CHAPTER 1

Chapter 1: The Squeeze Starts Before Your First Step

Stand behind the ball return next Tuesday and watch the bowlers in your pair of lanes. Ignore their feet, their follow-through and the pins. Watch only their bowling hand in the two seconds before the first step.

You will see forearm tendons standing up like cables. You will see a thumb pressed so hard into its hole that the knuckle goes pale. You will see a man who has not moved yet, but whose shot is already finished.

That man might be you. For most of my league years, he was me.

The white-knuckle grip on the approach

Here is the picture I want you to hold. A 14 or 15 pound house ball is sitting in your hand at the top of the approach. The finger holes are a little loose, because house balls rarely fit anyone perfectly. So you do what feels sensible. You **clamp**. You squeeze the fingers and the thumb together, the way you'd grab a heavy grocery bag that is starting to slip.

The clamp feels like control. It feels like responsibility. Nobody wants to drop a ball behind them in front of the whole league.

The trouble is that a clamped hand turns your arm into a crane. A crane has to lift, push and steer the load with its own motor. Good coaching describes the arm swing as something else entirely: a **pendulum**. In that model, the weight of the ball supplies the force and your arm muscles do not. The bowler relaxes the arm at the peak of the push-away so the ball can fall on its own (Bowling This Month; National Bowling Academy).

A ball held in a fist can't fall on its own. It can only be carried.

I found this out at my own kitchen table. My wife watched me rub my right shoulder over breakfast one Wednesday morning and asked which frame did it. I couldn't answer, because I had not thrown one hard ball all night. It had been the squeeze, every shot, before every step.

How tension travels from the fingers to the shoulder

On a bowling forum, a 73-year-old bowler described a sore, painful shoulder. The advice he got was to drop one pound of ball weight. His main worry was that a lighter ball would cost him pin carry, which is the fear almost every senior bowler shares (BowlingBoards.com). In the same discussion, a bowler in his mid-fifties said he moved from a 15 pound ball to a 14 after three surgeries (a detached bicep tendon, a rotator cuff and carpal tunnel). He said the lighter ball was much easier on his arm (BowlingBoards.com).

Both men went looking for the cause in the ball. Weight does matter, and Chapter 10 gives it a full chapter. But first I want you to see a different problem, one you carry no matter what the ball weighs.

I call it **the Squeeze Chain**.

> The Squeeze Chain: whatever your fingers grip, your forearm must hold, your elbow must brace and your shoulder must lift. Loosen the first link and the others have less reason to hold on.

I'm describing what bowlers feel, not a medical diagram. Squeeze a full coffee mug hard for thirty seconds and notice where the effort goes. It doesn't stay in your fingers. Your wrist stiffens. Your forearm firms up. Soon your shoulder rises slightly toward your ear without asking permission. A bowling ball is roughly fifteen coffee mugs of weight at the end of your arm.

Once the arm is locked, the pendulum is gone. A locked arm can't swing freely, so the shoulder muscles have to move the ball back and bring it forward again. Coaching sources add a second link to the chain. When your feet move too fast, your body gets ahead of the ball in the backswing, and you are forced to **muscle or pull** the ball through the shot (Bowling This Month; National Bowling Academy). A tight grip and hurried feet feed each other. The ball falls behind, the hand grips harder to "catch up," and the shoulder pays the bill.

> Guides written for senior bowlers commonly suggest a **10 to 14 lb** ball and note that dropping just **1 to 2 lb** can sharply reduce joint strain (bowlingball.com; Murrey Bowling). A 15 pound ball in a clamped hand puts you above that range before you've taken a step.

Why the shot is often lost before the feet move

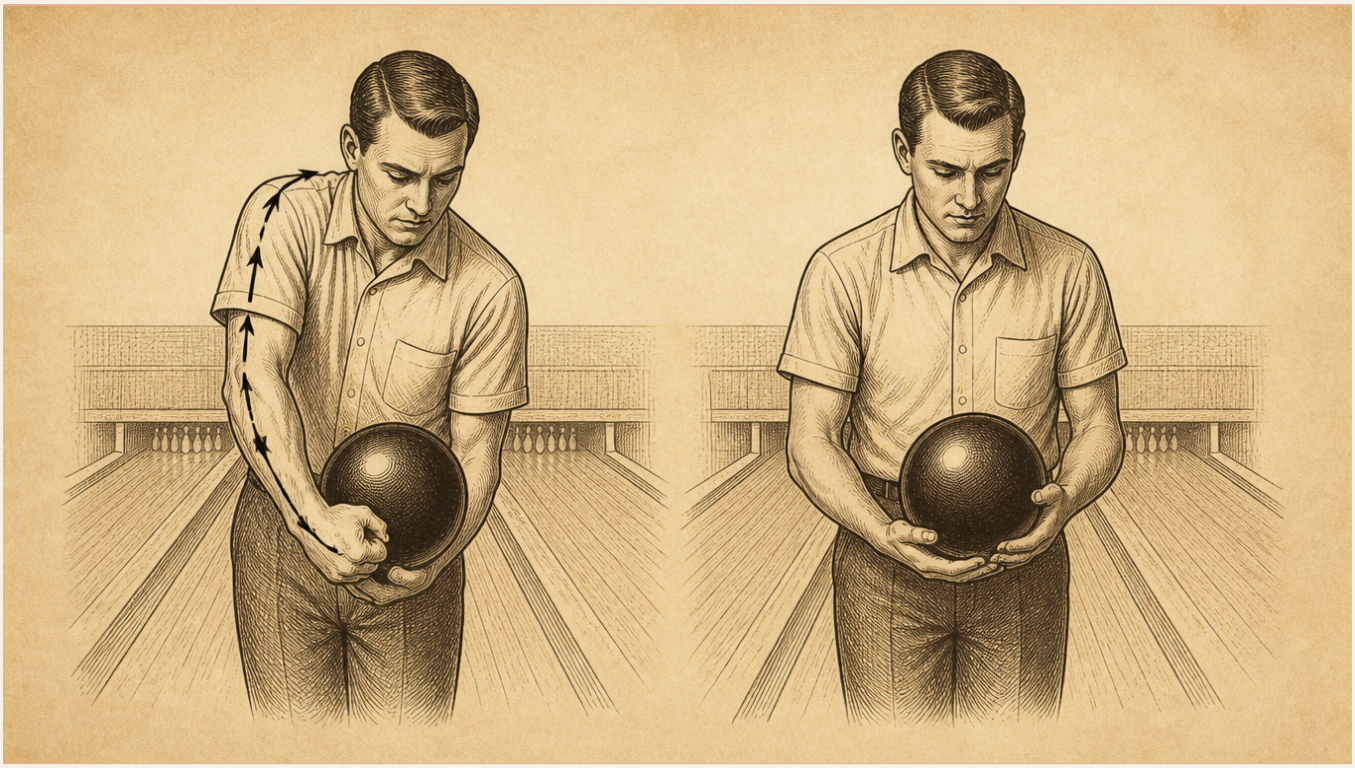
Most league bowlers diagnose a bad shot from the result backward. The ball went flat, the ten pin stood, so something must have gone wrong at the release. They fix the release. They twist harder, throw harder, or reach for a new ball.

I'd ask you to run the tape the other way. Where did the shot first go wrong?

For a bowler in the Squeeze Chain, it usually went wrong in the stance. Here is the sequence I see again and again:

1. **The hand clamps at address.** The ball is already under muscle control.
2. **The push-away becomes a shove.** Because the arm is braced, the ball goes forward with force instead of out and down.
3. **The ball can't drop.** Coaching sources say that dropping the ball into the swing, rather than pushing it out, gets it to the bottom of the pendulum faster and with less muscle (Bowling This Month; National Bowling Academy). A gripped ball gets pushed, so it arrives late.
4. **The feet win the race.** The body gets ahead of the ball, and the arm has to pull to catch up (Bowling This Month).
5. **The release is a rescue.** By the time the ball reaches the foul line, your hand is fighting to hold on, not letting go. A hand fighting for grip can't roll the ball well. The ball skids flat into the pocket and the ten pin stays standing.

Every one of those faults shows up at the foul line. Not one of them started there.



This is why "try harder" feels so natural and works so badly. Trying harder adds tension to the first link of the chain. Chapter 2 shows exactly how that trap holds a bowler at the same average for a decade.

A quick self-test for hidden grip pressure

Most bowlers who squeeze don't know they squeeze. The pressure has been there so long that it feels normal. So don't trust your opinion. Test it.

You can do this at home tonight with your own ball, or at the center before warm-ups. You won't swing or throw anything. You only hold the ball and pay attention.

Safety first, in this same scene. Stand on carpet or a mat, well clear of furniture, pets and your own feet. Keep your feet about shoulder-width apart. Support the ball's weight with your non-bowling hand the whole time, under the ball, not beside it. Do not swing the ball indoors. If you feel sharp pain, pain that shoots down the arm, or numbness in the fingers, set the ball down on the floor and stop. Chapter 3 covers the warning signs you should never bowl through. Leave the test to your doctor or physical therapist if you're recovering from shoulder, elbow or hand surgery.

- ✓ **Set up.** Put your fingers and thumb in the ball the way you do on league night. Hold it at your usual stance height, with your other hand underneath carrying most of the weight.
- ✓ **The wiggle test.** Without moving the ball, try to wiggle your thumb slightly inside its hole. If you can't, your thumb is clamping.
- ✓ **The forearm touch.** Lay your free fingertips on the top of your bowling forearm, just below the elbow, for a moment (keep the ball supported against your body). Hard, ridged muscle means your grip is working far harder than it needs to.
- ✓ **The shoulder check.** Look in a window or mirror. Is your bowling shoulder higher than the other one? A raised shoulder is the far end of the Squeeze Chain.
- ✓ **The release.** Let your support hand carry the ball completely and slowly relax your bowling fingers until they barely touch the holes. Notice how much of the ball's weight your palm and support hand can carry without any squeezing at all.
- ✓ **Write it down.** Note which of the four checks you failed. That list is your starting point for Chapter 9.

Most bowlers fail at least two checks on the first try. That isn't a verdict on your age, your strength or your ball. It's simply information you didn't have before.

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> Ask yourself this before you put the ball away: on the shots you remember as your best, were you holding on, or letting go?

Keep that question in your pocket for Tuesday. You don't need to fix anything yet. Just notice your hand at address, frame by frame, and count how often the squeeze is already there before your first step.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- **Check your hand before your feet.** On every shot next league night, look at your grip at address before you think about anything else.
- **Let the ball's weight do the work.** Coaching describes the swing as a pendulum powered by the ball, so treat your arm as a rope rather than a crane.
- **Trace a miss back to the stance.** When a ball goes flat, ask what your hand was doing before the push-away, not only at the release.
- **Run the self-test once a week.** Use the wiggle, forearm and shoulder checks, with your support hand under the ball, to find hidden pressure.
- **Stop at pain.** Sharp pain, shooting pain or numbness means the ball goes down and the session ends.

You now know where the squeeze starts and how far it travels. But that leaves a harder question. If a looser hand works better, why does every instinct you have, and half the advice at the bar, keep telling you to grip tighter and throw harder? And why can a bowler follow that advice faithfully for eleven straight years and never move off the same average?