

Chapter 1: Your Straight Ball Is Not Your Fault

Tuesday night, sixth frame. You've thrown the ball the way you have for thirty years, square to the pins and down the middle. It hits the head pin a little light. Nine go down and the ten pin stands there. Your elbow has that warm, tight feeling it always gets about now. You pick up your ball for the spare and think the same thing you've thought a hundred times: *maybe I'm just getting too old for this.*

I want to put that thought on the table right away, because it's wrong. Your ball goes straight because of a handful of habits. Most of them were handed to you as good advice the week you started bowling, and you've practiced them faithfully ever since. Ability and age have far less to do with it.

The three habits almost every lifelong straight bowler shares

On BowlingBoards.com, a group of older bowlers started a thread titled "too slow & old to throw newer gen balls." They wrote about lower ball speed, fewer revolutions, and a feeling that modern equipment was built for someone else (BowlingBoards.com, "too slow & old" thread). Read it and you'll hear the same fear you carry. What you won't hear is anyone asking whether the problem lives in their hand, their target and their timing. The heading on that thread blames age. The habits underneath it get missed.

After years of watching league bowlers past fifty, I see the same three habits almost every time.

Habit one: the hand sits behind the ball. The fingers are directly behind the ball, pointing at the pins, and the thumb hangs on until the last instant. A hand in that position can only push the ball forward. It gives the ball no side rotation, so the ball has no reason to curve.

Habit two: the target is the center arrow. You line up in the middle of the approach and send the ball over the middle arrow toward the head pin. A straight line down the center leaves a hook no room to work, even if you had one.

Habit three: the arm does the work. The ball starts late, the swing gets rushed, and the shoulder and elbow take over to throw it. That's the habit this whole book is named for.

My own first league ball was a plastic house ball I pushed straight at the head pin for years. I blamed my arm for the ten pins I left. It took a patient old-timer in our Thursday league to show me that my arm was trying too hard, and my timing was starting a step late.

Before you read further, answer these three questions honestly. Write the answers in pencil on the back of your last scoresheet.

- ✓ When you hold your ball at address, are your fingers directly behind it, pointing at the pins?
- ✓ Which arrow does your ball roll over on your first shot of the night?
- ✓ By which frame does your elbow or shoulder start to feel warm or tight?

Those three answers are your starting point. We'll come back to them in later chapters.

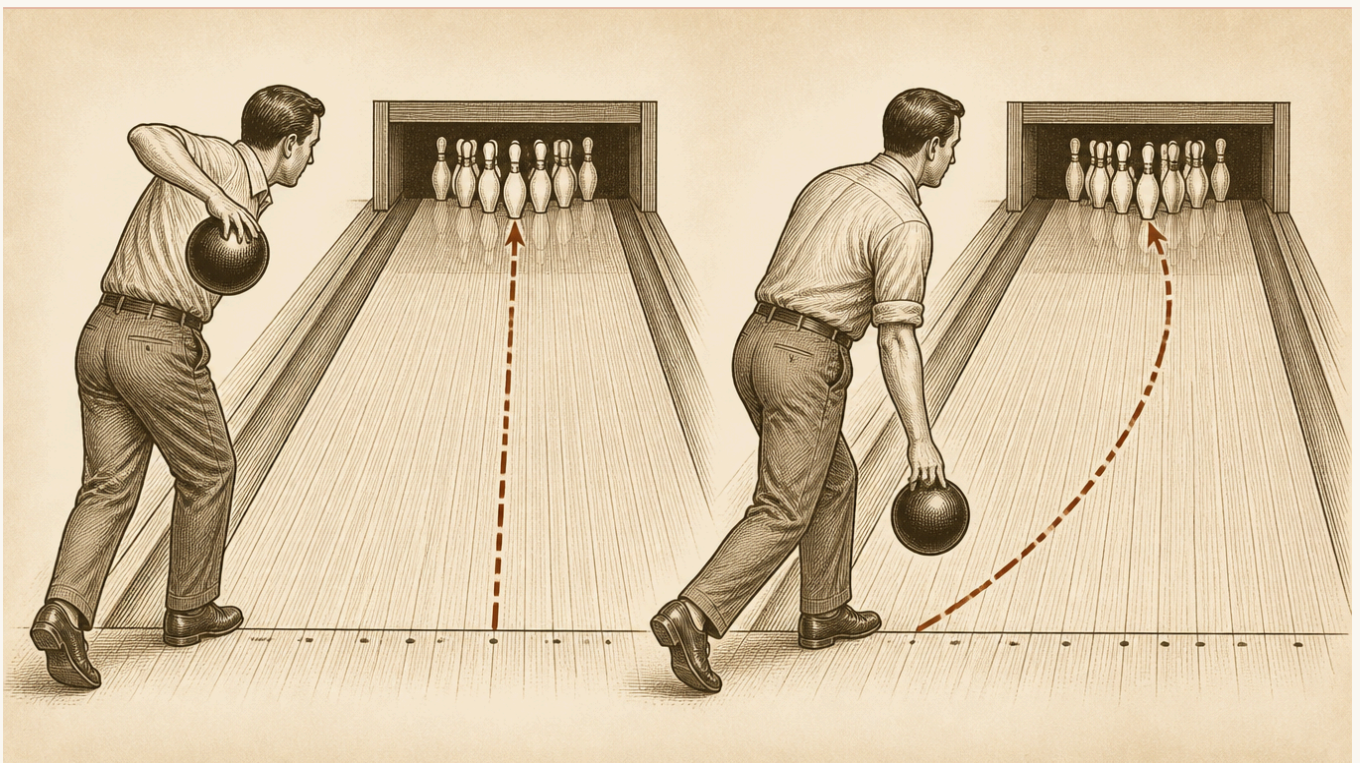
Why effort and hook work against each other

Here is the principle this book rests on. I call it **The Harder-Straighter Rule**: the harder you work the ball, the straighter it goes.

Muscle kills the curve. Every ounce of force you add to your swing buys you speed and costs you hook.

Think about what a hook needs. The ball has to slide through the oil, catch the drier part of the lane near the pins, and turn. A ball you heave down the lane gets there sooner and has less time to turn. A tense arm also tends to square the hand up behind the ball, and that position throws a straight ball.

Coaches teach the opposite motion. The arm stays straight and relaxed, and the ball's own weight sets the height of the backswing, with no forced muscling (BowlingBall.com; chrispearce52, 2016-03-21). A pendulum is a weight hanging from a fixed point. Your shoulder is the point, and gravity supplies the power.



Timing is where most muscling begins. A common error is starting the pushaway only after the first step is finished. That turns a four-step approach into three steps and rushes the backswing and forward swing, so the bowler has to muscle the ball to catch up (BowlingBall.com; Bowling Path). You aren't choosing to throw hard. Your feet have left your arm behind, and your shoulder is rescuing the shot.

That rescue has a cost. Inflamed elbow tendons from repeated wrist and arm motion, often called bowler's elbow, and shoulder tendon strain from swinging a heavy ball or throwing too hard are among the most common bowling injuries (New York Bone & Joint Specialists; Premier Orthopaedics). The burn you feel by frame six comes from overwork. We'll deal with it directly in Chapter 18.

Effort even gets misapplied to equipment. A ball that hooks too late usually needs a duller surface, and more arm effort won't fix it (Storm Bowling; Bowling.com). The ball, the lane and gravity can do most of the work you've been doing with your shoulder.

Standard beginner advice that quietly locked your game in place

Nobody sat you down and taught you to muscle a straight ball. You picked it up from well-meant tips. Here are the ones I hear most, and what they did to your game.

"Aim at the center arrow and hit the head pin." It feels logical. But a ball rolled straight into the head pin deflects, and a straight ball hitting the pocket lacks the angle to carry the corner pins. For right-handers, the 10 pin is the single pin left more often than any other (ExpertBowler; BowlingBoards.com). Chapter 2 explains the angle, and Chapter 14 moves your line.

"Keep your wrist firm and your hand behind the ball." A firm wrist is useful. A hand locked behind the ball guarantees a straight roll, as we saw in Habit one.

"Throw the heaviest ball you can handle." That tip may have fit you at thirty. Senior-bowling guides now suggest balls of about 8 to 12 pounds for many older bowlers, because a lighter ball lowers strain and is easier to control (BowlingBall.com; Morada Senior Living). On BowlingBoards.com, a bowler in their mid-fifties with three arm surgeries dropped from 15 to 14 pounds and said they felt stronger in games three and four (BowlingBoards.com, ball weight thread). Don't change weight on a whim tonight. Chapter 19 walks you through it safely.

"Hit more strikes and your average will climb." Strikes matter. But spares are where most league averages are won or lost.

70% vs. 80%: Bowlers who convert about 70% of their spares tend to average 150-170, while those converting 80% or more often average 180-200 (Revolutions Lanes Blog; Bowling Path).

A typical league bowler converts only about 65% of 10 pins (Bowling Path; BowlingBoards.com). Your road to 200 runs straight through that one pin in the back right corner.

What this book will change, and what it will leave alone

I'm going to ask you to change a few things, and only a few. I'm not asking you to become a power player or bowl like the young kids on the next pair.

What we will change:

- ▶ **Your grip.** The thumb leaves first, and the fingers move a quarter turn to the side (Chapters 8 and 9).
- ▶ **Your release.** A relaxed handshake replaces a push (Chapters 10 and 11).
- ▶ **Your timing.** The pushaway starts with the first step, so gravity does the swinging (Chapters 12 and 13).
- ▶ **Your target.** We move you off the center arrow (Chapters 14 through 16).
- ▶ **Your spare plan.** A straight ball and a simple system for the corner pins (Chapter 17).

What we will leave alone:

- ▶ **Your house and your league night.** Most house shots are about 40 feet long with a roughly 10-to-1 oil ratio from center to outside. That shape funnels slightly missed shots back toward the pocket (BOWL.com, USBC; BowlersMart). Your Tuesday lanes already help a relaxed bowler.
- ▶ **Your ball, in most cases.** New USBC rules for slow oil-absorbing urethane balls took effect December 31, 2025, with national-event bans starting January 1, 2026. As of September 2026 they remain in force. Those restrictions apply only to USBC national events such as the U.S. Open and USBC Masters, and they don't reach typical local leagues (BOWL.com, USBC). Chapter 7 helps you judge the ball you already own.
- ▶ **Your four-step approach.** We'll adjust its rhythm, not replace it.
- ▶ **Your body.** We work with the joints you have, not the ones you had.

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Every change in this book asks your arm to do less work, never more.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- ▶ **Stop blaming your age** for a straight ball. Check your hand position, your target arrow and your pushaway timing first.
- ▶ **Use The Harder-Straighter Rule.** When the ball won't hook, relax the arm before you add force.
- ▶ **Start the pushaway with your first step** so the swing never has to be rushed or muscled.
- ▶ **Treat elbow or shoulder burn by frame six as a warning** that your arm is overworking, not as a toll you must pay.
- ▶ **Put spares ahead of strikes.** Raising your 10-pin conversion adds more to your average than chasing one more strike.

You now have the three answers you penciled on your scoresheet, and a rule that explains them. But a hunch about your game is different from evidence. Before you change a single finger, you need to know exactly where your pins are disappearing, frame by frame. Some of what your old scoresheets are hiding may surprise you.