CHAPTER 1

Chapter 1: The Ten Pin That Rings and Stays

You know the sound. The ball rolls out clean and the pins explode. The rack clatters into the pit, and then everything goes quiet in the far right corner.

One pin is still standing there. Sometimes it wobbles and seems to think it over, then settles back on its spot. The ten pin rang and stayed.

You turn around and somebody on the settee says, "Tough break." You nod, because it looked like a strike. Then you walk back up, roll at that lone pin, and watch the ball slide past it by a whisper. Now the frame is open, and the man on the next pair, the one with the short backswing and the slow ball, marks again.

The perfect-looking shot that leaves one pin standing

I have stood in that exact spot more Thursday nights than I care to count. For years I kept a stubby pencil and a folded scoresheet in my shirt pocket. One season my wife went through the laundry and found a whole stack of them. She asked why every one had a little circle drawn around the tenth box. I told her those were the frames I *should* have had. She said, "Then why don't you have them?" I didn't have an answer. This book is the answer I worked out afterward.

Here is what I want you to notice about that ten pin. The first ball was not your problem. It looked good, it sounded good, and on most nights it would have carried. What cost you the frame was the second ball, the one you threw at a single pin with the whole lane open in front of you.

A single pin. No pocket to find, no carry to worry about. And it got away.

> **The Two-Board Truth:** most of the pins that beat you are spares you should own. They stand because of a small, repeatable miss, and luck has very little to do with it.

Missing by two boards and calling it bad luck

Watch a league for one night and you'll hear "bad luck" more often than "nice shot." The ten pin is the favorite target for it. The ball "just" missed. The pin "just" stood up. It "just" wasn't your night.

But bad luck is random. It should hit everyone about the same, and it should leave a different pin each time. When the same corner pin stands week after week, and your spare ball misses it on the same side by the same small margin, that is a **pattern**. Patterns can be fixed.

A lane is made of narrow wooden or synthetic strips called **boards**. A miss of two boards sounds like nothing. At the pins it is the whole difference between a spare and an open frame. If you miss by two boards to the left every time you shoot at the ten, then your feet, your eyes or your aim are off by two boards every time. That's a mechanical problem. It isn't fate.

Bowlers figured this out long ago, and they're still saying it. In a BowlingChat.net forum thread comparing spare systems, bowlers reported that a plain plastic spare ball thrown straight works on any lane condition. They also said that converting more spares often lifts an average more than adding hook ever did. Those are people who tried it on their own scoresheets. Nobody sold them anything.

> **Case (illustrative):** Picture a bowler who leaves the ten pin four times in a three-game night and converts one. He walks out saying the pins were "against him." Now picture him writing down where each spare ball crossed the arrows. Three of the four misses pass on the same side of the pin. That's one correctable habit, written down in pencil.

Why the average slips even when the arm feels the same

This is the part that frustrates men who've bowled forty seasons. The arm feels the same. The release feels the same. The ball looks like it always did. So why is the average drifting down a few pins a year?

Three honest reasons, and none of them is that you forgot how to bowl.

The ball is slower than it used to be

Ball speed commonly drops for bowlers 65 and older as reflexes, strength and flexibility decline (BowlingBall.com). You may not feel it. A few miles an hour slower doesn't register in the shoulder. It does register on the lane. A slower ball has more time to react to the surface, and a ball that hooks will hook more and earlier. Your old target was set for a younger, faster you. Chapter 14 shows why steady speed matters more than fast speed.

The equipment may be fighting you

Some coaches say many slower senior bowlers use balls that are too aggressive. Those balls lose energy to friction on the dry outside part of the lane, and the coaches recommend weaker coverstocks instead (BowlingBall.com). The **coverstock** is the outer shell of the ball. It decides how hard the ball grips the lane. On a BowlingBoards.com thread titled "too slow & old to throw newer gen balls," older bowlers described the same thing. Their modern reactive balls hooked too early for their speed, and some talked about going to weaker gear or plain plastic.

Now think about where the ten pin sits. It's in the corner, and you reach it by rolling across the outside of the lane. That outside part is exactly where a grabby ball misbehaves.

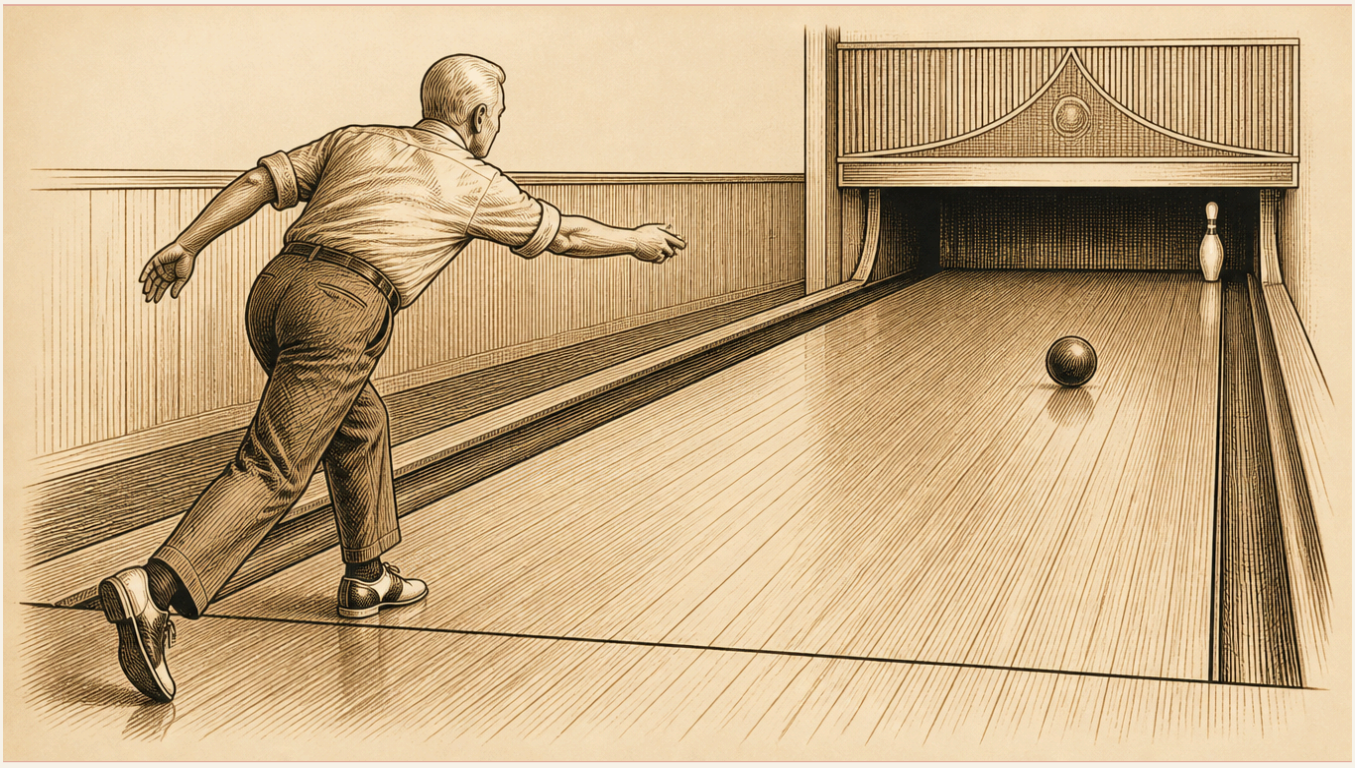
The lane was covering for you, and spares fall outside its help

Most league nights are bowled on a **house shot**, the standard oil pattern a center puts down for leagues. A typical house shot puts roughly ten times as much oil in the middle of the lane as on the outside (National Bowling Academy). That shape nudges off-target strike balls back toward the pocket. The lane quietly forgives your first ball.

> **About 10 to 1:** the typical oil ratio from the center of a league lane to its outside edge. Your strike ball gets the help. Your corner spares mostly don't (National Bowling Academy).

Your shot at the ten pin heads away from all that forgiving middle oil and toward the drier edge. So the forgiveness you lean on for strikes isn't there for the pin that beats you most. Chapter 18 covers oil properly. For now, just know this: your strike ball has a safety net and your corner spare doesn't.

Put those three together. A slower ball, gear that grabs too hard, and a spare shot with no oil to help it. The arm feels exactly the same. The results don't.



What this book will and won't ask of your body

I'll be plain about the deal before you turn another page.

This book will not ask you to:

- Buy a new ball or pay for a drilling job. Chapter 13 shows why the ball already in your bag can make spares.
- Pay for lessons. Every drill here can be done alone on a practice night.
- Throw harder, add hook or change your release after forty seasons.
- Muscle the ball. Injury and clinical sources link bowling arm injuries to "muscling" the ball with the upper body instead of using leverage from the legs. They recommend a relaxed, pendulum-style swing (New York Bone & Joint Specialists). Whenever this book asks for a change, it will be in your feet and your eyes, never a harder arm.

One safety word belongs right here. If your elbow, shoulder or back already hurts while you bowl, nothing in this book is meant to be pushed through pain. Stop for the night, and talk with your doctor before you change your game. A spare isn't worth an injury.

This book will ask you to:

- Stand in a specific spot, measured in boards, and write it down.
- Look at a target on the lane instead of at the pins.
- Repeat the same speed and the same walk on every spare.
- Keep an honest pencil tally for a few weeks.

Senior bowling guides give the same advice I'll keep giving you. Older bowlers should work on a consistent straight or low-hook delivery instead of chasing a big hook, because consistency keeps scores up even with less mobility and slower speed (BowlingKnowledge). Look at that slow, short-swinging man on the next pair again. He isn't stronger than you. He is repeating himself.

> The pins don't care how hard you throw. They only care where the ball goes.

Here is your first job. It costs nothing and takes no extra effort from your body.

- ✓ On your next league night, keep a pencil and a spare scoresheet in your pocket.
- ✓ Every time you leave a single pin, write which pin it was.
- ✓ If you miss it, write **L** or **R** for the side the ball passed on.
- ✓ Don't fix anything yet. Just record it for all three games.
- ✓ At home, count your marks. Look for the pin that shows up most and the side you miss on most.

Most bowlers who do this find one pin and one side doing most of the damage. That's good news. One problem means one fix.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- **Treat a repeated single-pin miss as a pattern.** If the same pin stands and you miss it on the same side, write it down instead of blaming luck.
- **Expect your speed to have changed, even if your arm feels the same,** and stop aiming like the faster bowler you were years ago.
- **Remember that the house shot helps your strike ball more than your corner spares.** Plan your spares as shots with no safety net.
- **Make changes with your feet and eyes, never by muscling the arm.** Stop for the night if anything hurts.
- **Start a three-game pencil tally next league night,** marking each single pin left and the side you missed.

Once you've kept that tally, you'll have a list of the frames you gave away. It's easy to shrug at one open frame here and one there. But what does a single open frame actually cost on the scoresheet? And how many of them stand between your current average and the score you used to carry? The answer is a simple bit of arithmetic, and most bowlers have never once done it.