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# A.J. Johnson wins PBA Regional at Ten Pin Alley, showing the talent that almost certainly will win him many PBA Tour titles

JEFF RICHGELS | Posted: Saturday, August 29, 2020 11:00 pm



As soon as match play started at Saturday's PBA Ten Pin Alley Midwest Open and I saw the look A.J. Johnson had and the way he was rolling the ball, I predicted he would win the Regional.

A few hours later, my prediction came true as Johnson captured the top seed and then beat non-member Timothy Gruendler of St. Louis 232-212 in the title match.

Of course, considering Johnson's talent, that wasn't exactly going out on a limb.

At the same time, I am only one among many who have been predicting Johnson would win on the PBA Tour for a long time, and he's reached the stage where he's at or near the top in the debate for best active PBA Tour player without a title.

The powerful right-hander has five seconds on the PBA Tour, plus a second in the PBA China Tiger Cup invitational non-title event.

Johnson also was part of the PBA League champion Silver Lake Atom Splitters in 2018 and won the Korea PBA Samho Cup over Chris Barnes in 2019 that was worth more prize money than all but a few PBA Tour events. He also has a slew of international gold medals for Team USA.

I think I share a common sentiment that once Johnson wins a PBA Tour title, he will win many more.

On Saturday at Ten Pin Alley, Johnson was fifth after qualifying with 1,343 (183-217-258-206-235-244) as 12 players out of the 53-player field advanced.

Chris Ponders, whose family owns the 32-lane center in Fitchburg, led qualifying with 1,402 (224-225-226-215-246-266) using a PURPLE HAMMER to tame the Don Carter 39 lane pattern.

Ponders ran into trouble during match play, with not quite the same ball reaction and tore off the side of his thumb.

He later made this post on Facebook:

*"Looking back to yesterday it was a great experience. I still have a lot to learn. Match play is a different type of bowling. I need to control the emotions and calm myself down and toss the ball like I did in qualifying. I was way too fast and trying to make the ball hook instead of slowing down and letting it roll off my hand. I met some great people and look forward to having them back next year. Best part of the day was leading qualifying and the tying liz (with a key Brooklyn for me and a tough break on a solid 8 for her in the 10th) and beating AJ on a pair that sucked bad. Hopefully my thumb heals in a few weeks for the MAST at ten pin."*

Johnson opened match play by blasting 264, 267 and 276 to take the lead, faltered with 177 and 169, but shot 233 to win his position round game and secure the top seed.

Gruendler got the second seed, Matthew Staninger the third seed, and Jay Heinzelman of Evansville the final spot in the stepladder when 2011 USBC Masters champion Tom Hess made a mistake at the end of match play he described this way on Facebook:

*"I'm am so disappointed in myself right now....paying too much attention to other scores...thought I was in the stepladder and threw my spare ball and got 7 on the fill. I was wrong...lost my match by 2 and fell from 4th to sixth. Going to be a long night thinking about that all night...#everyshotmatters #feellikeadumbass"*

In the stepladder, Heinzelman routed Staninger 211-158, and Gruendler downed Heinzelman 222-184 to set up the title match.

First was \$2,000 and second \$1,200.

Corey Schmidt of Madison finished 12<sup>th</sup>.