, in a nutshell, conscious thought is extremely slow and doesn’t flow relative to mastery. When these skills are learned, these become accessed from the cerebellum. The cerebellum cannot be accessed with conscious thoughts. This is where you can achieve a flow state.

When you make a conscious thought about your physical game, you are accessing the cerebral cortex. Consequently, an athlete is setting himself up for failure because the brain is functioning at a slower rate. Rather, focus on executing and simply hitting your pre-established target lines.

Junior Gold practice plan

Many athletes make the mistake of training too much as they lead up to a major tournament. Their thinking is such that they believe that they should bowl more just before a tournament. Research on training indicates that athletes should taper off and reduce their training, 8 to 14 days before an event. Specifically, frequency should be maintained but the volume of training should be reduced.

Think of volume as a measure of the amount of practice games or the amount of time that you practice. If you feel the need to practice longer, do that two weeks to one month prior to the event. With one to two weeks to go before the event, reduce the amount of time or games in your practice sessions, but do not reduce the frequency of your training.

Training should consist of spare shooting and lane play on all parts of the lane. As this illustrates, the quality of spare shooting will make the difference between making the initial cut for many. As part of the preparation for Junior Gold, be sure that a specific spare shooting practice process is included in each practice session. Shoot a minimum of 3 cycles each practice session: 7 pin, 8 pin, 9 pin, 10 pin, 4-7, 6-10, 2-4-7, 3-6-10 and the 5 pin. This cycle will help you be a better spare shooter.

Observation is critically important to watching ball motion, which is the only indication a bowler has for dealing with transitional lane conditions. In simple terms, practice watching your ball motion more carefully and closely. This will provide information on ball reactions.

Lane play at Junior Gold will require playing the extreme outside, middle part of the lane as well as deep inside. In preparation, bowlers should practice on multiple sport patterns that allow for playing short, medium and long lane conditions.

The Junior Gold patterns are designed to demonstrate versatility in each bowler. A simple strategy for targeting is to use the 3, 6 and 10 pins for the righthanded bowler and the 2, 4 and 7 pins for the lefthanded bowler as focal points to match up on each of the patterns.

For the short pattern, use a part of the 10-pin as a focal point for righthanders or the 7-pin for lefthanders. For the medium pattern, use some part of the 6 pin as a focal point for righthanders, or the 4 pin for lefthanders. For the long pattern, use some part of the 3 pin as a focal point for righthanders, or the 2 pin for the lefthanded bowler. Each of these focal points, for the specific pattern, will help a bowler maintain a target line that matches up with each specific length.