BECOMING A WORLD-CLASS PLAYER: Implementing a Practice Process

During my many discussions with bowlers of all ability levels, it is often revealed that too many players “practice” by just bowling a certain number of games. They neither have a set process nor do they really work on areas of weakness. Rather, they just go to the lanes and bowl, throwing shots, allowing randomness to dictate their practice session. Everyone loves to strike, right? But, randomness in training is not purposefulness. And, just throwing shots without a plan is not purposeful for developing your game. Consequently, inevitably, these bowlers will not fully take advantage of their practice sessions and will remain limited in their overall abilities.

Do you really want to be better? Or, are you just fooling yourself? Are you willing to be disciplined enough to have a practice plan? If you want to improve as a player, you must have a well-defined practice process. Specifically, your practice should be designed as focused training to improve areas of weakness as well as to solidify strengths.

Rather than a random process, bowlers who want to improve must develop a training process and a training mindset. Specifically, training is the process of acquiring skill, knowledge, or experience. Training must be purposeful, aligned with goals and be designed to improve weaknesses and reinforce skill set strengths.

Domains of Practice
In the last issue, in State of Our Sport, you were asked to evaluate the completeness of your game. You can use this article to guide you through the process of determining your strengths and weaknesses. Specifically, how strong are your technical, tactical, psychological and physical aspects of your bowling?

Determine the areas of weakness and develop a plan to address these areas of weakness. Be sure to prioritize the most important weaknesses to address and do not attempt to improve too many things too quickly.

Work with a coach to develop an improvement plan focusing on two to three areas simultaneously.

Recommended General Practice Process (90 Minute Example)
As a guideline, to help you improve your planning, here is a 90 minute general practice process. It is an example of how you can improve your skills with a focused purposeful practice. From warm-up to mental skills building, each is important for developing a holistic complete game.

Warm-Up (30 Minutes)
Elite bowlers are athletes. Accordingly, you need to take care of your body. Begin each practice by completing a stretching routine. You need to focus on the shoulders, wrists, ankles, biceps, triceps, calves, hamstrings, etc. Focus on slow movements in both directions. The idea is to get the blood flowing and loosen-up.

Release Variation Practice (15 minutes)
As I articulated in the last issue, ask yourself how complete is your game? In each practice session, you should work through your variety of releases, especially working with varying the axis of rotation, ball speed, axis tilt and rev rate. Spend 20 to 15 minutes on each release.

Work on altering your axis rotation, axis tilt, ball speed and rev rate. Each of these will help you change the ball reaction by changing how much skid and backend strength you will be able to achieve. To illustrate, research has shown that a bowler can get eight more boards of backend reaction by increasing the axis rotation from 30 to 60 degrees. Sometimes you need more and sometimes you need less, based on the lane condition and how the lanes are changing. Most importantly, empower yourself by learning how to manipulate ball reaction by changing your release.

If you are preparing for a tournament, focus on those release elements you are likely to utilize based on the lane conditions.

Spare-Shooting (15 minutes)
Strike for show and spare for dough (USA slang expression for money). The old adage is true, especially when the lanes are challenging. Without a fantastic spare game, you will never reach your full potential or be consistent as a bowler.

One of the best spare shooting practice methods is to throw the first ball straight down...
the middle of the lane. Specifically, you will line-up to throw straight down 20 or the 4th arrow. On your first shot, throw straight across the 4th arrow. If you are able to throw straight, then you will likely leave corner pins on both the left and right. This will allow you to practice the most frequent leaves.

For this practice process to be the most effective, you must learn to throw a zero degree axis rotation release, a full end-on-end roll. So, learn to break your wrist as well as set the index finger in and the pinky, smallest finger, out. Finally, he sure to follow-through by leading with the elbow.

Psychology (15 minutes)
At the end of each practice session, spend 15 minutes on mental skills building activities. These should include activities visualization, positive self-talk building, pre-shot routine, deep breathing activities for relaxation, etc. Invest in a book such as Focused For Bowling and the more recent Bowling: The Handbook Bowling Psychology. These books provide readers with specific mental skill building activities to help improve your game. The small financial investment and the dedication to sport psychology improvement will pay big dividends in your game.

Cool-Down Stretch (5 minutes)
After practice is completed, go through the stretching process again. This will increase your flexibility as well as reducing your changes of getting an injury.

Periodic Relative Ball Reaction Analysis
In addition to the general practice process discussed above, you should conduct an analysis of the relative ball reaction of all of your equipment each time you purchase new bowling balls. The reason for this analysis is simple. An elite bowler needs to know how their bowling equipment will react, especially in comparison to each other. This knowledge will help the bowler choose a better bowling ball for the situation. So, conduct an analysis of your bowling ball reaction, relative to one another. As you are conducting the analysis, pay close attention to the ball reaction. Remember, this is an analysis not a scoring attempt. Ask the following questions: How much skid does each get? How early is the hook phase? How early does the ball get into a roll? How many boards of hook difference on the backend?

To complete an analysis of your bowling equipment, be sure to throw the same release and the same targets with each ball. Throw all balls five times and make a chart to compare each. In simple terms, focus on these observation questions: (1) How far? (2) What shape? (3) How strong?

Fitness
Elite bowlers need both aerobic and anaerobic fitness development. To make it simple, I recommend cross-training. Try to engage in fitness activities at least 30 minutes each day, five days each week. Activities such as swimming and yoga promote flexibility. Activities such as running, tennis, basketball and the like, build both strength and overall fitness. When you are physically fit you will be able to repeat more consistent shots, especially at the end of the season when fatigue sets-in for the unfit bowler. Fitness will prevent you from bowling less consistently later. How many pins have you given away in the past at the end of a Masters event due to fatigue? Stop this reality now by adding fitness to your training program. Do you want to be your best or do you accept the reality of your current game?

On-Going Goal-Setting
If you read my article in the last issue, you may have already identified your strengths and weaknesses. Use this information to set goals, based on your priorities. Goals should always be realistic and measurable. For example, if you can currently convert 60 percent of your spares, a goal of 90% conversion in one or two months is not realistic. True, it is measurable. So, setting a goal of improving to 75% is practical, measurable and realistic. This example represents an improvement. And, once that goal is realized, you should set new goals.

In regard to release variation, your goals can be measured by focusing on repeatability. To illustrate, a goal such as "I will throw a 15 degree axis rotation release 8 of 10 times" allows you to measure how well you can do it. So, it is measurable. But, be sure it is also realistic.

I recommend that you develop two to three very specific goals that you will work on in training. Once the goal is realized, you should continue to monitor your consistency to ensure that you have truly realized that skill level.

You can visit my web site at http://www.bowlingknowledge.info to read the article, featured in the last issue, on how to improve your game and start this process immediately.

Conclusion
When I prepare teams or individuals, the training process is extremely detailed including practicing at the same time all of the squads will be bowling. We work on fitness, psychology, lane play planning, release variation and more. In a holistic approach, greatness is in the details! But, attention to this practice process will guarantee that ALL of the bowlers are ready to be successful.

As with any sport, bowling practice must be purposeful and designed to improve one's skills. By implementing the recommendations in this article, you will improve. But, una xcepto, you should only utilize the skills that you have mastered in competition. Training is training. The goal of training is to improve one's skill set. Competition is to maximize your scoring. So, you should use only the skills you have mastered in competition. Over time, through a focused and purposeful training program, you will improve those skills you can utilize in competition. Knowledge + Practice = Skill and Confidence!