

Don't worry: These tips will help you relax on the lanes

By Pat Brettingen, USBC Bronze coach

You know the feeling.

The night before a big test at school or before a big game, you get a lump in your stomach. It's natural to feel pressure to do well. You want so badly to perform well that you get nervous.

It's also natural to get nervous while bowling, especially during a big tournament. Unfortunately, being anxious can cause your muscles to tighten, making it difficult to bowl well. Your bowling will be better if both your muscles and mind are relaxed.

The key to having fun and bowling well at the 2008 USBC Junior Gold Championships in Detroit is to relax and let your body move freely. But how do you do that?

Check out these tips from USBC Coaching that will help you keep your nerves under control so you can bowl well and have fun.

1. Go to school. Learn everything you can about the tournament and the bowling center. What is the tournament format? How many games will you be bowling? What type of lane surface does the center have? What lane oil patterns will be used? This will help you prepare for the tournament and not be surprised by anything you see.

2. Arrive early at the bowling center. One way to relieve stress is simply get to the bowling center well before your squad time. This will help you become familiar with the surroundings, the atmosphere and the layout of the center. You can find out where your starting lanes are and maybe gain an edge by picking up some hints from watching the bowlers who are on your lanes.

3. Make sure your bowling balls fit properly. Take time to ensure that each bowling ball you brought fits the way you like, so you can switch from one ball to the next without having to spend a lot of time getting tape in or out. Nothing is more frustrating than having to miss practice shots to make a ball fit correctly.

4. Breathe. Sounds simple enough, right? Taking a full breath helps take your body out of an overexcited state. As you're preparing to roll a shot, try breathing down the back of your throat and filling the back of your lungs. This will help relax the muscles in your body.

5. Have short-term memory. This is a bad idea when you're studying for a test, but in bowling this is a great plan. If you have an open frame, forget about it and move on to the next frame. Once a frame is over - whether it's a strike, spare or open - there's no turning back, so you might as well focus on the next one.

6. Make a mental checklist. Try this trick to get a grip on your nerves: As you settle into your stance on the approach, concentrate on a mental checklist of all the parts of your approach and delivery. This will help you focus on what you need to do to get the scores rather than on the score itself.

Your checklist can include the following:

- Place your feet on the proper boards for the shot.
- Visualize your ball rolling over your target and into the pocket.
- Choose and focus on your lane target.
- Take a deep breath, exhale and roll the ball through your target.

7. I can handle it. Before picking up a ball, athletes must believe they can handle any result. It is OK to want things to turn out for the best. However, athletes cannot bowl effectively if they are afraid to miss the target. Develop a firm belief in the phrase, "I can handle anything that happens." Athletes who can say that and mean it are free to play the game.

8. Focus on the process, not the result. Instead of thinking "strike," think about how to roll a good shot. Try asking yourself a series of questions such as: "Where do I want to stand?" Then stand there. "Is my stance position good?" If not, fix it. "Where do I want to aim?" Find your target and keep your eyes on it. Relax by taking a deep breath, then let it out before you take your first step.

My favorite concentration trick is to imagine a line drawn on the lane that goes from the foul line, through my lane target and right into the pocket. When I can see that line in my mind, I just roll the ball along that line. Make the line in your mind your favorite color!

9. Stay positive. Bowling is exciting and frustrating at times. Sometimes you roll what looks like a great shot and leave a pin standing. Then you line up for the spare and miss it. It happens to all bowlers. What matters is how you deal with it. Stay positive about your bowling on each shot. Each time you step on the approach, tell yourself "I CAN!" and then prove yourself right.

10. Have fun! Enjoy the experience. You can choose to enjoy the tournament with your friends while making a commitment to doing your best and accepting whatever happens. This is a vacation for most of us, so have fun.

Keep these tips in mind and you'll keep your nerves at bay. For more coaching tips to improve your bowling, visit the Coaching section of bowl.com.