

10 QUESTIONS

Roger Rowley

About six months ago, NCABA member Roger Rowley of Sterling came up with an idea that developed into "Row-Del Grip Strips," a rubber thumb strip he believes can benefit bowlers of all ages. Rowley, who normally draws and designs the molds at Hughes Cast Stone of Manassas, makers of decorative stone for homes, later formed the Row-Del Company with his partner, fellow NCABA member Tony DelSordi of Centreville. Recently at AMF Dale City, Rowley met with editor Bob Cosgrove and responded to 10 questions about his invention.

How did your invention come about?

From bowling over the years, I have a high backswing, and during the year, the ball would come off my thumb three or four times a year early on the downswing because my thumb would shrink. I would add white tape into the ball, and that would make the thumb hole tighter but not necessarily give me more grip.

So I thought about this and talked about it one Tuesday night with Tony DelSordi while bowling. That weekend, I went to a sporting goods place and bought some rubber products like the tape you wrap a baseball bat with and cut it into pieces and put it into the thumb [hole].

I found that rubber works perfect in it, and I just had to find the right kind of material—what kind of rubber I wanted to put into it. That's how I created it.

How did this turn into a commercial product?

After I tried it, Tony and I threw practice games with it and realized how good it really was. We had a couple of other people try it, and everybody we gave a piece to just loved it. Just everybody that tried it wished it existed, so we said let's make a company, and let's go ahead and patent it and get it out to as many people as we could. And then it just started growing within the center and growing, growing, and that's where we are now.

The patent already has been turned in, so it is patent pending. We've checked everywhere that you can possibly check, and it doesn't exist anywhere for the sport of bowling. Rubber thumb inserts do not exist—except for our's, which is even better!

I've got two different versions of it—one is tackier than the other because some people might want more grip, some people might want less, but they're both still rubber.

How is it manufactured?

We work with a rubber company up in New Jersey that actually manufactured the rubber already, but they didn't manufacture it with adhesive on it. So I had them try it with adhesive sprayed on it so I could put it in the thumb hole, which worked fine, but the adhesive kept peeling off the rubber—they couldn't get it to stick to the rubber.

So they contacted 3M, which had a neoprene-like material that was made with the adhesive built into the material that was a perfect fit for my Grip Strips: It can't separate because it's all the same piece.

They worked with 3M to supply me with the right material and adhesive and then cut them to the sizes I wanted. Neither company had exactly what I wanted; they had to work together to get the whole package right.

It's a little bit thicker than the white tape, but because it's rubber, they have to make it 1/32 of an inch so that it doesn't just stretch and move around. But that's as thin as we can get it. You get used to it, and it works very well. It's very comfortable.

Why the name "Grip Strips"?

We called them "Grip Strips" because we didn't want people to confuse them with thumb tape because it's totally different. Thumb tape will get dirty, and you gotta change the piece every couple weeks or whatever, while this stuff will last months because it's rubber and will last twice as long. It's used the same way as thumb tape, but it's not the same.

How is it being sold?

We're not selling to the individual person. What we're doing is selling it to the centers and to pro shops, and then they're selling it to the people so that when people call us and ask about it, we just tell them where the closest location is for them to go get it. That way, we don't have to go through the taxes and all that stuff; we can just sell it as a bulk item.

Where is it available?

It's at various Bowl America centers—Bull Run, Falls Church, Chantilly, Manassas—Spares Pro Shop in Sterling, Va., and Chantilly Bowling Supplies.

Do you have plans to sell it outside the immediate area?

We definitely do. We're gonna start going to tournaments and big events, even Vegas and stuff like that and just try to go to as many places as we can, just to get people to try it.



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Right now, we're going to be a partial sponsor on the PBA Senior Tour, which will be at Bowl America Manassas in April. We're one of the sponsors, and they're allowing us to set up a table there with a big banner, and we're going to give out sample pieces to all the pros who sign up for the tournament and sell it to the people coming in to watch. So that's really going to be a big step for us right there.

We actually had a couple pros already try it that bowl on the tour, and they all say they love it—I mean, so far. They really like it.

How did Mr. DeSordi become your partner?

He was pretty much a bouncing board. He used to own a pro shop, and he's got a lot of bowling connections, and I wanted to get his opinion of it. He would say, "Try this" or "Try that."

So it was pretty much my idea, but bouncing things off of him, we kinda came up with the whole process together. His knowledge of bowling and what would and wouldn't work and why it would and wouldn't work was really helpful.

What have you learned in the process?

I've learned a lot about the product—that it actually helps kids who are learning to turn the ball because they can keep their thumb in the hole longer.

Also, older people that lost the grip that they used to have can't really squeeze their hand on the ball as much; this has also helped them stay in the ball a whole lot easier. I got a couple of people that are older that swear by these things now because it's just easier for them to hang onto the ball and get it down the lane.

Because our product gives you *grip* all the way from the top joint of your thumb and not just on the thumb print, you don't have to bend your thumb within the thumb hole, which a lot of people do out of habit, and the knot on your thumb goes down. Plus, you get more grip on the whole thumb the higher you have it on the lip of the ball. You can push it further in to get an earlier release.

Your thumb can be more relaxed, and you can get more turn on the ball because your hand is coming out of the ball with more leverage, and so it's easier to repeat shots. You get more length on the shot because you're getting it down the lane correctly.

You don't pull the ball as much because you're not squeezing it. All you're doing is just releasing pressure off your thumb when it comes off your hand extremely easy—a lot easier than you think it would be how it's rubber.

And because it's rubber, it's like the fingers—you don't feel the temperature of the ball. Some people leave their ball in the trunk, and it's cold or it's hot. The temperature's the same all the time.

When we came up with this idea, we never thought about these things; we kinda just stumbled into them. There have been a lot of advantages I never thought would pop up that you find as you start using them.

Working on any ideas for the future?

We're thinking about doing finger inserts—a lot of people don't like the rubber inserts that are in the balls because it doesn't give you the good feel.
