

Chapter 1: Your Arm Was Never the Problem

You walk off the lane after the ninth frame, the ten pin still standing like it pays rent there, and you say the thing out loud. "I've lost my arm."

I have heard that sentence in every bowling centre I have ever worked in. I have heard it from men who could still carry two bags of mulch up a porch step. The arm is fine. What went missing is something quieter, and the good news is that quiet things can be put back.

The story you've been telling yourself since the average dropped

The story goes like this. The average was 172 in 1998. It was 165 by 2010. Now it reads 143 and the sheet does not lie. Somewhere in there the body got old, so the score got small, and that is simply what happens to a man who has been bowling league three nights a week since the Carter administration.

It is a tidy story. It is also almost entirely wrong, and I can prove it to you with your own shoulder.

Here is the tell. If your decline were pure weakness, the ball would feel heavy in your hand and light on the pins. Instead, most men in your position report the opposite: the ball feels manageable, but the *next morning* the shoulder aches, the thumb is fat, and the forearm has a dull pull in it. Weakness does not do that. Effort does that. You are working harder than you did at fifty, not less hard, and the score is going down anyway.

Soreness the morning after league is not evidence that your body failed. It is evidence that you supplied with muscle what your technique used to supply for free.

What actually changes in a bowler between fifty-five and seventy-five

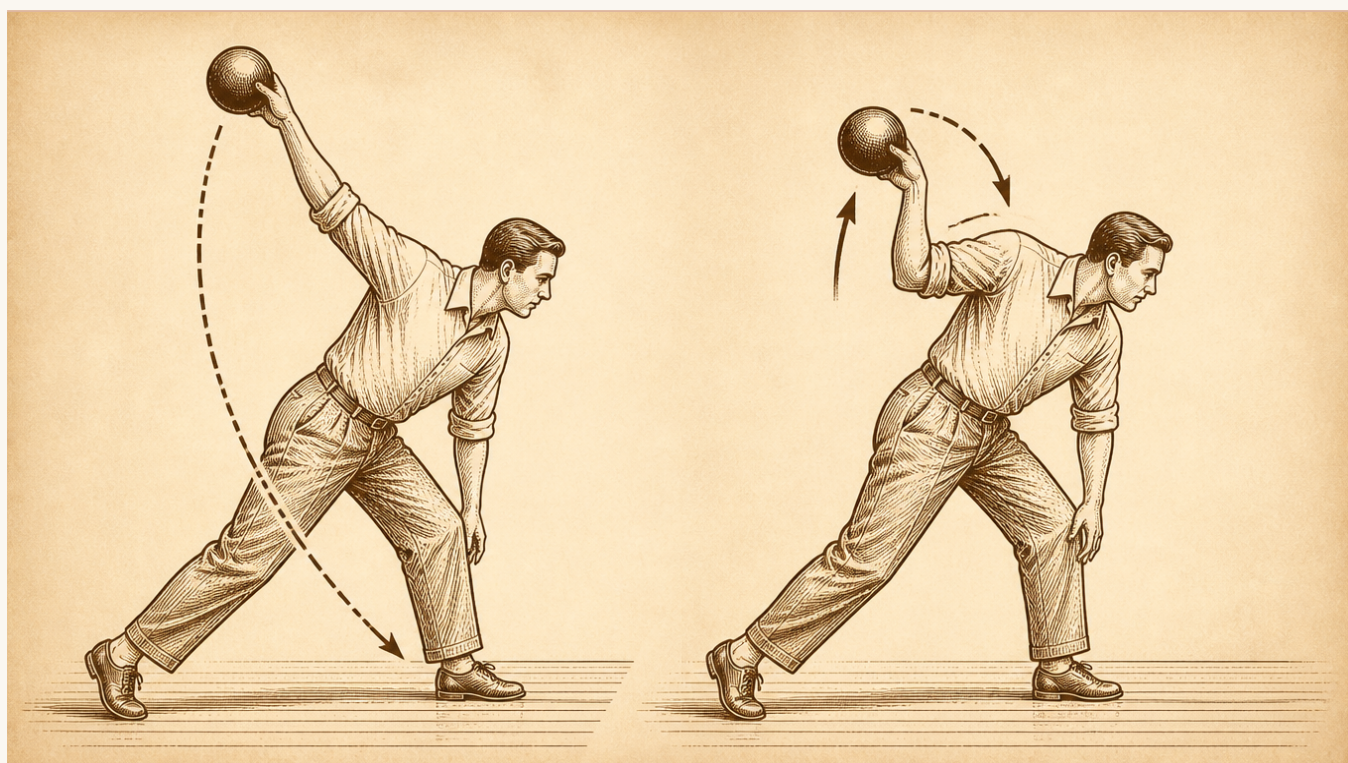
Some things genuinely change, and I will not insult you by pretending otherwise.

Foot speed slows. Hips and thoracic spine (the middle of your back, where rotation lives) stiffen. The shoulder loses a little range at the top of the backswing. Coaching guidance for older bowlers is explicit that ageing knees, hips and shoulders directly limit foot speed and armswing, which is why a dynamic warm-up before bowling matters far more at seventy than it did at forty⁴. Balance changes too, and that one has teeth: in a decade of US emergency department data, bowlers aged 65 and over sustained 72.4% of their injuries from falling, slipping or tripping, against 38.3% for bowlers under 65¹¹.

72.4% of bowling injuries in the over-65s came from falls, slips or trips, versus **38.3%** under 65 — across an estimated 141,844 US bowling-related ED visits, 2014–2023¹¹.

But notice what is on that list and what is not. Balance, mobility, tempo. Not raw arm strength. The armswing in a well-built shot is not powered by the arm in the first place, so losing a little arm power should cost you very little.

The other thing that changed is the game itself, and nobody sent you a letter about it. Reactive resin balls, synthetic lanes and heavily "walled-up" house oil patterns make today's game a fundamentally different environment from the one you learned on, one that asks for relearning rather than more effort¹⁴. You did not get worse at bowling. You kept bowling the 1985 game on a 2026 lane.



Why strength loss explains less than three pins of your decline

Let us do the arithmetic the honest way.

A bowling ball travelling down a lane is a falling weight converted into forward motion. The swing is a pendulum. Gravity supplies the bulk of the energy on the downswing whether you are thirty or seventy-five, because gravity has not aged. What your muscles contribute is mostly *timing* and *direction*, not horsepower.

Coaches who work specifically with ageing bowlers do not chase velocity. They target a modest 10 to 15 percent increase in ball speed, achieved largely by raising swing height or tempo rather than by pushing harder⁴. As Tyrel Rose put it in that column:

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"The goal is not to produce 20 mph ball speeds in senior bowlers, but rather to discuss ways to increase speed by 10 to 15 percent and to use equipment or other means to adapt to the game you have as you age."

Ten to fifteen percent. Not double. The gap between where you are and where you can be is a gap of adjustment, not of muscle.

And if strength truly determined score, the community would not keep producing counter-examples like this one.

Case: On BowlingBoards, a league bowler using 12-pound equipment because of physical limitations reports averaging 208. He went 14 lb for years, then 13 lb, then 12 lb for the last eight years, with no appreciable change in carry. In a separate thread, a bowler who dropped from 15 lb to 14 lb because of arm pain reports his average stayed identical to his three-year average before the change.

One pound of relief, zero pins of cost. That is not a man with a strong arm. That is a man with a free swing.

The three real culprits: grip pressure, timing, and fit

If not strength, what? In my experience it is almost always these three, usually all three at once, feeding each other.

Grip pressure. This is the master fault. When a ball feels slightly wrong in the hand, you squeeze. Squeezing locks the wrist, shortens the backswing, and turns a pendulum into a shove. A squeezed ball leaves your hand *slower* and flatter, not faster. On the Maverick forum, the long-running thread on grip pressure, tape and mechanics circles this exact loop: a slightly loose fit produces compensatory gripping, which kills the free swing. We take the whole of Chapter 2 on this, including a sixty-second test you can run tonight in your armchair.

Timing. As foot speed drops, the feet and the ball fall out of step. The ball arrives late, so you hurry it, which means you muscle it. Muscling the ball and a shortened backswing are the classic signs coaches look for². Nobody decides to muscle a ball. It is what late timing forces you to do.

Fit. The most fixable of the three and the most ignored. Forum members diagnose persistent thumb pain as a fit problem, specifically insufficient bevel on the thumb hole causing tendon inflammation, with rebevelling and tape as the first remedies rather than surgery or surrender¹². Fingers were the third most injured body region in the ED study at 12.6%, behind trunk at 21.9% and head/neck at 13.4%¹¹. Hands take a beating in this sport, and a bad span makes it worse every single frame.

A word of caution before you act on any of this: fit changes belong at a pro shop drill press, not your workbench. Do not open up a thumb hole with sandpaper at home. Removing material is permanent, uneven bevelling makes nerve irritation worse, and you can ruin a usable ball in ninety seconds.

Try this tonight

- ✓ Pull your last ten scoresheets and write down only two numbers per game: strikes, and spares missed.
- ✓ Circle every open frame that was a **single pin** left standing.
- ✓ Beside each, write "hooked past it", "left it short", or "pulled it".
- ✓ Do not change anything yet. Just look.

Most men doing this for the first time find that the strike count fell a little and the spare count fell a lot. That is not an arm problem. A single pin does not care how strong you are.

What this book will and will not ask of you

It will not ask you to get stronger. There is no gym programme here.

It will not ask you to rebuild your game from scratch, and it will not ask you to bowl like a twenty-two-year-old two-hander. It will ask you to lower your grip pressure, fix your timing, sort your fit, and learn a spare system you can trust. It will ask you for about eight minutes of warm-up before you touch a ball, and for one focus per practice session.

As one coaching column put it plainly: "We can't turn back the clock, but we can adapt to the reality we're in"⁴.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- ▶ Stop saying "I've lost my arm." Replace it with a testable question: *where exactly did the pins go?*
- ▶ Morning-after shoulder ache is a technique signal. Treat it as data, not as age.
- ▶ Expect realistic gains: coaches target a 10–15% speed increase for ageing bowlers, achieved through swing height and tempo, not force⁴.
- ▶ Audit ten scoresheets this week and separate strike loss from spare loss before changing anything.
- ▶ Book a pro-shop fit check rather than attempting thumb-hole work yourself.

You now have a suspect list. But suspects need evidence, and there is one test that identifies the master fault faster than any camera, any coach, or any pro shop. It costs nothing, takes sixty seconds, and you can run it tonight in your armchair without a ball in your hand. What does your own hand tell you when you finally measure how hard it is squeezing?