Reach out and shake hands with your target

The first thing you likely were taught in learning to bowl correctly was to hold the ball waist high with the thumb at 10 o’clock (right-handed bowler) and the fingers at 4 o’clock and simply reach out in your release and shake hands with your target. When performed correctly, with balance and proper timing, the result was a powerful semi-rolling hook ball with a high strike potential.

Even today, this still may be the easiest and best strike ball roll for you. Simplicity, after all, may be its own worst enemy.

When the thumb of the bowling hand is pointing at 10 o’clock, the ring and middle fingers of the right-handed bowler are at the ideal strike and release position of 4 and 5 o’clock on a clock face. This hand and release position is commonly taught as the “suitcase” or “handshake” delivery. It is ideal for correctly releasing the ball onto the lane with the necessary forward thrust and counterclockwise rotation of the ball into the 1-3 pin pocket for a strike. It is a good release and delivery, especially for the beginning and all other interested bowlers.

However, to maximize its use, you must correct common deviations that may occur in your hand and finger movements and armswing that are listed below. Simple hand and wrist departures will prevent you from realizing the full potential of the handshake delivery for higher average bowling.

Beware: There are different and more powerful releases taught and proposed from the day you begin to bowl that entice most bowlers to use the more exotic releases to hook the ball more, whether they are needed or not. (Remember, more hook is not necessarily better: The more hook you roll, the more boards your ball will cross and the less accurate will be your shot.) Unless you are a high average and skilled bowler, less hook means better accuracy for your spare and overall shotmaking.

Perfecting your simple “handshake” release and delivery may be well worth your effort. It could add another simplified and perhaps better bowling release technique and dimension to your bowling game.

The case for the simple “handshake” grip

As implied in the introduction, this is a good release for a beginning bowler or person with a straighter ball style delivery who prefers to bowl more “down-and-in” or at an inward angle toward the pins. Persons with weak fingers or a weak wrist will enjoy the stronger hand position on the side of the ball.

However, this ideal thumb and finger position and release may not occur if the bowler has an overly heavy ball or weak fingers and can’t keep his hand and wrist from the “flippy-flops” or rotation during his delivery. Instead of a dependable three-quarter ball roll, erratic and unstable thumb and wrist movements during the release of the ball will result in a much less effective ball roll and ball track.

At the point of your ball release, if the thumb and fingers rotate clockwise instead of counterclockwise, or if the fingers squeeze inward into the palm of the hand, the ball track will drop and create a different ball track and roll. (A backup ball often happens when the thumb rotates clockwise past 1 or 2 o’clock.) You must maintain a firm wrist and keep the thumb at 10 o’clock and the fingers at the 4 and 5 o’clock position throughout your delivery and follow-through to perfect the highly desired three-quarter ball roll with its higher strike probability.

Correct as necessary deviations in your handshake release and delivery

Caution: Although you have your thumb correctly pointing at 10 o’clock, your ball will tend to follow the thumb in a direction-al pull toward 10 o’clock. This invites early timing of the swing and release as the arm and elbow swing away from the body and outside the swing line in the backswing and inside in the forward swing. At ball release, the earlier timing of the swing will close the hand and decrease the lift and hook potential. With earlier timing, the ball may go left of the intended target line.

Correction is simple: All you need to do to straighten the armswing for better tim-

Adjust your armswing direction to enhance your release

Many bowlers, including high average bowlers, do not aim with the center of their bowling shoulder at the target or swing their ball over the intended target line. Although they visualize a squared bowling armswing for accuracy, they unfortunately aim with their eyes, which are located inside of the bowling shoulder.

Thus, most bowlers incorrectly see the target in relation to their shoulder joint and swing inside of the target line by several inches, and this results in more early timing. They are unaware of closing both the bowling shoulder and the hand position at release.

Coach Fred Borden once said if you had an eye in the middle of your bowling shoulder, you would be an excellent bowler, but you wouldn’t get any dates.

Your bowling eyes do lie. Check this out:

1. Stand in the middle of the lane with a bowling partner standing directly behind your bowling shoulder. Lower your bowling hand and index finger alongside your body and move sideways until your index finger is pointing directly downward over the 10 board—the board on which the second arrow target is located.

2. Tell your partner that you will aim the arm and hand and point your index finger directly at the second arrow. The partner is asked to sight down and over the center of the shoulder and the arm joint (sight No. 1) and over the index finger (sight No. 2) in a straight line, as if he were aiming a rifle at a target on the lane.

3. Pointing your index finger at the arrow, ask your partner to tell you where the index finger is actually pointed.

4. Based on hundreds of students, your index finger (and armswing) will be pointed somewhere as much as one or even two lanes to your left (right-hander bowler) — believe it or not!

Harlin Matkins is a retired Naval architect, a certified instructor and graduate of Dick Ritger’s Bowling Academy for Instructors, and a certified youth and bowling development instructor for Bowl America.