



Instructor's Corner

Roger Rowlett & Mary Jane Walsh

I've been curling for 6 years and I still get assigned to play lead for my teams. When do I move up?

—Emma Leed

Emma's question is natural, but quite possibly misdirected. New curlers somehow inappropriately assume that the positions on a curling team are assigned by skill level, with the lead the least skilled member of the team, and the all-powerful skip as the most skilled member of the team. Those new to the game might reasonably arrive at this conclusion because novices are often assigned to play lead for their teams.

Curling is a team sport

Curling, unlike many sports, is a true team game. In most team sports, the action typically centers around only the player who has the object of play, and at any one time, only a few players are immediately involved in the play. In baseball, for example, much of the play revolves around the pitcher, catcher, and batter. However, in curling, every player on a team participates 100% in controlling the outcome of every shot from beginning to end. In such a sport, every player has to be skilled, and perform their roles to perfection in order to be successful. No player gets to "sit out" a shot, or choose not to be involved.

Each curling position requires a different skill set

The four positions in curling have distinctly different required skills. Leads have to be adept at draws: setting guards and coming around them for cold draws and freezes. Takeouts are not a staple, but in today's game throwing accurate tick shots are becoming more important. Seconds will typically throw many clearing shots, since when it is their turn it is the first opportunity to remove guards from play. Seconds will throw all kinds of shots, including draws and freezes, but takeouts are often a staple shot for seconds. The front end must be superb sweepers and judges of weight, as well as adept at reading the ice for running speed.

Thirde must be the most versatile shot-makers: the scenarios they see are quite varied, and many of the shots they are called upon to play will require a great deal of precision. Thirde must also be excellent and experienced strategists, both to understand team strategy, but also to assist the skip if necessary in making strategic decisions. Skips, of course, have to be master strategists, and have tremendous resilience and patience. Ironically, skips may not typically have the most difficult or precise shots to throw, but those they do throw must be made consistently, because they score is totaled when they are done. Skips must have superb command of draw weight and be able to hit and stick consistently anywhere on the ice. Skips also have to be able to memorize ice topography and keep track of changing conditions in order to ice shots properly. Skips and thirde both need good team leadership skills.

To excel, each team member must relish their role

A competitive team requires skilled and dedicated players at each position. And each player must be enthusiastic about their role. To be a good lead, master the activities that make for a good lead: making precision draws and sweeping teammates rocks to perfection. To be a good second, become consistent

at throwing hits, and of course be a consummate sweeper and learn to read the changes in the ice with your lead. Thirds and skips need to be comfortable with strategy, and skips especially need to employ a game strategy that his or her teammates can implement. Skips must master ice reading. Thirds must figure out how to read the ice without the benefit of seeing line for most of the stones thrown during the game. It is not easy to excel at ANY curling position: and each comes with its own peculiar challenges.

Find your best role

So why do new curlers get asked to play lead? It's not so much that leads don't need much skill (*au contraire!*); it's that leads, because they shoot first when no rocks are in play, have the smallest number of shooting tasks to master. A new curler will probably find lead easier to grasp than playing other positions. Don't look at playing 2nd or 3rd or skip as a "promotion." It's just the same kinds of shots in a different context. That context may be more important than shot-making. Instead, think about what your best role on a team might be. If you have great draw skills and are an accomplished sweeper, your skills might be wasted at skip or third. You might make a great lead. On the other hand, if you can throw heavy weight peels and takeouts, you might find your role among seconds or thirds. If you are a strategy geek, can make routine draws and hits, and have an excellent memory for reading ice, skipping might just be for you. Every team needs four players who can fill four different roles. Which one are you?

*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*