



MONEYBOWL

**Traditional bowling statistics are passé.
Here's a better way to determine who's best.**

BY MIKE FAGAN

The “Moneyball” system, described in a book of the same name by Michael Lewis, changed the way baseball organizations evaluate and select players.

Statistics have taken the place of perception. Walks and on-base percentage have trumped intangibles such as “how the ball comes off the bat.”

Which brings up the question: In a world of sports dominated by new and interesting statistics, what system could be put in place and what criteria could be used for determining the best bowlers?

Statistics are part of bowl-

ing history, but to what extent have they been utilized to determine who is the best in the game today? Tournament victories represent an obvious stat that comes to mind right away. Most everyone would consider this a tell-tale way of separating the best from the rest. But is this really an accurate way to determine who is the best overall player?

Almost all PBA tournaments ultimately are decided by a one-game match between two players. Is this a large enough sample size to gauge who the best player was on that day or during that week?

Luck can play a huge role in the outcome of one game. That's why the High

Roller was so wildly crazy during the 1980s and '90s. The concept was simple: Anybody can beat anybody in a one-game match. It was a gamble for almost every bowler; people knew it, and people loved it.

I don't think that anyone would argue that Walter Ray Williams Jr. is not one of the greatest bowlers of all time; he has the most PBA titles with 47. But did you know that he has only won only about 25% of the time that he has made the televised finals?

If there are, on average, four or five bowlers on the TV show, and if he is, in fact, one of the greatest of all time, shouldn't he have won more than once in

every four appearances? I believe that in Williams' long career, he has created a large enough sample size (178 TV appearances) to show that under the lights of television in a one-game match, all professional bowlers are virtually created equal.

One of the issues competitive bowling has is the constraints placed on it — physically, and from a time perspective. Pro bowling was forced early on to alter the format in which it is played for television. Networks would allow a mere 90 minutes for the finals of a tournament in which the qualifying could last four to five days, with the bowlers on the lanes up to eight hours per day.

It doesn't seem fair for

A Different Way of Assessing the 2012 U.S. Open

PETE WEBER WON the tournament — “Who do you think you are? I am!” — but both runner-up Mike Fagan and third-place finisher Jason Belmonte out-averaged him in the 2012 U.S. Open tournament. The charts on these pages, compiled by Fagan, provide a different way of comparing players — in this case, Fagan, Belmonte and ninth-place finisher Bill O’Neill, during the 24-game match play round of the Open. Examine the statistics carefully, and you’ll see why Fagan and Belmonte made “the show,” while O’Neill came up a bit short.



Mike Fagan



Jason Belmonte



Bill O'Neill

MIKE FAGAN										
GAME	ATTEMPTS	STRIKES	STRIKE %	DOUBLES	DOUBLE %	TRIPLES	TRIPLE %	OPENS	SCORE	
1	11	8	73%	6	75%	4	50%	1	245	
2	12	6	50%	4	67%	3	50%	1	223	
3	11	5	45%	2	40%	1	20%	1	201	
4	11	2	18%	1	50%	0	0%	2	176	
5	10	5	50%	3	60%	2	40%	2	196	
6	12	6	50%	4	67%	3	50%	1	221	
7	11	5	45%	1	20%	0	0%	1	194	
8	12	8	67%	6	75%	2	25%	0	246	
9	11	5	45%	0	0%	0	0%	0	188	
10	11	3	27%	0	0%	0	0%	1	181	
11	11	8	73%	6	75%	4	50%	0	257	
12	12	6	50%	4	67%	3	50%	0	231	
13	11	6	55%	3	50%	2	33%	0	227	
14	11	5	45%	1	20%	0	0%	0	206	
15	11	6	55%	4	67%	3	50%	0	235	
16	11	9	82%	6	67%	4	44%	0	256	
17	12	5	42%	3	60%	2	40%	2	190	
18	11	5	45%	3	60%	1	20%	2	189	
19	11	8	73%	4	50%	2	25%	0	238	
20	10	8	80%	6	75%	4	50%	2	230	
21	12	8	67%	5	63%	3	38%	2	213	
22	11	6	55%	1	17%	0	0%	2	186	
23	12	7	58%	4	57%	2	29%	0	234	
24	12	8	67%	6	75%	3	38%	1	235	
AVERAGES	11.25	6.167	55%	3.458	52%	2	29%	0.875	217	

BILL O'NEILL										
GAME	ATTEMPTS	STRIKES	STRIKE %	DOUBLES	DOUBLE %	TRIPLES	TRIPLE %	OPENS	SCORE	
1	10	4	40%	2	50%	0	0%	3	177	
2	11	6	55%	1	17%	0	0%	0	205	
3	11	8	73%	5	63%	3	38%	2	222	
4	11	7	64%	4	57%	2	29%	0	232	
5	11	3	27%	0	0%	0	0%	0	192	
6	11	5	45%	2	40%	0	0%	2	190	
7	11	5	45%	2	40%	0	0%	3	177	
8	11	5	45%	3	60%	2	40%	2	199	
9	12	10	83%	8	80%	6	60%	0	277	
10	11	6	55%	2	33%	1	17%	1	207	
11	12	6	50%	4	67%	3	50%	3	193	
12	11	4	36%	0	0%	0	0%	1	178	
13	11	6	55%	3	50%	1	17%	2	200	
14	11	5	45%	1	20%	0	0%	1	190	
15	11	4	36%	0	0%	0	0%	0	198	
16	11	4	36%	1	25%	0	0%	1	189	
17	11	4	36%	2	50%	0	0%	0	212	
18	12	9	75%	6	67%	4	44%	1	242	
19	11	6	55%	3	50%	2	33%	1	215	
20	10	3	30%	1	33%	0	0%	2	180	
21	11	4	36%	0	0%	0	0%	1	185	
22	11	7	64%	3	43%	1	14%	1	215	
23	11	5	45%	2	40%	0	0%	3	176	
24	12	7	58%	4	57%	2	29%	1	212	
Averages	11.083	5.542	50%	2.458	39%	1.125	15%	1.292	202.63	

JASON BELMONTE										
GAME	ATTEMPTS	STRIKES	STRIKE %	DOUBLES	DOUBLE %	TRIPLES	TRIPLE %	OPENS	SCORE	
1	11	6	55%	4	67%	3	50%	1	224	
2	12	8	67%	5	63%	2	25%	2	217	
3	11	5	45%	3	60%	1	20%	1	206	
4	12	9	75%	7	78%	6	67%	1	256	
5	12	11	92%	10	91%	9	82%	0	290	
6	11	5	45%	3	60%	2	40%	0	218	
7	12	9	75%	6	67%	4	44%	1	244	
8	12	5	42%	3	60%	1	20%	0	213	
9	12	7	58%	5	71%	3	43%	0	238	
10	11	7	64%	4	57%	2	29%	1	226	
11	11	7	64%	3	43%	1	14%	2	202	
12	11	7	64%	4	57%	2	29%	1	222	
13	12	6	50%	3	50%	1	17%	1	214	
14	11	8	73%	6	75%	4	50%	0	256	
15	12	10	83%	8	80%	6	60%	0	267	
16	11	9	82%	7	78%	5	58%	1	254	
17	11	6	55%	2	33%	0	0%	1	203	
18	11	6	55%	3	50%	2	33%	2	206	
19	11	6	55%	2	33%	1	17%	1	205	
20	11	6	55%	2	33%	1	17%	2	192	
21	11	7	64%	3	43%	1	14%	1	214	
22	11	7	64%	5	71%	3	43%	0	244	
23	11	5	45%	3	60%	1	20%	2	200	
24	12	7	58%	3	43%	2	29%	1	205	
Averages	11.375	7.042	62%	4.333	59%	2.625	34%	0.917	225.67	

players to bowl 50 or more games, only to have the title come down to just one. A player can bowl a bad game and come away the winner, or roll a near-flawless game and come away with nothing. It is impossible to tell the story of an entire tournament in 10 shots.

So, how can we decide who the best players are, other than by simply noting wins and losses in such a statistically erratic environment?

The first thing that needs to be done is to consider the criteria for what determines a high-level player. Throwing the ball well is, of course, an important intangible — but looking pretty at the line is not going to get the job done by itself. There are many intangibles that create great players. Reading lanes, choosing the proper equipment, overall versatility and experience all are things that are nearly impossible to associate with a numerical value.

What about a hard statistic such as strike percentage? Sounds reasonable enough; the player with the most strikes should win every event. Well, it's not that simple because each shot is not independent. Many players would like to think that each shot is equally important, but a shot following a double is more important than a shot succeeding an open.

The players that are dominant usually are the ones who can string strikes and put up big scores, not those who are the most consistent. Although it may not look the prettiest on a scorecard, 279 and 184 beats 230 and 230.

An algorithm of how often

a player throws a strike when the previous frame is a strike, or when the two previous frames are strikes, would most likely tell the story of who is leading the event and, ultimately, the season's Player of the Year race.

In order for bowling to advance in the world of professional sports, statistics must be taken to the next level. Each bowling organization has its own ranking system, but until they are unified and united, it cannot be determined, without debate, who is the best bowler in the world. I also believe that

It is just a fact of bowling that some centers are more challenging than others. Pins, kickbacks, topography and surface texture are just a few of the factors that influence scores. Usually, these factors are more influential than the oil pattern, and they can be documented and parsed in determining a center's "slope" rating.

With computerized scoring at virtually every bowling center in the country, hardwired to the front desk with high-speed internet access, there is no reason that such a "network"

ing's handicapping system were more like that of the USGA's, where lower scores did not influence one's average as much, there would be no incentive to purposefully miss in order to receive more handicap the following week. Handicap also could change as one changes centers, based upon each center's "slope" rating — creating a truly level "playing field."

Every single shot thrown down a lane holds a statistical value, whether it's a strike, spare or split. Quantifying their values has not been fully explored, and

Average is a dead concept. It tells us little about the quality of a player.

beating higher-ranked players should add to one's ranking because rankings should not be solely about winning an event — who you beat to get to that title matters.

Statistics could be implemented at the league level to improve that bowling experience as well. Today, average is a dead concept; it tells us very little about the quality of a player. There has to be a way to determine who is better between a 200-average bowler in New York and a 200-average bowler in California.

Here's one way: by cross-referencing an individual's scores with the scores of the entire center, the scores of neighboring centers that have corresponding players, and with the rankings of the players at these centers. This would create a "slope" rating for each center.

of league player rankings could not become a reality.

"What is your average?" is not going to slake the thirst of our weekly league competitors any longer. The USBC could experiment by making changes to help legitimize the game's handicapping system.

Golf's handicapping system is based on what you potentially can shoot, not just an average of all your rounds. Not all rounds are created equal, given the vast differences in the "playing fields" from course to course, and I believe this reality needs to be addressed in the bowling world as well.

"Dumping" has always been an issue in the league setting, and has frustrated many people to the degree that they have walked away from the game when they see this go unpunished. If bowl-

could open up an entirely new side to the game.

Before fantasy football was introduced, the only notable stat in a given game was the final score. Today, people are tuning in out-of-market games just to see if a certain player can pile up 100 yards. Fantasy football has added an entirely new dimension to football and made that sport much more popular in the process. Fans are now invested in each and every game.

Whether it's football, baseball, golf or bowling, there is so much more to the story than just the win/loss column. Statistics help tell this story. And take it from a sports fanatic: We love our stats.

Mike Fagan was one of the three contenders in the hotly contested 2011-12 PBA Player of the Year race.