



USBC Tournament Rule Changes on Slow Oil-Absorbing High-Performance Balls Key Points

The United States Bowling Congress has adopted new national tournament rules regarding the use of slow oil-absorbing high-performance (urethane) bowling balls. Beginning Jan. 1, 2026, these balls will either be limited in national competition or required to meet a minimum 78D hardness standard. The change is designed to protect lane pattern integrity, improve competitive fairness, support player development and strengthen equipment governance.

Key Updates:

- **New Hardness Specification Standard Established:**
 - Effective Dec. 31, 2025, slow oil-absorbing high-performance bowling balls with oil absorption times over 90 minutes must be at least 78D hardness to be USBC approved for sale in the U.S.
 - Any ball with an oil absorption time greater than 90 minutes and a high-performance core is subject to the new specification standard.
 - Entry-level reactive balls and balls with non-high-performance cores are not subject to the specification.
- **Tournament Restrictions Begin Jan. 1, 2026:**
 - **Not allowed (any hardness):** U.S. Open, USBC Masters, PWBA Tour (including U.S. Women's Open, USBC Queens and all PWBA Regionals), U22 Masters and Queens, USBC Intercollegiate Nationals, USA Bowling Nationals.
 - **Allowed if 78D hardness:** USBC Open Championships, USBC Women's Championships, Bowlers Journal Championships, USBC Senior Masters, USBC Super Senior Classic, USBC Senior Queens, Youth Open Championships.
 - **Restricted use (qualifying only):** Junior Gold Championships (78D balls may be used in qualifying; none permitted from match play through finals).
 - **No change:** Team USA Trials, USBC Collegiate sectionals and regular season USBC Collegiate events, Junior Gold qualifiers, USA Bowling Regionals, USBC Senior Championships, USBC Youth Scratch Championships, The Forty Frame Game, Survivor Tournament.
- **Hardness Spot Checks at National Tournaments:**
 - USBC will add on-site hardness spot check testing for research, enforcement and to help protect competitive integrity.
- **Community Input Incorporated:**
 - Rule changes follow a manufacturer comment period and public survey regarding equipment standards.

Frequently Asked Questions

1. **What is a "slow oil-absorbing high-performance ball"?**

These are balls with high-performance cores that take more than **90 minutes** to absorb oil under USBC testing. Their design can cause lane patterns to break down pattern intent and influence scoring environments.
2. **What is considered "nonhigh performance" under the rules?**

The Equipment Specifications Manual definition of a non-high-performance ball has been updated with six factors USBC considers when classifying whether a ball is high performance



or not. Non-high-performance bowling balls are balls with weak cores and coverstocks that are typically used for spare shooting. USBC characterizes these balls by generally exhibiting the following qualities:

- Hardness over 78D
- Low RG greater than 2.65
- Total Differential less than 0.025
- Has a low oil-absorbing coverstock
- On-lane dry COF values of 0.125 or less
- A three-piece design consisting of an inner core, outer core and coverstock

There is a new testing SOP in place to ensure balls submitted as non-high performance exhibit the appropriate characteristics on the lane.

Note: Currently approved rubber and polyester or “plastic” balls are considered non-high-performance balls regardless of their other properties.

3. Where can I see the list of ineligible balls?

USBC will maintain and update the official list on **BOWL.com** under the Equipment Specifications section, and a link also can be found on the information page for each national tournament impacted.

4. Do these rules apply to plastic (polyester) balls?

No. Plastic balls are not subject to these new restrictions, even if they have stronger cores (such as the Radical Spy). You may continue to use plastic equipment like White Dots or T-Zones for spares at national events without restriction.

5. What about urethane or even rubber balls from the 1980s or earlier?

All slow oil-absorbing high-performance balls manufactured prior to Aug. 1, 2022, are not permitted in national tournaments beginning Jan. 1, 2026, regardless of their design. This includes older urethane balls. Polyester and rubber balls are considered non-high performance and may continue to be used.

6. What about “mix” balls or other non-traditional coverstocks like Microcell Polymer (MCP) or NU from Brunswick?

Balls like the Storm Mix or Hammer Axe that are not fully urethane but also not standard reactive are reviewed under the same criteria. MCP (Motiv) and NU (Brunswick) are categorized based on performance characteristics, not marketing labels. If these products appear on the official ineligible list, they cannot be used in national tournaments beginning in 2026. If they are not listed, they remain eligible.

7. Why is USBC making this change?

Research and feedback highlighted four main issues:

- Breaking down original intent of the lane pattern design.
- Competitive imbalance between slow-absorbing and reactive balls when used together in competition.
- Reduced skill development, especially for younger bowlers.
- Integrity challenges due to hardness changes and potential tampering.

8. Given the challenges outlined, how does USBC believe these equipment and tournament rule changes will help over time?

- **Lane Patterns:** Ongoing discussions with lane pattern development teams indicate that removing slow oil-absorbing high-performance balls will help maintain the pattern design. While lane pattern design will always be challenging, these changes allow



USBC to focus on two key balancing factors, right/left and one-hand/two-hand equity, rather than a third layer created by this equipment category.

- **Athlete Development:** Bowlers will continue to build versatility by adjusting ball speed, hand position and equipment choices (surface and layouts), rather than relying on a single type of ball. This brings skill development and coaching focus back to traditional fundamentals.
- **Integrity Challenges:** Adding hardness spot checks reduces the incentive or possibility for tampering. It also restores confidence in equipment compliance, addressing a rise in complaints and petitions from competitors about fairness.

9. Does this rule affect my local leagues or local tournaments?

No. These changes apply only to specific USBC national tournaments beginning in 2026. Local leagues and tournaments are not impacted unless the tournament director or league decides to adopt them. In the case of leagues, any change to restrict balls that are still on the USBC Approved Ball List would need to be approved by a league vote.

10. Why is USBC applying different equipment rules to different national tournaments?

USBC operates a wide range of national events that serve different levels of competition. At the professional level, the category of slow oil-absorbing high-performance balls is being eliminated effective Jan. 1, 2026, to address competitive balance and lane pattern integrity.

For other events, a staggered approach was adopted to account for the type of competition, the level of the athletes and how each tournament relates to the key challenges identified. This ensures fairness and integrity while still supporting player development in youth and collegiate competition.

11. Why are there no changes for some events?

USBC is not making changes to Team USA Trials because international competitions may not adopt the same rules, and we want Team USA athletes to compete on equal terms with other national teams. If international standards change in the future, USBC will revisit the rules for Team USA Trials.

For other events, slow oil-absorbing high-performance balls remain on the USBC-approved list to ensure their continued use in local leagues and tournaments. The remaining unaffected events are either not governed directly by USBC or are amateur competitions where these restrictions are not necessary.

12. What about youth and collegiate events?

Slow oil-absorbing high-performance balls will remain eligible in Junior Gold qualifying, but not in match play or finals, when champions are decided. These balls will also remain eligible for use in Collegiate sectionals, but not ISC/ITC nationals.

This balances athlete development with fairness at the highest levels of youth and collegiate competition.

13. How will Junior Gold work if my athlete makes match play and two of the five balls allowed in qualifying are no longer legal to use?

The rules for the Junior Gold Championships will be released in early January of 2026. If a competitor advances to match play, they will be allowed to resubmit their ball card. While details are still being finalized, you can be assured that players will have the opportunity to adjust their selections so that they have up to five eligible balls available before match play begins.

Additional details will be provided once the event rules are published.



14. How will the hardness testing be used?

Hardness spot checks at national tournaments will primarily support research and monitoring. They also provide a tool for identifying suspected tampering and protecting competitive integrity.

15. USBC previously said field testing for hardness was not possible. What's changed?

Field testing for bowling ball hardness remains challenging. Through extensive field research at key events, USBC evaluated variables such as ball storage conditions, weather and temperature factors, and measurements taken before and after use.

USBC's position has not fundamentally changed, but by requiring slow oil-absorbing high-performance balls to be manufactured at a minimum of 78D, we expect balls to measure above the 73D threshold in the field after use.

Given past challenges with tampering and enforcement, USBC will now reintroduce field testing in the form of hardness spot checks at national events. These checks are intended to strengthen competitive integrity and provide a framework to address any challenges or petitions that may arise in future competitions.

16. When do the changes take effect?

- New ball approvals: Effective Dec. 31, 2025, slow oil-absorbing high-performance bowling balls with oil absorption times over 90 minutes must be at least 78D hardness to be USBC approved for sale in the U.S.
- National tournaments: Tournament restrictions will take effect beginning Jan. 1, 2026.

17. Should I be able to get a refund for these bowling balls?

No, USBC has constructed these changes so that previously approved bowling balls remain on the approved ball list. All USBC approved balls can still be used in USBC leagues and tournaments unless specific event rules state otherwise.

USBC does not believe there is justification for members to consider requesting returns or refunds of any bowling ball based on these changes.

18. Will USBC make any other changes related to this?

USBC will continue to monitor the impact of these rules on national tournaments, review ongoing research data and gather customer feedback. If additional changes are needed, USBC will communicate updates to all key stakeholders.

For more information:

- Equipment questions: Contact the USBC Specifications Department at specs@bowl.com
- Media/announcement questions: Contact pr@bowl.com
- Tournament rules questions: Contact tournaments@bowl.com
- Ball list and rule details: A full list of ineligible bowling balls and complete details on these rule changes are available [here](#).