PARBOWLING

BY TOM KOUROS

THE TRICKS TO GETTING A GOOD GRIP

It's no secret: A good ball fit is the key to execution.

ROLLING A STRIKE IN BOWLING IS MUCH EASIER than hitting a home run, and does not require big muscle prowess. Unlike baseball, what is required of a skilled bowler is a much higher percentage in realizing the ultimate result. Most professional bowlers today exceed the average of seven strikes per game. Doing so requires repetition; i.e., being able to repeat positive technique at a high percentage. This pertains to all aspects of the game, but where it is most often overlooked by the average bowler concerns the ball grip.

The weight of the ball in the stance should be supported predominantly by the bowling hand. This is automatically accomplished by positioning the ball slightly right of center (right-handers), with the gripping hand supporting the ball from underneath, thus transferring approximately two-thirds of the weight of the ball onto the bowling hand. Only when lack of strength is a factor would it be in the bowler's best interest to distribute the weight equally between the hands.

Although there are several pro bowlers who are exceptions, I recommend you assume your grip by putting your fingers into the ball first, then your thumb. This makes it much easier to regulate proper finger and thumb depth. If you put the thumb in first, there is more probability it will be inserted too deeply, or not deep enough; consequently, the depth of the fingers also will be affected negatively. An exception to this rule is made when a bowler wishes to kill the amount of hook. By burying the thumb first, the effect of the fingers can be weakened, reducing the torque effect of the release. A regimen I recommend for assuming the grip would involve the following: 1) insert the fingers first; 2) shift more of the ball's weight onto the fingers and the right side of the palm; 3) adjust the fingers until they feel comfortable; and 4) insert the thumb.

Regarding the ideal grip, the variation in the size of the digits is of great concern to bowlers, especially the thumb. Changes in temperature, humidity, the use of the hands in the bowling process, and more, all serve to cause swelling or shrinking. Therefore, determining what size to drill a hole is a "narrowing-down" process which considers several guidelines with regard to what is tight and what is loose. For starters, the fingers should fit more snugly into the ball, while, relatively speaking, the thumb should be looser. Because it has the task of initiating a right-hander's release by coming out of the ball first in a left-to-right direction, and because it moves out of the hole more off the backside than off its pad in the release, the thumb cannot afford the luxury of being inserted too securely in the hole. As a rule, the thumb should be loose enough so it can be turned in the hole without turning the ball itself. Once the thumb clears, the hand's grasp of the ball is eliminated. At this point, the snugly-fit fingers are able to apply the bowling torque.

Obviously, hole sizes can be taken to extremes. If the fingers have to be squeezed into the ball, for instance, this could provide resistance when they exit, negatively affecting the release. Indeed, fingers that "hang up" in the release make a repetitive release unlikely. Likewise, the thumb must exit unimpeded, balanced with the vital need for that digit to provide a secure grip throughout the swing without "crimping" or bending. Between these two extremes lies the happy medium.

The distance between the nearest edge of each fingerhole to the nearest edge of the thumbhole represents the span measurements. As you might suspect, the span decision is absolutely critical to the grip feel. Basically, there are three span categories: fingertip, semi-fingertip and conventional. A span allowing the fingers to be placed only to the first knuckle is referred to as a fingertip grip. The use of such a grip normally enhances ball action by allowing more turn and better extension. The extra contact of the hand with the ball surface allows the palm to exert more extension than would normally be applied by the swing alone.

The conventional grip is the most basic, the most secure and most effective in terms of accuracy. In the conventional grip, the fingers are inserted down to the second joint. Having a good portion of the fingers grasping the ball leads to a more secure grip, relaxing the hand throughout the swing.

It's a subjective decision when a bowler is ready to tackle a wider (fingertip) span. Before attempting its use, the bowler should have developed enough accuracy so that hitting the pocket isn't a major challenge. Beyond that, the player should be able to demonstrate the ability to repeat similar ball roll from shot to shot; otherwise, the more effective ball roll derived from a wider span will prove to be of little value, and could leave you worse off than before. Also, because today's lane conditions require much more ball speed than before, many bowlers who found it difficult to generate this speed have gone back to the conventional fit with much success because they cut down on an uncontrollable hook, thus enhancing their ability to repeat effective shots.

As one gets further into pitch and offset grip concepts, the artistic nature of ball-drilling becomes more apparent. There are no infalllible systems and automatic answers. An advanced grip is a unique creation, attained by utilizing and compromising grip principles to create various effects. Yet, a ball grip that is a panacea for one bowler could be a nemesis for another. The final judgment on whether a grip is highly effective or something less is dependent on the specific hand that it was created for, and its ability to repetitively deliver effective shots.