

Hi All,

*I need to thank a couple of people for the inspiration to write this during lockdown. Firstly, thanks to my fellow pBus Squad Member Simon Cannington for the idea to write an article on this topic and to the person (who shall remain nameless) on social media who referred to myself as “a w@^%#!r and an average bowler in denial” ... or now that I think of it maybe it was actually “an average w@^%#!r and a bowler in denial”? Anyway, nameless person, you gave me the inspiration to finish this. For that I thank you.*

## **Managing Pressure / Performance**

# **Expectation – How A W@^%#!r And Average Bowler Won A National Title**

### **IMAGINE**

Imagine you're playing in a Grand Final. It could be a team or individual event. Maybe it's pennant. Maybe it's for a State Title. Perhaps it's even for an Australian or World Title.

The match has been intense. For what seems like a lifetime you / your team and your opponents have traded shot for shot. It's been an incredible see-sawing battle that has the crowd on the edge of their seats.

It all comes down to the last end. Your opponent won the last end and the last bowl is yours. You pick up your bowl and walk to the mat. Your opponent hasn't left you much. You're down in the head with no easy access. Getting shot to win the match won't be easy.

As you step on to the mat all eyes are on you. They're eagerly awaiting to see what you will do. You get into your normal pre-delivery stance. Every part of your body is tingling in anticipation. Do you feel a strange sense of calm come upon you or are you trying to stop your body from shaking? Do you feel the rush of adrenaline coursing through your body or is it nerves instead? Does the bowl feel heavy in your hand or as light as a feather? Is your mind racing with thoughts about the what-if's or is there a clear purpose to your thought process? Are you 'in-the-moment' or are you lost in the moment?

### **THE BREAKTHROUGH**

I chose this subject as it is close to my heart. I'm not good at blowing my own horn (remember I'm average), however, I believe that mental toughness was previously a weakness that I have been able to improve on to the point of it being a strength. At a prior pBus squad training session, our Coach Lachlan Tighe asked other pBus squad members in attendance to name strengths of the others in the group. The one common voiced strength of mine that others voiced

was “playing the big bowls in the pressure moments” or something to that effect.

I’ll be honest and say this came as a massive shock to me as, going back some 10-15 years, I was known as a good player who had a tendency to snatch defeat from the jaws of victory, AKA a “big game choker”. An average bowler WITHOUT a national title. So much so that in 27 years of playing our wonderful game I had only two club mixed pairs championships to my name. Yep... 27 years. I had a score of club pennant achievements for sure, however, I’d not won any individual trophies at National, State, Region or even Club level. Always close but ever so far away. I’d be lying if I said that it hadn’t affected me psychologically. Fast forward to now and I have the pleasure of being the reigning Australian Indoor Singles Champion (2019). I still sometimes have to remind myself that winning that title actually happened, to an average bowler like me.

So what changed? How did an average bowler and perpetual runner up / finalist finally break though? What did it take? I’m not presumptuous enough to claim I know it all and in many regards I think of myself as the perpetual student. To write 27 years’ worth of information in one document would make this very long and boring. Let’s also keep in mind I’ve written this for those out there looking to improve their game. Here are a few of the things I have learned along the way.

## **PREPARATION AND PLANNING**

Why do some wait until the event / match itself is upon them to put any thought towards what they will do ‘In the moment’? Laziness, arrogance or a case of “you don’t know what you don’t know”. Some seem to go in with no plan at all. Others seem to have some basic idea of what they will do, but usually only when the going is good.

Preparation and planning, in my humble opinion, are possibly the most overlooked parts of any successful campaign by lawn bowlers worldwide. Most people think of being able to handle pressure ‘in the moment’ as being about what you are doing in that moment itself. I’ve had quite a few people ask recently, “What were you thinking when you played that bowl?” but nobody asks, “What did you do prior to the event / match to prepare?”.

In my brief experience on the national stage, with ALL of that attention, pressure and excitement, is that it happens all too quickly to be able to make good decisions on the spot. One moment your warming up and the next the match has finished. Leaving the decision making until you’re ‘in the moment’ will invariably lead to some bad or rash decisions...decisions that you can’t afford to make in the big pressure moments.

So on to the how and what of preparing / planning?

## **SITUATIONAL AWARENESS**

I can't tell you how many articles I've read or documentaries I've watched about Champions in their respective sports (it's a lot). I can tell you that one common trend is that they prepare and plan to the 'nth' degree. Why? So that they know what to do and when to do it both when they're dominating and when they're in trouble. What they don't do is leave it until the main event to figure it out. They visualise, simulate and test their game under a multitude of practice scenarios that have been designed to account for every eventuality and by doing so they don't need to think about the situation when it arises; they react. They're going through the process as they've done many times before and therefore look composed 'in the moment'. They're reassured by the familiarity. It feels like they've been here before. They know that all the hard work and dedication on the training track has prepared them to perform 'in the moment'.

## **SPECIFIC, PURPOSEFUL TRAINING**

One way to work on your situational awareness is through specific, purposeful training. It is far superior to any other training I have come across. Most lawn bowlers are only accustomed to rolling up. A few may train skills and drills. The elite train specifically and purposefully towards a clear goal / objective.

Under the guidance of pBus Coach Lachlan Tighe and with the help of my fellow pBus squad members (to all of whom I will be forever grateful) I spent the three months prior to the 2019 Australian Indoor Championship training specifically for that format. It involved the following:

- Training for the format (simulating sets play)
- Creating scenarios in training to simulate the expected pressure of playing in a televised national event (lights, cameras, the crowd's reactions etc.)
- Simulating game situations
  - Lost the first set... now what?
  - Playing in a tie-breaker... now what?
- Training for different shot situations
- Recording and debriefing all of the above

## **KNOW WHAT IS WORKING AND WHAT IS NOT**

For those who haven't watched the Bowls Show, every episode they show a match usually at a National / International Level. For every match shown they choose a 'shot of the game'. I remember watching the Bowls Show with interest when they aired my Australian Indoor Semi-Final. The shot of the game chosen was the following: in the first end of the three end tiebreaker, I'm 2-3 shots down with one of my oppositions' bowls on the jack. With my final bowl I trailed it two feet giving myself a handy 3-0 lead. I secured the tiebreaker and the game by picking up two shots on the 2<sup>nd</sup> end.

In the post-match interview, I was asked about this shot choice considering that bowls two and three of that same end I'd attempted the exact same shot and missed. In this scenario I can only imagine that many bowlers would've chosen a completely different shot. From a draw to cut it down to a full blown drive. What shot would you have played? The options available were endless.

So why did I choose to repeat the exact same shot selection – play two feet over to trail the jack? Because during my three-month preparation and in the games at Tweed Heads prior to this match I'd recorded statistics on every bowl I'd delivered. I'd worked out that, when repetitiously playing the same trail shot with two feet of weight on the same hand, I had a 30% chance of success. Having already played two near misses, in my mind, I only had a 10% chance of missing again. Compare this to my recorded statistics for heavy up shots or drives, which was at 35%, but even lower with only one attempt at the shot. A draw to cut it down had a 58% chance. I'd decided prior to the game what I'd do if in this situation. No thinking on shot selection required. Just focus on the process of the delivery.

## **GAMEPLAN**

The best game plans are simple yet effective.

In a recent coaching exercise for a bowls pupil of mine (I'm an average coach as well as an average bowler), we watched the entire live stream of an Australian Singles Title final between two international calibre players. I used this particular game as a way to demonstrate the power of a pre-determined game plan. I asked my bowls pupil to imagine they were either player and I would be the other one. We were to record their shot selection and success of each bowl played throughout the entire match. Once the match was over we reviewed these statistics and compared. We did this not with a view to criticise these players but more so as an exercise in "what would *we* do in this scenario".

It was interesting to find that we both noticed the following patterns:

- When drawing close (within a mat length) with their first bowl both players had greater success drawing with their second.
- If their opposition achieved success before they did (having one or two bowls within a mat length) they invariably resorted to attacking the head with at least a metre or more weight on their second bowl.
- More times than not they missed and this left them in the precarious situation of being two or three shots down by the time they were to play their 3<sup>rd</sup> or even 4<sup>th</sup> bowl.
- The above was so pronounced during the game that for the first 9 ends player one won eight of these and from ends 10 to 18 player two won eight ends. On all but two of these 18 ends the winner was the player who had two bowls within a mat length before their opposition.

With the benefit of having the statistics to confirm the above pattern we may be able deduce the following:

- First player to draw two bowls with a mat length has a distinct advantage.
- Having at least two bowls in the head before going on the attack would do a great deal to mitigate any multiple counts against you.
- Therefore, playing any shot with more than two feet of weight with bowl one or two in your arsenal should be avoided unless absolutely necessary (example: to save or win a match).

Moving forward the above deductions could be added to any game plan and it could quite easily be written as follows:

Objective 1 – have at least two bowls within a mat length before attempting any attacking shots unless you need to win or save the game. Simple and yet effective.

## **TO SUM IT UP**

The power of using statistical data obtained from specific purposeful practice to help you develop a fundamental game plan allows you to free your mind ‘in the moment’ to focus only on the process of delivering your bowl. You’re not thinking about shot selection. You’re not worrying about being 2-3 shots down. You’re not worried about whether you should draw to save or attack the head. You’re not in two minds. In that moment right then and there you know what are going to do. You planned for it. You trained for it. All you have to do is focus and deliver your bowl. Simple.

I've decided to wrap it up as, to be honest, if I don't stop here I probably never will. There is so much more I could've included as the effort involved in competing, failing, learning, improving, competing again, failing again – rinse and repeat over and over for 27 years until I finally had a breakthrough has had a lot of work put in to it. Maybe I will be able to find some time to write about it again, although let's hope it doesn't take another COVID-19 lockdown to inspire me to do it.

Your very average 2019 Australian Indoor Champion over and out.

Cheers,  
Robert Briglia  
Middle Park Head Coach