



Instructor's Corner

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My skip makes funny faces sometimes after my shots. How can I keep my skip happy?

—F. Rusty Raitte

Nobody goes out on the ice with the intention of missing their shots. Misses are an integral part of the game, and happen more frequently at the club level than at the competitive level. Indeed, the outcome of most ends will be dictated by the number of misses and half-shots by each team. To a crude first approximation, the team with hammer should expect to score one; with each miss by the non-hammer team, add one to that total; with each miss by the hammer team subtract one from that expectation; skip past zero in this calculation in either direction. So if the hammer team has 3 misses and the non-hammer team has 4 misses, a deuce is a likely result for the hammer team. Reverse that scenario and a likely result is a steal of one. Of course, specific rock placement can significantly alter this crude calculation, but more often than not the net miss total will predict the outcome of the end. When the game of curling is viewed in this light, you can see that reducing a team's misses by only one or two per game could make a difference in score by one or two shots! Since the most common score differential on any league night is one shot (62% of men's leagues games were decided by one point in the 2014 season), a reduction of team misses by only 1-2 per game can result in a significant impact on wins and losses.

7 ways to keep your skip happy

There are some relatively simple things you can strive to do that will improve your consistency. These tips won't magically make you a world-class curler, but they might reduce your misses by 1-2 shots per game. That will make your skip *very happy* 😊!

1. Throw consistent takeout weight

If you really want to drive your skip crazy, throw a different takeout weight with every shot. (The "box of chocolates" approach: every one is different.) That way, it is impossible to ice you properly, and you will rarely get the proper roll, or you shooter will crash on a guard or roll out of the rings too often. Throwing a consistent takeout weight means the broom can be placed in the proper place for the called shot. (When the broom is in the wrong spot, 4 players look bad.) So what is the proper weight? Well, that depends...but the best advice is to throw whatever weight you are comfortable throwing accurately, let your skip know what that weight is, and throw it every time. If you want to make a lot of takeouts and great hit and rolls, I suggest that you master 10 second takeouts. (That is, a takeout weight that takes 10 seconds to travel hog-to-hog.) Most skips will call this weight "bumper", "board", or "control." This weight is firm enough to remove rocks from play even if they are struck thin, but soft enough that there is some curl that can be controlled by sweeping. You can practice mastering takeout weights with a partner who can time your stones hog-to-hog. If you can master 2 or 3 takeout weights on command, you will make your skip ecstatic. Consider adding 9 ("normal", "firm") and/or 11 ("hack") second takeouts to your repertoire. But even throwing one weight consistently will enable your team to make more shots.

2. Put proper rotation on your stones

Some players seem to get more “picks” than others every game. Many “picks” are not due to debris on the ice, but rather to flat spots that are created when the pebble is worn down by sweeping, and by players sliding and walking on the ice. Flat spots are more likely to occur between the 4-foot lines in the slide paths and where players concentrate their sweeping. Rocks that have little rotation are more likely to “catch” on the flat spots on the ice. Sharpened or “textured” rocks are prone to lose rotation and “pick” even on fresh pebble if not given sufficient rotation. Do yourself and your team a favor and put 2 ½ - 3 rotations on your stone (measured from release to stop at tee-line) on every shot. You will get consistent curl (no “hangers” or “cutters”), and you will experience fewer “picks.”

3. Be aware of the miss tolerance of each shot

You may have heard some chatter around the table about “pro misses.” I’m not a really big fan of thinking about missing—you should really be focusing on making the called shot—but I do think it is important to be aware of shot tolerance. For every shot, there are ways of not making the shot perfect that are better than others. Here are a few examples:

- Without hammer, especially if you are behind, light is better than heavy when throwing guards. It’s hard to steal if you throw guards into the house. Focus on making the shot, but make sure you use your sweepers.
- With hammer, being short up the middle is an end-killer. The most common scenario is coming around a corner guard inside-out, which is really the only way you can do this with curly rocks. When you come up short in the middle, you provide a center guard for your opponents that gives them an out and maybe even a steal, when you otherwise had a good end going.
- When ahead in the score, coming up short (leaving guards instead of stones in the rings) is a no-no. Guards only serve to help the other team score or score multiples. Better to be behind tee-line or through the rings than to throw free guards for the team that is behind.
- When throwing a freeze, you have to stay in front of the target rock. If you are a little heavy on a corner freeze around a guard and bounce, you create a pocket for the opponents to use to stuff another stone behind cover. If you are a little short, your rock can still be used and is still a threat to the other team. (Of course, 10 feet short is just guarding their stone. Freezes have less tolerance than many shots.)
- When chipping out a stone that is half-buried, you can’t be wide. A tad narrow will chase the guard, but a wide one gets you bupkis. No one tries to miss, but if you slide a little narrow, resist the temptation to correct your shot by throwing inside-out. You can still get a good result with strong sweeping or by peeling the guard if you are a little tight on the broom. If you slide a little outside and heavy, you better make some sort of correction because a whiff won’t help.

Get in the habit of thinking about shot tolerance on all your shots. Good skips will often show you two shots: the primary shot and the acceptable alternate shot. The alternate shot tells you the shot tolerance: heavy or light, wide or narrow. You can also ask your teammates about shot tolerance. Focus on *making* the shot, but be aware of the shot tolerance.

4. Get out to the broom

This should go without saying—no one tries to miss the broom—but when throwing shots wide on the sheet, such as draws to the center or wide come-arounds with curly rocks, it is imperative that you slide out to the broom. Especially for newer curlers, hitting the broom outside the four-foot can be a challenge. With rocks that curl, there is no saving narrow, even with good sweeping. You can practice getting out to the broom by throwing at cups at the near hog line. Placing a cup near the 4-foot line at the near hog is the equivalent of sliding out to the edge of the sheet at the far end. With

4 feet of curl, even routine shots like center guards have to be thrown out to the eight-foot at the other end.

5. Improve your sweeping technique

A good pair of strong sweepers can carry a stone 10 feet or more additional distance than it would travel otherwise. That kind of help gives the shooter quite a wide margin of error for a draw to the 4-foot! A weak pair of sweepers...not so much. Being able to carry a stone a few extra feet for that extra point, or holding that tight takeout to get past the guard could be the shot that wins a game. Good sweepers get their weight over the head of the brush by gripping it low about a foot off the ice with the low hand. If your hand is higher than that, you can't apply any pressure to the brush head! Work on applying both pressure and brushing speed. Using the newer, high-tech broom heads will also definitely help! Keep in mind that if you are playing front end, you throw only two but you sweep six stones. Where you do think you have the most impact on the game? Consult with an instructor to get the most out of your brushing technique...the better you can brush, the more shots your team will make.

6. Sweep early for distance, sweep late for finish

It's not enough to sweep well, you also need to know *when* to sweep. Learning how to judge weight is a whole 'nother article, but here is some sweeping food for thought: you get no extra style points for sweeping once and only once. Good sweepers are up and down, adjusting and re-evaluating the distance of the stone all the way down the ice. And good sweepers know a couple of additional things about sweeping: it's easier to make up distance early, soon after release, than late, when the stone is about to die; if you want to bury a stone behind a guard, or you need to get your guard to move across the sheet to guard a rock, sweep late to get "finish". When stones start to slow, usually just before the far hog line, they start to take on much more pronounced curl and start to move sideways. Sweeping stones "after the break" will extend their travel across the sheet. Sweeping for finish is the secret to getting big "curl." If a stone looks a little light, sweep it a little early to get some extra distance without affecting the finish very much.

7. When in doubt, sweep!

Here is a winning bar bet at the curling club: pick a curling sheet to watch during league night, and convince a friend to give you a dollar every time a rock is underswept; you promise to give your friend a dollar every time a rock is overswept. I'll bet you will have one less friend by the end of the night. I don't fully understand the sports psychology of this, but far more rocks are underswept than overswept in club curling. So what does this tell us about sweeping? It tells us that sweepers should be sweeping more on most shots! A properly thrown curling shot should be swept 50-80% of its distance. Any less than that and you don't have much opportunity to control the curl and distance of the stone precisely. Any more than that and you will nearly certainly kill the desired curl to make the shot. Skips know that a stone can be 6 feet or more light and still make the shot. There is no fixing heavy, so you will not find many skips that throw their last rocks heavy! If you don't know what to do, *sweep*. You can always stop if you think you have enough distance. On the other hand, if you didn't sweep when you should have been, you can't go back and make it up. If you don't oversweep a rock now and then, you are not sweeping enough.

Conclusion

So there you have it. A 7-step program for keeping your skip sane. And you just might find your team enjoys more success, too. Good luck on the ice.

Good curling! Have a question for Instructor's Corner?

Have a suggestion for an Instructor's Corner article?

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