

Bowling: The Intellectual Sport

There's a video of it happening. The first strike was messy because the seven-pin had to be knocked over by a rolling pin. The second and third strikes that frame were cleaner. There was a cheer, many high-fives and fist-bumps. My first 300 game.

But bowling has its ups and downs. I've been fighting out of a slump in my scores recently. At the beginning of this CIBL league session, my scores dropped down to as low as 120, and my averages as low as 160 -- a big step down from the 212 average I had last year in the league. I lost quite a bit of faith in bowling, which affected my ability as captain. I was frustrated, angry-- naturally, this made my scores decrease. But with the repetitive advice from our coach and the slow regain of my average over the last eight weeks, I'm proud to say that my previous average has returned.

I like to summarize up difficult experiences like this concisely in my journal for future reference. For something like cross country, pure displays of raw strength and athletic talent, it runs along the lines of: "Run until you feel dead, then keep running." But despite the flounder in my bowling, what I noted about the sport from this experience is something much more agreeable: "Bowling makes so much sense."

The beginners might see it as good or bad luck. Hit the pins right on the nose of the triangle, and sometimes you get a strike, sometimes you don't. Most bowlers know that this often leads to splits, and try to increase their strike percentage by hitting the pocket at an angle. Both thoughts are true: there is some natural variation in a person's swing and in the position of the pins and the oil on the lane, and statistics dictates that there is no sure-fire way of guaranteeing a strike on any shot. But physics explains why every shot results in the way it does, and chemistry accounts for the viscosity of the lane oil or the grip of the ball's coverstock. And every change in motion a person makes has a corresponding effect on the outcome of the shot. "Luck" is no more than a facade for minute inconsistencies in the bowler's swing, and usually improves as hook and speed increases.

I never thought I would become an athlete, but now I wholeheartedly embrace being a bowler. I enjoy doing schoolwork and embrace the nerdiness of going to hackathons and math or science competitions. However, following the example of my dad and older sister, I ran cross country in the fall and outdoor track in the spring. The problem with these sports is that there's not enough time to think; it's all just toil and heavy breathing and feeling your heart burst. It's nice as exercise to keep fit, but does little else except strain my body and tire out my mind.

But I believe bowling has something fundamentally different from the emphasis on physical exhaustion and speed at the core of many other sports: the game is all about making everything move smoothly according to physics. Action-reaction. Friction. Maintaining angular momentum. Gravity and constant acceleration. Et cetera. (It only makes sense that four members of our Varsity team take the most difficult mathematics and physics courses offered at our school. We get excited every time bowling balls are used for demonstration in class.)

It just makes sense to move the starting position of the feet left or right so that the ball pivots toward the opposite direction. The footwork to get both feet out of the path of the ball just enough to stay balanced makes sense. As to swing the right foot and left arm out left for stability. To let gravity smoothly accelerate the ball. To avoid getting the hand around the side of the ball. To have a long slide with the knee bent for stability and speed. That no matter how skilled a person is at bowling, they are never perfect, and they will sometimes miss. And of course, that practice (nearly) makes perfect.

The latter point, interestingly, was somewhat of a struggle for me to understand. I thought that my previous high average could keep me afloat, but my bad habits of constantly getting around the side of the ball dragged me under. I was not serious with improving my technique at the beginning of this season and let my scores falter. In the end, it was long, simple, hard work and concentration that did the job. I watched as one of our new bowlers soared into Varsity with no prior experience, because he was extremely enthusiastic and went bowling many times a week. Even my younger sister, who has much less experience than me, outscored me several games because of the seriousness of her every throw. I felt very humbled by this apparent honesty in the sport. In a game where you could have a lucky strike a hundred different ways or an unlucky leave another hundred ways, the sport itself, in the long run, has always been very impartial to luck. As statistics says it should be.

That being said, I've placed both absolutely first and last place in leagues and tournaments, individually and as a team. Even at the bottom, it's never a traumatizing experience, especially because I know that there will always be good days among those bad days in the future.

And watching our high school team stagger and grow, but in high spirits either way, has been by far the most rewarding experience in high school. Becoming team captain has been the most recent chapter in the bowling journey. I manage the Facebook group, actively communicate with the school administration and the league, handle uniforms, recruit members, organize finances, and arrange end-of-year ceremonies. But these are the superficial details, the technicalities to run the team. But to be a captain, and to truly have a team, means to get everyone else on the same mindset about bowling. Bowling is such a great sport because it makes so much *sense*. It's lovable and honest. The best part is, I think we all believe it.