



Instructor's Corner

Roger Rowlett & Mary Jane Walsh

Why is my team so slow? How long should it take to play a game?

—Mark N. Thyme

Slow play is a common problem at curling clubs everywhere. The pros of course play with a game clock—in the past, 73 minutes per team to complete 10 ends, and today 38 minutes of thinking time for 10 ends, or 30 minutes of thinking time for 8 ends. You go over your allotted time, you forfeit the game. Any way you slice it, an 8-end game should take about 2 hours to complete using these timing rules as a guide. (The pros get some additional time between each end; this is usually not the case for club leagues.)

Some clubs use total time game clocks to force the conclusion of play after a set time—for example, ringing a bell after 1 hour 50 minutes, signaling you must finish the end you are in and no more—but such rules are not entirely in the spirit of the game. If one or both teams play slowly, the game may not complete the normal number of ends: this can dramatically affect strategy, such as trying to retain the hammer in even ends. In the worst possible case, an unethical team can stall with the lead to shorten the game by an end or two.

So why do so many club games stretch well beyond the 2 hours required for complete 8 ends of play? There is not necessarily one reason for slow play, but many. What are they and how can they be avoided?

Not being on time

It goes without saying that you can't finish on time if you don't start on time. If the ice is ready, there is no reason not to go on the ice early, shake hands with your opponents, and take your practice slides before the official game start time. If hammer and stone colors are not pre-selected, this can be accomplished ahead of time as well, maybe even in the warm room. The U.S. Curling Association rules put a premium on getting started on time: you are penalized one full end for being *one minute* late, two ends for being more than 15 minutes late, and forfeited if more than 30 minutes late (Rule 11.i.i). Club rules are often more lax, but that should not be an excuse to hold up a game for everyone else. Get to the club on time.

Slow decision making

Slow decision making is a major contributor to slow play. Decision making has to be pretty snappy to keep a game moving. Let's do some math. To throw eight ends worth of stones will require 128×24 seconds: that's 128 stones that might require as much as 24 seconds each to be released and come to rest. That's 51 minutes right there. Add 8 more minutes total to clear the stones after each end, and you are up to 59 minutes just to make shots and clean up after every end of play. That leaves each team about 30 minutes to think about how to play 64 shots: that is, you have an average of 28 seconds to decide on a shot. If one team takes an extra 10 seconds on every shot making decision, that's an extra 10+ minutes. Ideally, a team will want to reserve some extra thinking time for the more complicated thirds and skips stones, when houses are often messier and/or critical, game-changing decisions must be made. This means calling more routine shots earlier in the end more quickly.

Skips can help their teams play faster by managing time better:

- The first shot of an end should not be a mystery requiring extensive thought. A skip should already know what kind of end strategy, and therefore what initial shot sequence to call, based on score and end of play.
- For routine shots—say an obvious takeout of shot stone—the skip should put the broom down and call the shot right away. Save thinking time for more challenging shots later in the game. Veteran skips will often have the broom down for the next shot before all the stones have come to rest.
- Use simple broom- and hand-signals your team understands to communicate shot-calling. There is no need to make extensive “John Madden” diagrams on the ice or yell up and down the ice.
- Don’t skip by committee: this is a tremendous time-waster. Most teams are not a democracy: the third may occasionally provide input to the skip; the front end should normally not provide strategic input unless asked. The only thing worse than a bad game plan is four game plans. (The “Three Tenors” was a good concept. The “Four Skips” is a disaster.) And arguing up and down the ice about which of four game plans is the right one. Don’t be “that” team.
- If you are finding as a skip that you need lots of time to make strategy decisions, maybe you are trying to call too complicated a game. Playing a more open game with more takeouts and fewer draws is usually easier to call and may speed up your flow, not to mention cause less decision angst.

Not being ready

It would be too easy, and disingenuous, to blame skips entirely for slow play. Arguably, teammates are just as culpable for slowing the pace of a game. Remember, 10 seconds per shot saved will shorten the game by 10 minutes; if your opponents do the same, that’s 20 minutes saved! The best way to save this kind of time is to simply be ready when it is your turn to play:

- Be in the hack and cleaning your stone *before* the skip calls your shots. As soon as the opposing player before you releases their stone, circle back to the hack from your position between the hog lines, retrieve your stone, remove your gripper, get your stabilizer, and get ready to make your shot. Don’t be the guy who gets caught every end: “What, it’s my turn to shoot? Where is my stabilizer?”
- When you make your shot, by all means participate in the execution of the shot, but when your role is done, stop admiring your handiwork and get to the sidelines or retreat to the boards. If you stand in the middle of the ice, gawking, the other team can’t call their shot and deliver their stone until you move out of the way.
- Set up stones for all your teammates, not just your skip. You will be amazed at how much time this saves over the course of a game.
- On the other hand, *do not set up stones for your opponents*. This may seem like a gracious, time-saving courtesy, but more often than not it is an annoyance and a time-waster for your opponents. You do not know what shooting order the opponents are using, and by moving rocks from the rock nest, you may be creating a trip hazard by putting stones where your opponents do not expect them. Let the other team deal with their stones.
- If you are playing lead, you should not be clearing stones at the conclusion of the end. The seconds and thirds can handle that quite well on their own. Leads should be back on the boards getting ready for their first shots.

Not clearing the ice promptly

A major source of wasted time in a typical league game is players of the delivering team lingering on the ice after a shot is concluded.

- When your team's shot is completed, hie thee away from the center of the sheet toward the sidelines, where you can make your way back to the delivering end in preparation for the next shot for your team. (And when you get back to the other end and the opponent's stone is delivered, keep going back and set up your team's next stone.)
- If you feel you must have a conversation with your skip after the completion of a shot, assemble at the sideline at the far hogline, or continue to the boards so that your opponents can call and deliver their next shot. Don't be the guy having the strategy conversation in front of the house while the other team is trying to call a shot.

Being overly fastidious

Every club has its obsessive-compulsive members who must have things in perfect order when competing on the ice. While this type of behavior is often commendable in other areas of life, in curling it can be a cause of slow play.

- The stones do not have to be in numerical order, nor do they have to be in a perfect geometrical arrangement at the beginning of each end. If your teammates are finding and setting up your stones, this "pre-arrangement" of stones does not save any time.
- Some individuals have elaborate pre-shot rituals. It is perfectly normal—and competitively necessary—to have a set pre-shot routine. However, if your routine takes more than a handful of seconds, you don't have a routine, you have a ceremonial ritual. (Break out the incense.) I once put a stopwatch on an opponent skip who had an incredibly agonizing pre-shot ritual: almost 60 seconds from arrival at the hack to release of the stone. For this team, the skip alone was responsible for prolonging the game by 15 minutes or so.

If you and your team can successfully implement even a handful of these suggestions, you should be able to shave many minutes off every game. And you won't feel rushed. The nice thing about a well-paced game is how much fun it is. Heck, you might even find you curl better. One thing is for sure: win or lose, the sooner you finish, the sooner you will get to the bar afterwards for a refreshing beverage!

*Good curling! Have a question for Instructor's Corner?
Have a suggestion for an Instructor's Corner article?
Send an email to curlingschool@uticacurlingclub.org*