CHAPTER 1

Chapter 1: The Walk Back to the Settee

It's the eighth frame of the second game. Your first ball comes in high and light and knocks down nine. One pin is left standing in the far right corner. You've made this shot a thousand times. You set your feet where you always do, roll it, and watch the ball slide past the ten pin by the width of a finger.

Nobody says anything. Your teammate taps your hand. Then comes the walk back to the settee, which is the longest fifteen feet in the building. You sit down, pick up your drink, and do the math in your head. Afterward you tell yourself it was only one pin.

It wasn't one pin. It was closer to ten. By the end of this chapter, you'll see why that single miss matters more to your average than any strike you didn't throw.

The Quiet Math: Open Frames Hold an Average at 175

Most league bowlers think their average is stuck because they don't strike enough. They buy a stronger ball, chase a sharper hook, and try to hit the pocket harder. I did the same thing for years. My wife still keeps a coffee can of my old scoresheets in the hall closet. When I finally read through them one winter, the strikes weren't the problem. The open frames were.

Here is how the scoring works against you. A spare earns ten pins plus whatever your next ball knocks down. An open nine earns nine. So a missed single-pin spare costs you **one pin plus your next first ball**. If that next ball knocks down eight or nine, the miss cost you about ten pins.

Now look at a strike the same way. To strike, you have to hit the pocket and get the carry. Carry means the pins falling into each other the right way. You control only part of that. The lane, the oil and plain luck control the rest. A single-pin spare asks for one thing: **contact**. The ball has to touch one pin. That is entirely yours.

I call this **the Quiet Math**. The pins you lose to missed spares never show up as a dramatic moment. There is no split to groan about and no gutter ball to laugh off. They leak out a frame at a time, and they add up to a number that looks like a ceiling.

> **The Quiet Math:** every missed single-pin spare costs you roughly a full frame's worth of pins, and you can win all of them back without throwing one more strike.

What Converting Every Single-Pin Spare Is Worth

Let's put the Quiet Math to work with round numbers. These are illustrative figures, so plug in your own.

Suppose you leave four single-pin spares a game and miss two of them. Each miss costs about ten pins. That's twenty pins a game. Over a three-game series it comes to about sixty pins.

Sixty pins a series is twenty pins a game. That's the difference between a 175 average and a 195 average. You wouldn't need a new ball, a new release or a new hook to get there. The strike game you already own would do. And if you only close half that gap, you're still looking at ten pins a game you've been handing back to the lane every week.

- ✓ Pull out your last three league scoresheets, or ask your league secretary for them.
- ✓ Circle every frame where you left exactly one pin and didn't convert it.
- ✓ Multiply the number of circles by ten.
- ✓ Divide by the number of games. That's your rough per-game leak.

Do that exercise tonight before you read the next chapter. Most bowlers I've walked through it go quiet when they see the total. They were sure the problem was carry.

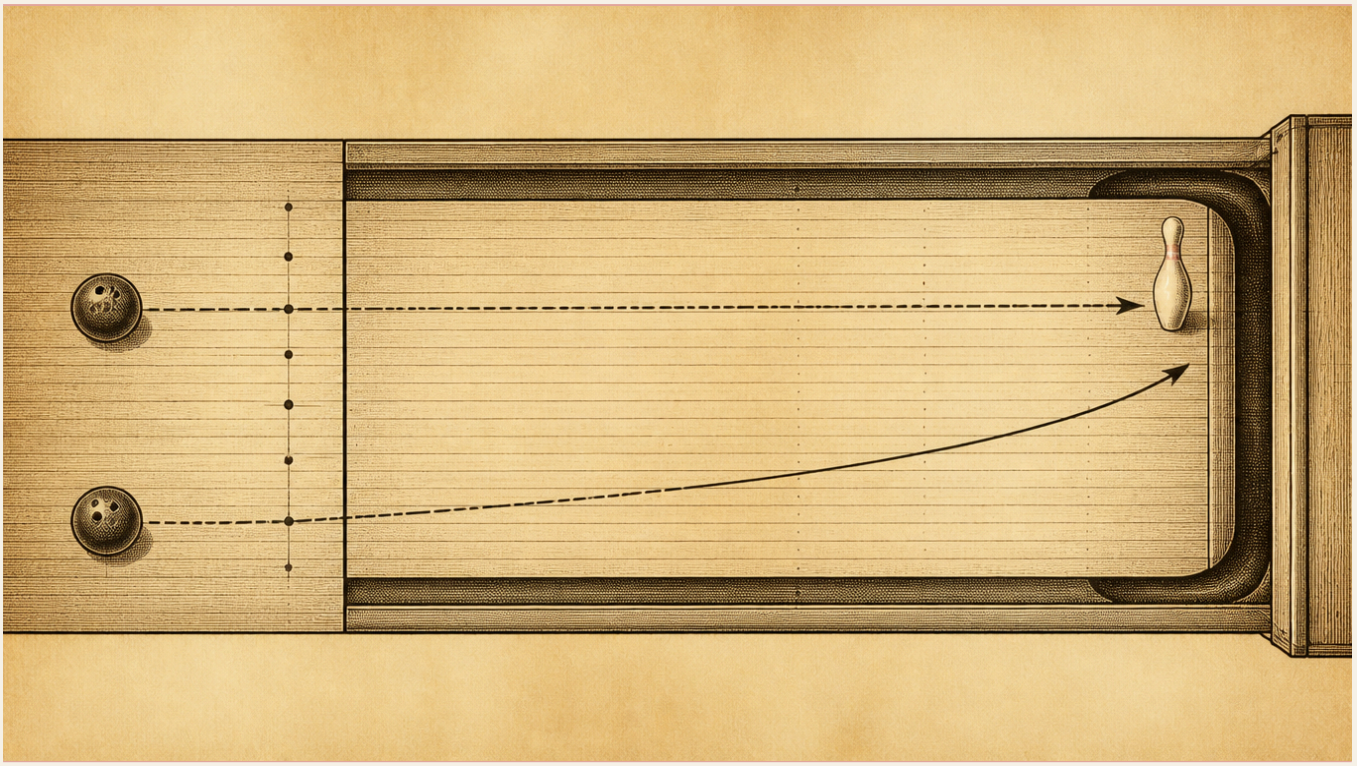
Bowlers who commit to a system see this gain for real. On the BowlingChat.net forum, one bowler described committing for about two months to shooting every spare with a plastic spare ball. By then, their single-pin conversion had reached about 80% and was still climbing (BowlingChat.net forum). Others on AnandTech's forums reported big early jumps from focused practice and instruction. One went from the 80s to the 120s in about three weeks, and another added around 40 pins to their average after lessons (AnandTech Forums). Those are personal reports from forum members, not controlled studies. But they point the same direction as the arithmetic.

Why the Ten Pin Stings More Than Any Split

A split is bad luck. When you leave the 7-10, nobody expects you to make it, including you. You walk back shaking your head at the pins.

The ten pin is different. It stands alone in the corner. There's nothing in front of it and nothing behind it, and it's exactly the leave you were supposed to handle. When you miss it, you can't blame the pins. You can only blame the shot. That's why it stings.

There's a second reason. The ten pin gets left after shots that *almost* worked. The ball hit the pocket and everything went down except the corner. You were one pin from a strike. Then you got nine pins and an open frame from a shot that felt good. Of all the ways to lose pins, that one feels like the biggest waste.



The picture above hints at why the corner gets away from so many of us. A ball hooking from your strike line is fighting the lane the whole way to the corner. A straighter ball crossing from the other side has room to spare. Walter Ray Williams Jr., the all-time PBA titles leader, describes his own approach this way:

> "I like to shoot my right side spares from the same starting spot on the left side of the lane and adjusting my target depending on the spare." (Live to Bowl)

Keep that sentence in mind. We'll build on it, board by board, in the chapters ahead.

The Promise of This Book

You're in good company. USBC counted 1,075,194 members in the 2024-2025 season, and membership has stayed roughly flat through 2025-2026 (BOWL.com (USBC), 2026). A lot of those members bowl one weeknight league in one house, year after year. Plenty of them have an average that hasn't moved in a decade.

Here is what I'm promising you, and what I'm not.

One system. You'll learn one fixed way to aim at every spare. The target stays the same and only your feet move. You'll write it down, so you stop guessing from night to night. League bowlers trade these systems all the time on forums like Maverick Bowling, comparing fixed starting spots and pin-by-pin adjustments (Maverick Bowling Forum). The versions that last are simple enough to repeat under pressure.

No new gear required. If you already own a plastic ball, good. Plastic is the standard spare ball because it rolls nearly straight with little or no hook (Wikipedia, "Bowling ball"). If you don't own one, you won't need to buy one to use this book. Chapter 15 shows you how to throw your regular ball straighter at spares.

Starting next league night. You won't need to rebuild your delivery. Your strike game stays exactly as it is. We're adding a separate, boring, repeatable spare game next to it.

What I can't promise is a number. Nobody honest can tell you you'll gain exactly twenty pins. Your gain depends on how many spares you're leaving on the table right now. That's why the scoresheet exercise matters. It tells you what's actually available to you.

> **A typical case, for illustration:** imagine a bowler averaging 176 who circles seven missed single-pin spares across three games. Using the rough ten-pins-per-miss math, that's about 70 pins, or roughly 23 per game. He hasn't changed a thing about his strike ball. The pins were already his to take.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- **Count before you change anything.** Circle every missed single-pin spare on your last three scoresheets and multiply by ten to find your real leak.
- **Treat each missed single pin as a ten-pin loss.** A miss costs one pin plus your next first ball, so it adds up to about a full frame.
- **Stop chasing strikes to fix your average.** Carry is partly luck. Contact with a single pin is fully under your control.
- **Keep your strike game exactly as it is.** The system in this book sits beside it and doesn't replace it.
- **Commit for weeks, not frames.** Forum bowlers who stuck with one spare method for about two months report conversion rates still climbing.

So the ten pin is where the money is. But that raises a harder question. If it's the easiest leave in the building, why does it keep beating bowlers with twenty years of league nights behind them? The answer starts with where you're standing when you throw it, and most of us have been standing in the wrong place for a very long time.