

Strategies for Maximizing Team Performance

Making history with Team Philippines

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As a coach, there is nothing more special than the moment you see your bowlers ascend to the top of the podium to receive a gold medal for their nation in a major championship. To see them, with the flag draped over their shoulders like a superhero, is so rewarding because I know how much work went into being prepared to be successful when it matters most. These moments are always emotional. Imagine seeing their family members tearing up as they sing along loudly to their national anthem with great pride. Each of those brief moments is etched deeply in my memory and drives me to be the best coach I can become.

This article shares my experiences coaching the U20 Team Philippines' Boys team at the 21st Asian Youth Championship in July in Bangkok, Thailand. We won the overall country boys title, with a gold medal in the team event and also a gold medal in the masters. By sharing my experience, I'm hopeful these shared insights can aid youth team and college coaches to gain a deeper competition perspective to help prepare their teams to be at their best when it matters most.

Understanding the scope of what happened

The performance in this 21st Asian Youth Championships was historic for the country, with Team Philippines' boys winning the overall boys country title for the first time, the first team gold medal in 42 years, and the first masters gold medal in 27 years. Not only this, but with one game to go in the team event, they trailed Korea by 209 pins. With a 943 final game, we jumped them for the gold to win by 11 pins, which was just 15 pins over Thailand, who earned the bronze.

Immediately after they finished bowling, and not knowing for sure what the results were, I said to the guys that I was so proud of them for committing and trusting the process. We were so happy at that moment because we had committed to the lane play work without score-watching while being great teammates. I, too, had stayed away from score-watching as I didn't

want to give away any body language or facial expression cues either way. At that moment, there was a deep satisfaction in our performance, and we didn't yet realize that we had made history.



A photo of the gold medals. (Image courtesy of the Thailand Tenpin Bowling Association)

It was only when one of the women's team members came down in tears that we knew we had managed to achieve something special and won a gold medal, the first in 42 years. We embraced as we jumped up and down. Tears came to my eyes. What a moment for the nation. What a moment for these young men.

Culture sets the stage

For me, the most important element of building team bowling success is the quality of the cultural foundation. How a team unit does what it does and what is emphasized drives future success. To build a high-functioning team, a coach must start by defining the culture and philosophy of what the program and team do.

What you say and do is powerful, and what you don't say and don't do is equally as powerful, as it sends a message to the team about what is valued.

For Team Philippines, the cultural expectations and philosophical underpinnings included the following:

- Always fight to the end no matter what ("Laban Pilipinas," which translates to "Fight Philippines").
- Be a great teammate (body language and facial expressions matter and will impact the team).
- Exercise emotional control.
- Be open-minded when we make zonal moves or release/ball changes.
- Commit to communal lane play movements (moving off of teammates and being proactive yields higher scores).
- Understanding that a specific communal move may not be the best for one individual but will yield the highest score collectively for all of the team (unselfishness).

- Avoid score-watching, as this will impact performance negatively.
- How we do what we do matters. We will be us, and we don't care what others think. Be proud of what we do.
- Greatness is in the details. From when the team eats breakfast, each moment leading up to when the team arrives at the bowl and the warm-up routine begins, greatness is in the details.

TEAM CULTURE BUILDING TIP

Always scaffold from culture. Start with your identity as a team and program. Are you continuing a long track record of success or are you striving to make history for the first time? This will shape the stories you offer to the team. Share stories of past success or from teams that have made history for the first time. Define the symbolic images, expressions, and mottos that are aligned with the culture you want to establish. Add quotes aligned with these messages and state them often. If you don't say it, or they don't see it, it will not be valued. Culture should never be taken for granted. It must be purposeful. Constantly remind in verbal and written word as well as through images and videos.

Preparation is key

As a coach, environmental preparations are the soil from which future success blossoms. Within this context, there is a simple belief that I have utilized for decades to shape training and preparations with the teams I coach. Knowledge plus practice equals competence, which leads to confidence. Self-efficacy is the belief that one can do something specific. Developing self-efficacy is a prerequisite to performing at one's best when it matters most: a championship representing one's nation.

Simply put, you must be able to do what you need to do when you need to do it and know that you can do it.

This philosophy drives preparation. You can't ask an athlete to do something specific in competition if he or she has never or is underprepared to execute that skill in training. Bowlers must be able to play statistically likely lane play zones as well as the unanticipated zones that emerge from the lane transition from the collective field. If an individual has trained to be prepared for the expected or unexpected, when needed, they know they can make that shot in that zone. This sets the stage for success.

The Asian Youth Championships featured both a medium and a long oil pattern and was contested on Brunswick Pro AnviLane. Each scoring block would be six games. The team event would be contested on both medium and long, three games each. Accordingly, structured training plans were developed for training proficiency that included six total zones with corresponding ball motion shapes. The determination of these zones was based on my experience as well as on the pattern structure and environmental factors such as lane panel hardness, lane panel age, topography, lane conditioner variables, competitor anticipated lane play, and likely transition rate.

With these guiding variables, the structured training plan ensured the bowlers had seen all possibilities and were prepared to shift zones when needed. Specifically, our training focused on ball speed variation, specific axis rotation zones, and launch angle changes with breakpoint adjustments. The bowlers were proficient in what could be needed on the lanes, but they also prepared to adjust quickly to zone changes if we needed to shift from Plan A to B to C on the fresh or in transition.

MAJOR TOURNAMENT TRAINING TIP

Define the most likely lane play demands of the tournament and corresponding skill requirements.

Commit equal time to each of these as well as implement training to ensure the bowlers are prepared for the unexpected. The skills needed should be identified. This includes specificity on ball speed, axis of rotation angles, launch angles, and breakpoint distances needed for each unique lane play zone.

Moreover, arsenal sequencing plans should be developed in advance so bowlers can simulate.

Official practice philosophy

For an official practice, it is vital to understand that only the first 15 to 20 minutes will yield the information to determine a fresh pattern manipulation and starting zone plan. Any practice time after that is irrelevant, as other teams are testing different zones at different times, and bowlers are throwing their balls all over the place.

Accordingly, only the fresh and very early transition is valid for potential interpretation. Too many bowlers develop a plan after the initial 15 minutes of official practice thinking they found something, only to be shocked when the real bowling begins. This requires a very structured official practice start.

Developing an official practice plan is essential to quickly identify likely Plan A and B options,

sometimes Plan C as well, for the fresh as well as to eliminate zones that don't have playability or margin of error built into them. With two patterns in play, it was essential to have an efficient plan to equally test each of the potential lane play zones we anticipated using. With this in mind, I developed a very structured training plan that prepared bowlers for both the statistically likely choices as well as the unexpected options. They were ready to implement efficient testing because we had trained in all possibilities, and we had a minute-by-minute "organized chaos" rapid-fire official practice plan.

Constant communication

I have always been a coach who stresses constant communication on every shot. This is essential in my communal lane play philosophy discussed below. Whether the event is singles, doubles, trios, or teams, bowlers should be working together with the coach on every shot to be proactive and have bowlers moving off of their teammates. Because one shot can lead to missing a cut or missing a medal, control the controllable. Moreover, with a communal lane play focus, everyone's shot matters with the entire team's movements. We can't afford a mistake that doesn't need to happen. This process starts in singles, where two of the bowlers are on the same pair, and doubles, which sets the stage for trios or teams later in the tournament.



Communication is one of the foundations of success in any team competition. (Image courtesy of the Thailand Tenpin Bowling Association)

Relative lane play

To help bowlers understand one another's ball motion, I utilize a concept I refer to as relativity. Through this process, bowlers develop a deep understanding of their lane play starting points relative to their teammates. We want to know who would be on the same line while being aware of who is left or right of these lines. This allows us to constantly check in as we are making proactive moves or responding to a bigger, more abrupt transitional change. Relativity helps the entire group stay in the pocket more often.

BOWLING TOGETHER - RELATIVELY

Bowlers need to be aware of their lane play relativity, compared to one another. This process should happen in training frequently. Have the bowlers constantly observing ball motion at a high level with anticipating proactive moves with one another. When a move is needed, all bowlers are moving. This requires a commitment to bowling as a team unit. This sets the stage for communal lane play.

In addition, with more rapid transitions, we employ a mathematical movement process for spares and splits.

This allows the team to make an anticipated move for the next strike shot, paired with a mathematical move for the spare or split, before the actual next strike shot. Due to this process, the next strike shot will have more trust, and we can still make an additional movement after the spare or split is attempted.

A practical example

At the Asian Youth Championships, in our third game of the team event, one of our bowlers converted two very challenging splits (the 6/8 and the 3/4/7/10) with a next strike shot move and a mathematical move for the split. Without the trust to commit to this process, he doesn't convert the two splits, and we don't win any medals. I discussed a mathematical spare shooting in a [previous Bowling This Month article](#). There is nothing more team-oriented than this process.

This allowed two other bowlers to remain in the pocket to shoot 250 and 260 in that game. Our 878 game, in game three, moved us from 11th after game two to 4th at the end of the first day on medium, 105 pins from a bronze, setting the stage for the historic move on day two.

The most important aspect of communal lane play is focusing on doing lane play work non-stop, as a group, from start to finish. When you authentically commit to just doing lane work, the process leads to competition flow.

Staying in the present

When a mistake is made, we simply move on immediately to the next adjustment as a unit. The bowler who just missed has no time to dwell on the mistake, as we are constantly remaining in the present, staying in the now. Remaining present aids each individual in maintaining emotional control. Communal and proactive movement also helps the team unit see how quickly the pattern is transitioning and the corresponding necessary lane play adjustments required to score higher in later events.

This process worked so well for our team that two different bowlers, during different times of the tournament, didn't recall who we were bowling with on the pair or were surprised when a qualifying block ended. They were immersed in the present.

In-competition meetings

After a challenging performance in doubles, we had a lengthy conversation on the topic of what makes a good teammate.

This not only included what you should do to be a great teammate, but also what actions shouldn't be taken. Specifically, we asked each bowler to reflect on the actions of previous teammates and what they had done in the past that caused a negative reaction. We ended with the question, "What do you need to focus on to be the best teammate for your team tomorrow?"

With each share, it was clear there was an elevated commitment to being an amazing teammate who controlled their body language and facial expressions, paired with a commitment to stay present and work the lane as a team unit. Without the individual commitment to the team and being a great teammate, we would not have been able to achieve an overall title and two gold medals. They committed, freeing up everyone to be their best, including me.

STAYING CONSISTENT

Remaining consistent with the expected team culture and the philosophical underpinnings is essential in your daily meetings. The focus points of in-competition meetings should always be based upon how well the team is living-up to these cultural expectations and corresponding actions. Be as specific in your reminders as possible. Remind them of the impact these actions have on team performance, good and bad.

Convergence

With this kind of commitment, the goal is for convergence to happen, resulting in a peak performance for the team and/or individuals. In particular, the lane play plan for practice manipulation and arsenal sequencing should be clear. Committing to this plan while adapting to each day is essential. At this point of the championship, the only challenge will be the transition rate as the field continuously adjusts their own strategies.

Final thoughts

Through a combination of shifting the cultural paradigm, remaining committed to communication, and a focus on lane play, the team was able to achieve a historic feat. Hopefully, bowlers and coaches alike can take some of these lessons and apply them to their own team play and coaching experiences.



About Joe Slowinski

Joe Slowinski, a USBC Gold Coach, is a freelance bowling coach who works with bowlers around the globe. He is currently on assignment with the Philippines. Slowinski is the former Director of Bowling at Lincoln Memorial University, where he served as Program Administrator and Head USBC Collegiate Men's and NCAA Women's Coach. The Portland, Maine native has served as the Administrative and Men's Head Coach at Webber International University and served for four years as a Master Teaching Professional at the Kegel Training Center. Slowinski is also the former Director of Coaching and Coach Certification for the National Sports Council of Malaysia. He has coached international teams at the World Championships, Pan American Games, South American Games, and European Championships, helping Belgium win a Gold medal at the 2022 EBF Championship of Champions and coaching Brazil to Gold medals at the 2015 Pam American Games and the 2014 South American Games. He was the 2018 NTCA DII/III Coach of the Year and the 2010 NCBCA Men's College Coach of the Year.