

Chapter 1: The Ten Pin That Follows You Home

The ten pin is still standing. It was standing last Tuesday, and the Tuesday before that. You watched the ball hit the pocket, heard the right sound, and saw nine pins go down. Then that last pin in the back right corner wobbled and stayed put.

You walked back to the ball return and picked up the same ball you've thrown for fifteen years. You aimed at the same pin you've been missing. Maybe you made it. You probably didn't. Driving home, you counted the frames it cost you and felt a dull ache in your right shoulder. Your thumb was a little raw.

This chapter is about that ten pin. It is also about why it keeps showing up, and what it's trying to tell you.

Portrait of a stuck average: the 150–165 plateau

I know this bowler well because I coach him every week. He's usually somewhere between forty-five and sixty-five. He carries a 150 to 165 average and has carried it for most of a decade. He's a good teammate. He shows up. He knows every lane in the house by feel.

He has also tried the two fixes everybody tries. First he threw harder. When that didn't work, he bought a newer, stronger ball. The new ball felt wonderful for about three weeks. Then the average drifted back to exactly where it was before.

That drift back is the most important clue in this book. When a number returns to the same place no matter what you change, you're probably changing the wrong thing. A plateau this stable doesn't come from bad luck. It comes from a habit repeating itself perfectly.

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A stuck average is a very consistent result. The question is what it's consistently producing.

What "stuck" actually looks like on a score sheet

Look closely at a 155 game and you'll rarely find a disaster. You'll find a few strikes, several spares, and three or four open frames. Most of those opens are single pins. Usually one of them is the ten pin, and often the seven.

This is where the pins quietly leak away. Recreational bowlers are commonly estimated to convert only about 60–70% of single-pin spares (Bowling Path). Converting just two more spares per game is estimated to add about 20–30 pins to an average. The reason is simple: each converted spare is worth 10 to 20 pins compared with an open frame (Bowling Path; ExpertBowler).

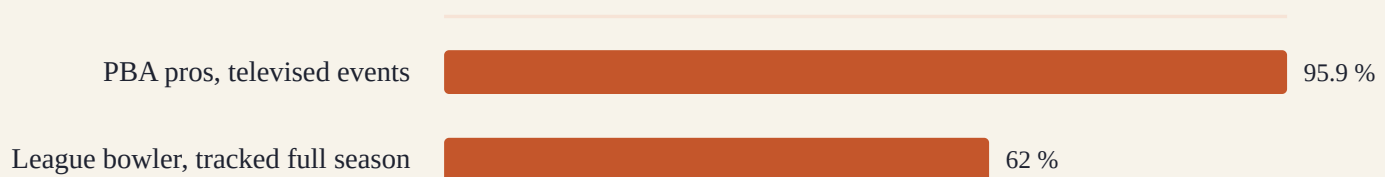
Read that again with your own average in mind. Twenty to thirty pins moves a 155 bowler to somewhere near 180. He doesn't need a single extra strike to get there.

Why the same leave keeps showing up week after week

On BowlingBoards.com, one league bowler did something few of us bother to do. He tracked every leave for an entire season. He reported leaving the single ten pin **101 times** and converting only about **62%** of them (BowlingBoards.com). That's roughly thirty-eight open frames from one pin in one season.

Compare that with the pros. ESPN surveys of nationally televised PBA events found professionals converted the single ten pin **95.9%** of the time, and the seven pin 95.5% (The Sulphur Springs News-Telegram). Other members of that same forum agreed that pros make almost all their single pins, while amateurs lose many pins on the "easy" spares (BowlingBoards.com).

Single ten pin conversion: pros vs. one tracked league season



Single ten pin conversion: pros vs. one tracked league season

So the ten pin hurts you twice. First it survives your strike ball. Then it survives your spare ball. The same leave keeps showing up because the same delivery keeps producing it. The spare keeps getting missed because you're shooting it with the same muscled arm and the same hooking ball.

The Effort Loop

Here is the pattern I see in almost every stuck league bowler. I call it **the Effort Loop**.

1. You leave a ten pin.
2. You decide the ball needed more drive, so you throw the next one harder.
3. Throwing harder tightens your grip, your forearm and your shoulder.
4. Tension changes the release, so the ball reaches the pins with less hook or a worse angle.
5. You leave another ten pin, or something worse.
6. You conclude you still didn't throw it hard enough.

The loop feels logical from the inside, and every step seems reasonable. But each lap adds a little more tension and a little more wear. It never adds any pins.

The Effort Loop: every time a leave tempts you to try harder, the extra effort becomes the cause of the next leave. The way out runs through less force.

I learned this on my own score sheets long before I taught it. For one full season I kept a little spiral notebook in my bowling bag and jotted down every single-pin leave. By spring the ten pin had its own page, and the notes beside it said the same thing over and over: "tried to hit it harder."

The thumb, the shoulder and the drive home

Now look at what the loop does to your body.

A bowler caught in the Effort Loop squeezes the thumb to control the ball. He pulls with the shoulder to add speed. He cranks the wrist to force hook. None of these feel dramatic in one frame. Across three games a week and thirty weeks a season, they add up to a sore thumb, a stiff neck and a shoulder that complains on the drive home.

Age changes the math, too. Coaches who work with senior bowlers say the two biggest problems as we get older are **loss of ball speed** and **too much axis rotation**^{5, 20}. Axis rotation means the ball spinning sideways like a top instead of rolling forward. Both problems get worse when you fight them with muscle. A tired shoulder slows the ball down. A forced wrist spins it sideways.

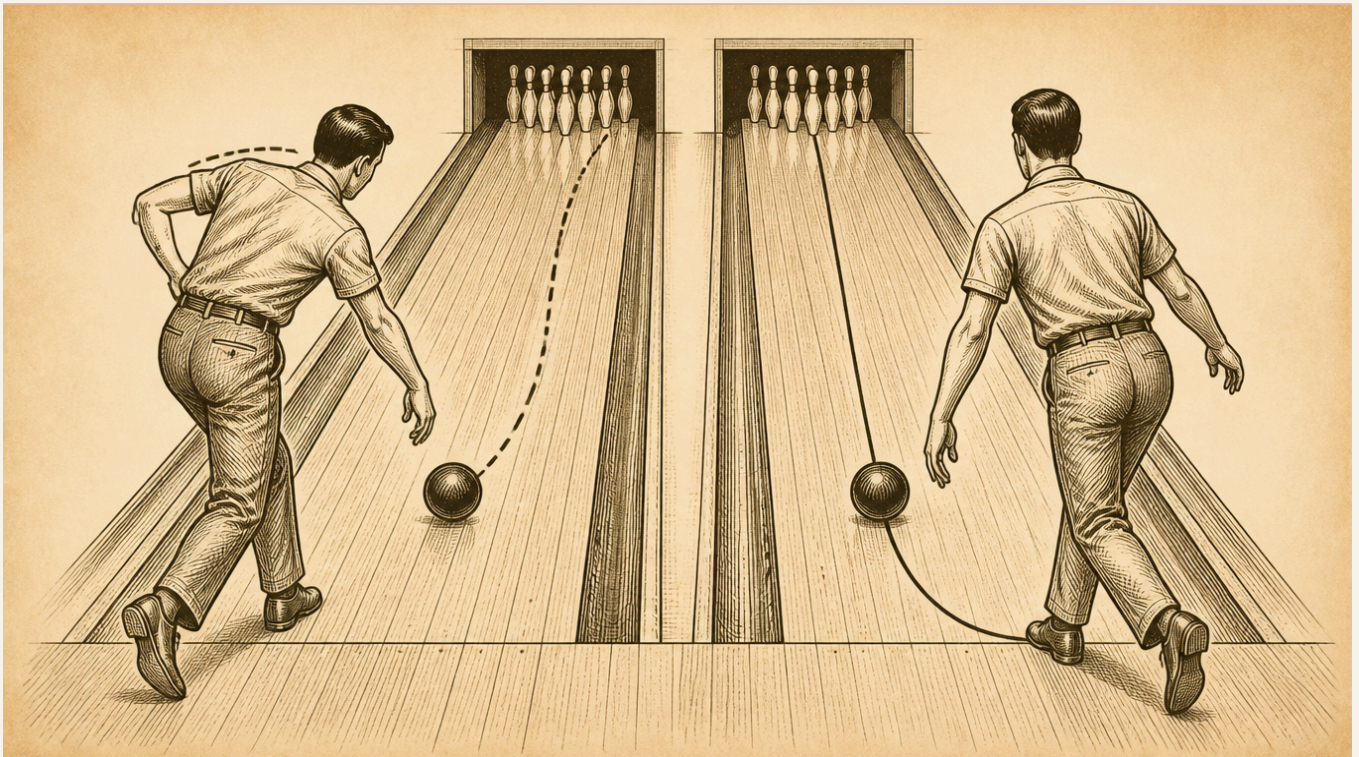
For reference, recreational bowlers typically throw around 12–16 mph, and competitive league bowlers around 16–18 mph (EFX; MOTIV Bowling). You don't need tour speed. You need a speed you can repeat without hurting yourself.

Case: A 22-year Navy veteran on the Maverick Bowling Forum bowled with shoulder, neck and throwing-hand pain. He made one change and dropped from a 15 lb ball to a 14 lb ball. Six months later he reported a higher average, much more consistency and no back pain after league nights (Maverick Bowling Forum).

We'll come back to ball weight in Chapter 20. For now, notice the order of events. His pain went down first, and his scores went up after.

A word about pain

Soreness after league is common. Pain that lingers into the next day, wakes you at night, or sends tingling or numbness down your arm or into your fingers is different. Treat it as a medical signal and see a doctor or physical therapist before your next league night. Nothing in this book asks you to bowl through that kind of pain. Every change I'll suggest is meant to reduce load on your joints, never add to it.



The quiet fear that your best games are behind you

Nobody says it out loud at the lanes, but plenty of bowlers think it. *Maybe this is just where I am now. Maybe I peaked.*

I understand the fear. Your knees aren't what they were. Your shoulder has opinions. The younger bowlers on the next pair throw the ball faster than you ever did.

But look at the evidence we've just walked through. The biggest leak in a 155 average is single-pin spares, and making them has little to do with strength. The biggest threats to an older bowler's game are lost speed and too much sideways spin. Both get worse when you add effort. Coaches also report that many bowlers who move to a lighter ball *raise* their average, because it puts less strain on the armswing, the approach and the balance at the line (Bowling This Month; Maverick Bowling Forum).

In other words, the path forward asks less of your body. The best bowling of your life may well come after you stop trying to overpower the ball.

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Your strength hasn't run out. What ran out is the idea that strength was ever the answer.

Your first assignment

Before you change anything, gather honest evidence. This costs nothing and carries no physical risk.

- ✓ Bring a pen and a small card to your next league night.
- ✓ After every frame, write down any pins left standing after your first ball.
- ✓ Mark each spare you convert with a check, and each miss with an X.
- ✓ At home, count your single-pin leaves and your single-pin misses across all three games.
- ✓ Beside your worst pin, write one honest line: what were you trying to do on that shot?

Most bowlers who do this are surprised by two things. First, how few of their open frames are split leaves or bad luck. Second, how often that last line reads something like "tried to muscle it."

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- ▶ **Track your leaves for one full league night** before you change your ball, your line or your delivery.
- ▶ **Count single-pin misses first.** Two more converted spares per game is commonly estimated to add 20–30 pins to your average.
- ▶ **Catch the Effort Loop in the act.** When a leave makes you want to throw harder, treat that urge as the warning sign.
- ▶ **Treat lingering pain as information.** Pain that lasts into the next day, or any numbness or tingling, means a visit to a doctor or physical therapist before you bowl again.
- ▶ **Retire the idea that you've peaked.** The fixes ahead ask less of your body, not more.

You now know where the pins are leaking and why harder hasn't plugged the hole. But this raises a bigger question. If effort isn't the answer, why are so many of us still bowling on Tuesday nights trying to find more of it, and why has almost no one shown the league bowler a different way?