For many bowlers, it appears that their spare shooting has lost importance. Many bowlers simply do not practice their spare shooting as often as they should. Yet, with the top tour players actually striking between 65 and 70 percent of the time, it is the players who convert spares more proficiently that are more successful. In 2005–2006, Walter Ray Williams Jr. converted a PBA Tour record 475 consecutive single pin spares in match play ending with a 99.31 percent single-pin conversion percentage over the season (289–291). I believe most readers will agree that it is not surprising that the most successful player in Tour history is also the best spare shooter of all time. As WRW Jr. exemplifies, the basic rule of improved spare shooting is that “straighter is better.”

Improving your ability to throw straight on spares

(there’s more than one way)

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In this article, I share several methods that will improve your spare shooting. This is not a specific spare shooting system. Rather, I provide readers with some guidance on how to more effectively improve spare shooting by throwing straighter and repeating good spare attempts. This will accompany any spare shooting system that relies on increased accuracy when throwing the ball straighter.

**Use the same focus and concentration as your first shot**

I am no longer surprised to see bowlers focus far less on their spare shot than their strike shot. But, this certainly prevents them from maximizing their ability to become a great spare shooter.

As a coach, I actually time bowlers in competition with a stop watch. Specifically, I want to know exactly how much time these bowlers take from the point they reach the ball return until they actually throw the ball. And, I want to know this amount of time on every single shot. I also keep records of the amount of time between stance setup time to post setup to throwing the shot. I have often found that bowlers take significantly more time on their strike shot as compared with their spare shot. I recall one bowler who would take nearly double the amount of time on strike shots as spares (i.e, 16 seconds to 9 seconds). Needless to say, he was not an excellent spare shooter. And, since I had data, he couldn’t deceive himself about his taking far less time on spare attempts.

Great bowling is a collection of single great shots...including spares. So, do not underestimate the importance of sustained focus on every single shot you make, spares and splits included. Use your pre-shot routine on every delivery from start to finish with the same attention to detail and with the same amount of concentration and focus.

Try this the next time you go to league or a competition. Time some bowlers with a stop watch on your cell phone. What do you notice? Is it near the same on every single shot? If you want to be an excellent spare shooter, you must sustain the same level of focus on each single shot.

**Spread the pinky wide and keep the index tight to the middle finger**

First and foremost, a ball will not hook if a bowler can throw with zero axis rotation, completely end-over-end. This is an important aspect of improving your spare shooting. By spreading the pinky wide, you will promote more forward roll, increasing your ability to throw the ball straighter and reduce the back end reaction. Specifically, when you spread your little finger wide and place the index finger close to your middle finger, the center of the ball is shifted to the inside of your hand, promoting your ability to throw the bowling ball with more forward roll, less axis rotation.

But, be sure you actually set this position with your fingers in the stance. Many bowlers will not take the time to be certain that their fingers are set in the exact position each and every spare shot. We need the same attention level of concentration and focus.

**Break the wrist to reduce revs**

A bowler who tries to throw the ball straight will at some point put some side rotation on the ball. As discussed above, a ball will hook with the presence of friction and axis rotation. And, a high rev rate can lead to the ball reacting even with a small amount of axis rotation. So, a good spare shooter will break the wrist to improve their spare shooting. When you break your wrist, you reduce the amount of revolutions leading to a reduction in the back end reaction and increasing your margin of error.

Think about it this way: When you break your wrist, your fingers will be closer to the top of the bowling ball when you throw it. Literally, you will cover less distance with your fingers in regard to under and around the ball. This, of course, will reduce the revolutions at release.

In addition to breaking the wrist, some bowlers have developed unique methods for reducing the revolutions. Billy Oatman has thrown spares with only his thumb in the bowling ball while Robert Smith has used two fingers to reduce revs (ring or middle finger with the thumb). Both methods reduce the motion around and under the bowling ball, which reduces the rev rate and makes the ball less likely to hook down the lane. Be careful when experimenting with new methods.

**Hold the ball higher in the stance**

When one throws the ball faster, the ball literally has less time to hook. So, one effective method in spare shooting is to throw the ball faster.
When you hold the ball higher in the stance, your swing will be higher, increasing your ball speed, leading to more skid, and a straighter ball path.

But, do not make an effort to throw harder. By starting the ball higher in the stance, you will throw it faster. If you try to throw with more speed, this will likely get you throwing from your shoulder rather than executing a solid release at the bottom of the swing.

As you develop this skill, focus on waiting until your hand reaches your slide shoe heel to release the ball. In training, this will promote waiting on the swing, especially if you are not comfortable with changing the height of the ball in the stance.

**Targeting with 3 points of reference and a quiet eye**

For regular readers of my Slowinski at-large column, you will be familiar with 3-point targeting as well as using a quiet eye with longer target gaze with less eye movements. Accordingly, I recommend that you use 3 reference targets and quiet eye for spare shooting as well. This process will create a straight line visualization promoting a straighter target line for spare shots. The three targets you will use include: a focal point at the point of contact to convert the spare, a middle second target around 35 to 45 feet down the lane and a third visual target. The three points of reference are better than one target at creating a straight target line. (See photo 2)

Begin by choosing a focal point at the base of the pin or where the contact point would be with your spare conversion. As with all spare systems, this should include a key pin. Next choose a second target between 35 to 45 feet down the lane. Target longer down the lane on the target line that you have created. The longer you look down the lane, the straighter the ball will go to the target. Finally, choose a target at your visual target distance that you use. The three should create a straight line.

To use a quiet target eye, take 2 full seconds on each target, starting from back to front. After two seconds on the first, move smoothly to the next target looking for two full seconds and finally ending on the visual target where you will look as you begin your approach. You will keep your eye on this target throughout the approach and after you throw the ball. As discussed in my March column, elite athletes target long with less eye movements. The two seconds on each of the three targets will help quiet the mind and promote a straighter target line.

The three targets will increase the likelihood of throwing straight with more accuracy.

**Set your slide shoe to the target line**

As a coach, I have seen many bowlers set up incorrectly in the stance when shooting spares. The error I see the most is a slide shoe position that is not parallel with the intended target line. Consequently, as they make their approach and delivery, their body is in a position that prevents smooth execution when shooting spares. This is particularly true for corner pins. By setting the slide shoe parallel to the target line of the spare, the swing line will be on target. A simple look at their feet would help them correct the problem. Set the feet, set the body.

**Lead with your pinky or elbow to the target**

To promote a low axis rotation, I recommend that you lead with the tip of the pinky through your visual target in order to promote a straight end-over-end roll. By focusing on the pinky through your target, you are less likely to turn your hand. This method will help most bowlers improve their ability to throw straight. In the event a bowler still turns his hand, while trying this method, I ask him to lead with the front of the elbow through the target. Focusing on the elbow will reduce rotation of the wrist and lead to the desired end-over-end throw. The idea is that the pinky or elbow will be projected through the target. Imagine the tip of the pinky throwing over the target or the elbow leading the follow-through.

**Use a plastic ball**

I’ll end with the obvious, using a plastic spare ball. A bowling ball
needs both axis rotation and friction to hook. You can actually throw a bowling ball with the most aggressive coverstock and strong layout straight if you release it perfectly end over end, with no side rotation. Even a player with the highest rev rate could throw a bowling ball without hooking.

Using a plastic bowling ball will reduce the traction and friction between the ball and lane. Specifically, due to the cover material, using a plastic ball increases the margin of error, since the ball will skid more and have less back end reaction when release mistakes are made (e.g., rotating around the side of the ball when you do not want to) leading to higher consistency and straighter throwing. A ball with reduced friction thrown straight will provide the most accuracy for any bowler.

Practice and closing thoughts

With all of these methods, I recommend practicing with your most aggressive bowling balls. This will force you to execute the methods discussed in the article more precisely and accurately. If you can learn to throw your most aggressive equipment straight, you will grow your confidence in spare shooting and also develop your ability to throw straighter more often.

A simple but effective practice technique is to throw straight down the middle of the lane on a first shot with the methods described. Then, on the second shot, practice the corner pins remaining. Both shots will focus on throwing straight promoting improved spare shooting.

These tips will assist you in becoming a more consistent spare shooter by setting the stage mentally and physically, allowing you to throw straighter. Remember the old adage, strike for show and spare for dough. It is truer today than ever before. With increased striking percentages, spares actually become more important, especially with a higher scoring pace. For example, a bowler can’t afford to give 11 pins away by missing a single pin.