

Bowlers Journal

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He's Back

Rhino Page seals comeback with "roller coaster" week in Syracuse

2017 U.S. Open Champ
Rhino Page

2017
U.S.
OPEN

FOUNDATION FRAME

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The Power of a Great Mental Game

TO BE A SUCCESSFUL bowler, you need to make good physical shots, develop sound lane-play strategy and control your mental game. Your mental game involves remaining calm, relaxed and properly focused under stressful conditions. The better your physical game, the more important your mental game becomes in your quest for success.

A good mental game will help you become a good bowler, whereas a great mental game will help you become a great bowler. Developing your mental game is just as much work as developing your physical game, except that it's invisible. However, the effects on your performance are not.

If I've heard it once, I've heard it a thousand times: "Susie was in the cut with a game to go, but then her mental game got it the way." Or, "I had a good shot in practice, but then I couldn't strike."

Does this happen to you? Have you ever been bowling well in competition and realize that you might shoot your first 200 game, or your highest game ever, only to fall just short of the feat? Have you ever needed a strike in the 10th frame for your team, but focused more on trying to win than on the shot you were about to make?

If so, consider focusing on what you can control. You *can* control the quality of the shot you make, with hopes that the outcome goes your way, but you cannot control your opponent or how the pins actually fall.

To be effective, focus on your performance, rather than on the outcome. You cannot control the outcome, but you can control your performance.

When I was on the pro tour, I'll never forget an interview my roommate, Liz

Johnson, did after being named Rookie of the Year. Asked about her focus going into her sophomore year on tour, Liz said, "I just have to focus on one tournament at a time. Actually, I can only focus on the next tournament."

Thinking more, Liz continued, "Well, I really can focus only on the next block of games. No, I really just need to focus on each game." Finally, a pensive Liz nailed it to finish her reply: "I really just focus on making good shots and making my spares each frame; that's all I can control."

It was such a thoughtful response, and the reflection of a great champion's mental game. Liz's prolific career speaks for itself, and this serves as great advice to follow by all who aspire to bowl better.

You can control making good shots, adjusting to the lanes, and making spares. These strategies are performance-oriented. You may believe that you can focus on making the cut, but in reality you can only control your shots from frame to frame until the cut is made.

You might have a personal goal to shoot 300. Well, when you focus on shooting 300, this perfect score becomes elusive because you can focus only on making the best shots you can, each frame, then look up at the end of the game to find the score. The goal of



A Matter of Routine: An important key to the success of women's pro bowling legend Carolyn Dorin-Ballard was her disciplined pre-shot routine in which she focused properly, blocking out what was going on around her.

shooting 300 is outcome-oriented; the focus on making the shots necessary to strike every frame for 12 consecutive frames is performance-oriented. Focus on what you actually can do and control.

Another common pitfall is to focus on your opponent. Trying to beat an opponent is another example of focusing on an outcome. You cannot control your opponent's performance any more than you can control their score. All you can really do is focus on your performance. When you look up, you hope that your score is better than your opponent's.

In actuality, each bowler is playing his own game against the pins, and whoever ends up knocking down more is the winner. I have won with a 150 game, and I have lost with a 250.

Let's face it: Sometimes you are going to mentally stray from the task at hand. Whether you are fatigued, distracted, had a bad break, need a shot to win or allow your emotions to get the best of you, your mental state may lag. The key is to be able to *refocus* and get your thoughts back on track.

A very specific personal experience comes to mind when I try to convey this concept. I was on the TV show, in the title match at the Sam's Town Invitational, a major tournament. As my opponent came off the approach, I got up and re-racked the pins for my upcoming shot.

She looked at me, puzzled, and said, "What are you doing?" I said, "I am re-racking because the pins are off." She replied, "But it's the 10th frame." I was so focused on my performance each frame and nothing else that I did not even realize what frame it was — and that she had another fill shot to make.

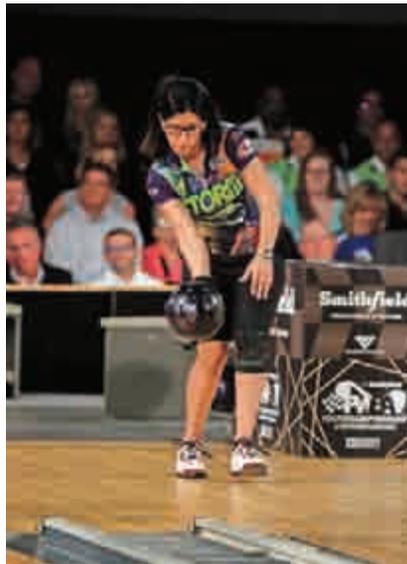
It was unintentional, but *now I knew* it was the 10th frame. I became distracted and nervous and, worse, began to lose my sharp focus. So many thoughts and emotions came flooding forward that had not been there during the prior frames — such as the title, the trophy, the money... the major. All of this started to become my focus. I knew I was in trouble with these thoughts and had only a few moments to gather myself before it was my turn. And I became aware that I had to strike.

Desperately trying to get these thoughts of the outcome out of my head and get my performance-oriented focus back, I thought about how I had approached all the other shots leading up to that moment, not just during the show, but all week long. I knew I had to re-focus on my performance to make a good shot for the chance to strike. This was just one more frame.

I went through my pre-shot routine and focused on making a good shot. I got on the approach and executed. I knew I threw it well, but would it

strike? Although it seemed to take a year to get down the lane, it did. Because I was able to refocus my thoughts to execute, I won my major title.

An effective pre-shot routine is both a physical *and* mental ritual. Your shot-making routine helps you control your environment, regardless of circum-



One at a Time: One quote that made a lasting impression on Mullen during her pro tour days was that of her roommate Liz Johnson, after Johnson was named Rookie of the Year. Asked about her focus going into her sophomore year on tour, Johnson said, "I just have to focus on one tournament at a time. Actually, I can only focus on the next tournament."

stance, to properly focus your thoughts so that you can produce good shots.

I remember being struck by two greats on tour who you could see worked hard on their shot-making routines: Kim Adler and Carolyn Dorin-Ballard. While competing against them, I was taken by their discipline to relentlessly implement their routines, regardless of the scenario.

Without the ball, they would stand beside the ball return, face the lane and focus before going through the rest of their routine with the ball. They rarely

showed emotion; rather, they exuded the focus necessary to enhance their shot-making ability, independent of past or future outcomes.

It was apparent to me how much work they put into their mental games. When they were up, they always took the time and made the effort to focus properly, blocking out what was going on around them. That routine does not just happen; it's very hard work to develop and relentlessly implement, but it pays off in excellent performances, time and time again.

It's not that there aren't any emotions or thoughts going through their heads, but they take the time to re-focus them into productive thoughts that allow them to focus on the one thing they can control: the next shot.

To be frank, sometimes you just don't feel like doing your pre-shot routine. I get it. You might be too upset from your last shot or distracted by the lucky shot your opponent got, or you might just feel lazy. This stuff takes a lot of energy and discipline to do every time.

Again, developing your mental game is just as much work as developing your physical game. Great bowlers stick relentlessly to their routines. This does not mean that it is easy to do. It means that they have trained themselves so that it becomes more automatic, and they are rewarded by the results.

As you practice, work on what you focus on when you bowl. Is it the guy with the crappy form who strikes while you work hard on improving your game and stone an 8-pin? Is it the lucky strike your opponent got while you pounded the hole to leave a corner pin? None of these thoughts lead you to focus in a way that helps you bowl better. They are only distractions to what you could be focusing on: your performance.

Make the next shot a quality shot with the proper strategy on the lane. More often than not, you'll come out ahead.

Michelle Mullen is a Gold coach and author of two books, Bowling Fundamentals and How to Pick Up Spares. For more tips, visit yourbowlingcoach.com.