



The Bradman of the lanes? You heard that right – kingpin Jason Belmonte dominates his game the way no other Australian sportsperson does at the moment. And it all started in a bowling alley in Orange...

By MATT CLEARY

**O**range is a fine and tidy town. Tree-lined and trim, its four distinct seasons produce cold climate wines and hot summer sport. It's a cool joint, too – you can eat a duck pancake in a gastro-pub. You can drink local seltz with a variety of cheeses. And your children may ride their bikes, and play cricket in the street, and run about bare-feet in the wheat. It's a beauty, Orange.

Banjo Patterson was born in Orange. So were VS Supercars. A woman known as "Susan" – and "The Crown Princess of Albania" – taught art at the local ladies college. Other things from Orange include gold and copper, stone fruits such as the apricot and the plum, and the Red Wiggle.

Sportos? Heap of 'em. Golfer Lucas Parsons. Wallaby David Lyons. Good few leagues. Jimmy Maloney, his old man Brian captain-coached Orange CYMS. Raiders fullback Jack Wighton, born in Orange. Wine-maker and former Bulldogs man Peter Mortimer has produced chardonnay, shiraz and Daniel Mortimer.

To your questions: do they grow oranges in Orange? They do not – oranges grow only in tropical regions. Why'd they call it Orange, then? Because of William of Orange, King of the Netherlands. Why is there nothing that rhymes with orange, as there is with apple (grapple) and banana (Havran) and Jessica (Alha)? Answer: I cannot help you.

Rather, the question that interests us here is this: how could a burgh of 40,000 souls that sits in the vastness of the NSW Central West a couple hundred clicks from Blue Mountains base camp produce the greatest ten-pin bowler the world has ever seen? How did that happen?

Did I just say, "The greatest ten-pin bowler the world has ever seen"?

Yes, friend, I did. Orange – dear, sweet Orange – has produced, along with Banjo Patterson, the Red Wiggle and so many apricots – the greatest ten-pin bowler the world has ever seen. Orange did this. Made a Great One. Made a four-time world champion. A winner of nine major championships. Who's earned millions. Who's gone out and dinkum revolutionised the way people play the sport. Jason Belmonte, of Orange.

And, if you can believe it, there's people who don't like it. Who are these people? Americans, mainly. Purists, traditionalists, conservative types who can't cop the two-handed way the Great One slings the heavy round rock. Belmonte, you see, doesn't put his thumb in the thumb-hole! ▶

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I know! Sacrilege, right? Father he balances the ball using his spare hand as ballast. Then he shuffles in and gets into his work, whipping it through like Murali slinging in the doosra, like Will Genia at the scrum-base shooting out the Gilbert. And then the work he gets on it, well, it's Warney-esque, baby, Warney-esque.

While Belmonte breaks no rules with his high-octane, two-handed style, if you've been raised on tales of Grampa Billy-Bob hurling fat vulcanised-rubber balls down at big wooden pins, then it just doesn't look right. And when the 20-something Australian began winning on the Professional Bowlers Association (PBA) Tour, there was resistance. It's just a fad, they said. You can't keep playing like that, they declared. Enjoy your 15 minutes, kid, because there's no way you can bowl like that for long much less a career.

Belmonte took all that stuff on board. And then decided these people didn't know what they were talking about. And as he'd done throughout his career – indeed his entire life – he just kept on doing it his way. Where once he'd have taken criticism personally and on board, today negative opinions just drive the man ever upward.

Just how good is he? Friend, they're talking Gretzky. They're talking Jordan. They're talking Tiger and Roger and Rafa on clay. And Bradman. They're talking Bradman.



**S**ure, but it's only bloody ten-pin bowling, right? Who gives a stuff? Bowling is disco-rama on a Friday night, it's teenagers smoking White Blazes in flamelette shirts and black desert boots. Belmonte's not really sport, it's what Yanks do instead of punting in pubs, right?

Belmonte's been hearing this stuff for years. It doesn't annoy him anymore, not really. But he would set you straight if you

asked. He feels a responsibility to the sport, to talk it up and get it out there. It's given him everything. He'll play it forever. He bloody loves it.

We met the man in the beer garden at the Parkview Hotel. He sports a cool chunky watch and cool sunglasses, and cool stubble. We get into a tasty green curry and a local pale ale, and talk of Orange and bowling and where it all began.

On the way out we bump into the Mayor. "Keep on stickin' it to 'em," says Mr Mayor in

a way Clover Moore might not. "Every time I open the bloody paper you're in it!"

It's true enough. With Belmonte's success has come something of a profile. He's often stopped in US airports and asked for a photograph, a quick chat. Certainly they're very proud of him in Orange. "And it's a good thing," he says. "It's understanding you have a responsibility. In the US, my spotlight's nothing like LeBron James's or Tiger Woods's. But I'm still representing myself, my sport. And it's always nice – you're the guy that bowls funny, I saw you on TV."

Soon enough we're down the road at the Orange Tenpin Bowl, and we've got our own private GOAT show. This is the bowlo where it all began. We have a yarn with Chucky, the hole-drilling guy who talks of polyurethane and centrifugal force in a way he perhaps believes I understand. Then Belmonte dons his golden slippers. And shows us what he does.

The Belmo Approach is to mosey up to the line rather than attack it. It's casual. There are guys that tear in, get all "big", blustery, animated. Belmonte almost shuffles in. Then he builds up like a fast bowler off a short run, his arms become a jumble before he takes the ball back like a halfback who wants to sling a torpedo lung.

Then the arm comes through and there's a wrist-flick at the end, and there's the pregnant pause at release... And so the ball shoots away down the

lane, hugging the right gutter, fizzing, squabbling across the lane's top-dressed oil, hooking ever more as its parabola reaches denouement. And then, near the pins, it grips and rips, this big black beauty, and verily begins to sing. By the end Belmonte has channelled Mitchell Starc's late-swinging heater. And the pins clatter. It's a cacophony of pins. A slaughter of pins. And there are no more.

He looks at you and smiles. "And that's how I bowl!" And it's really quite cool and sort of weird to think you've just witnessed someone do something better than anyone ever has. In Orange.

To ask a top sportsman why they're good is to invite a shrug of the shoulders. Belmonte, though, articulate and clear-eyed, a thinker and non-drinker, has a crack. "I've bowled more games on the lanes than perhaps anyone ever," he says, only half-joking. "I've spent my entire life bowling. If I was awake, I was bowling."

Belmonte's parents started up Orange Tenpin a year before Jason was born. There was a hole in the market – there wasn't one. By the time the boy was 18 months old, he was rolling ten-pounders down the lanes. Naturally it took two hands for the little tyke. And that's how he developed his style. He just kept on doing it. Every day.

And he became great. He got the curve thing going. It was a thing no-one else could do. And he loved to win. Aged four he won,

he remembers it, sitting on the shoulders of his parents, there's a picture of it. The winning feeling became so infectious it was a virus.

He did have a bit of luck – no-one tried to change him. His mum and dad had never bowled in their lives before they opened the bowlo. They were sweet, though – long as he was occupied while they ran the centre. There was no AIS for bowlers, no talent ID program. They didn't take him down to Canberra to feed him the finest meats. He wouldn't have listened anyway.

Instead he just bowled and bowled and bowled again. You know that theory about the 10,000 hours to achieve excellence? Belmonte reached that before he was 10.

Still the advice streamed in, well-meaning you can't do it that way. You shouldn't do it that way. If you want to be any good you've got to do it the right way, like everyone else. He heard all that stuff. He just didn't listen. "I have a really stubborn personality," says Belmonte. "And it's been evident my entire life since I picked up that ten-pound ball. I've never really had a coach and no-one's really tried to coach me."

He also had a competitive streak inherent in so many top sports. Craig Parry's father-in-law admits fear when he plays him during a social game of ping-pong. Ricky Stuart doesn't play friendly games of ping-pong. It's always ping-pong with these people. Or backyard footy. ▶



