



Instructor's Corner

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What does it take to be a good skip?

—Ivana Beewun

In previous articles we have discussed the roles of the lead, second and third on a curling team. What skills are required of a skip? I have mixed feelings about skipping. I've often said that "skipping is almost like curling." The role of the skip is very different from every other position on a curling team. Unlike the other curling positions, the skip does not sweep stones down the ice, and does not interact closely with team-mates except the third. Most shots are vicariously experienced through placement of the broom and sweep calls. It is a strangely lonely yet challenging curling position with (typically) the enormous responsibility of throwing the last two stones of the end. The skip of a team plays many roles.

Strategist

The skip must be first and foremost a master strategist. Good strategy enables your team to nearly always win when you out-curl the opposition. Bad strategy requires your team to curl twice as good to achieve half as much. If you want to skip, you need to study and employ good curling strategy to get the most out of your team. Strategy is more than just calling the next shot—that's really tactics—strategy is having an overall plan for the end and calling the kinds of shots that help achieve that plan. Just as important, a good strategist needs to know when to bail when the plan is going off the rails.

The best way to learn strategy is to carefully observe how a good skip you play for calls a game, and ask questions after (not during!) the game. If your club offers instructional opportunities in curling strategy take advantage of them. Another way is to learn from an experienced third in a developmental or beginning skips league, but to get the most out of this avenue you need to be ready to accept and perform the other roles of a skip...

Team Manager and Leader

This might be the most important role of a skip. A skip is by definition the team leader, and must lead by example. Successful skips are remarkably patient, resilient in the face of adversity, and inspire confidence in teammates. If the skip isn't panicking when things are bleak, it's likely that your teammates won't, either. The most successful skips wear the same game face whether they are up 3 or down 3. As a skip, you will have to employ selective amnesia when you miss a critical shot, and be mentally prepared to make your next one.

As a skip, you will have to pick up your team when they have had a bad end by making a crucial draw or hit to score or limit damage. In most games, a skip will normally have to pick up the pieces and salvage an end at least 1-2 times per game, even on a good team. If you are not comfortable in this role, or expect your team to never leave you in this situation, you are not ready to skip. Being the leader means that the buck stops with you, like it or not.

A good skip is also a great team manager. This doesn't mean being a boss—that's an entirely different attitude. A team manager knows how to get the most out of teammates by playing to their strengths, and showing confidence in their abilities. This is really important in club curling, where not every player

on your team has honed all of their curling skills. For example, if you have a player that is not consistent hitting the broom on hits outside the 4-foot, then you must accept as a skip the responsibility to figure out the right inside-out ice for routine hits so your player has a better chance of making the shot. If you have a player that struggles with precise draw weight, you might not want to give them a steady diet of precision freezes, but rather choose an alternative, higher tolerance shot instead. If you have a good hitting team, don't force them to play a draw-fest, come-around game. (In this situation, maybe an open game would suit your team's skills better.) If you have a player than has a better in-turn than out-turn, you should consider employing the preferred turn whenever possible for critical shots. If you can call a shot in such a way that the likely miss leads to a reasonably good result, then you need to figure out how to do that. Helping your teammates play better is a key trait of a good skip, and requires that you have good knowledge of your teammates' skill sets. However, it is just as important to trust your teammates to step up to the plate on occasion. When you get the opportunity—perhaps when you have a substantial lead or when you are forced to play a certain shot regardless—have confidence in your players to make shots they need to get better at, and reinforce them when they make those shots. Success can breed confidence, which breeds success...

Ice Reader

Skips must become adept at reading the ice. In practice, this means remembering the amount of curl to expect on every part of the sheet (both turns) for both draws and takeouts, and updating that information as the game progresses and the ice changes. Skips must have a good memory! (Except of course when they need to forget their last shot.) Skips must also be good at calling line. This means learning how to recognize the break point on draws and hits, and anticipating curl *before* it happens. If there is an oversimplified rule of sweeping, it is that you often need to sweep before you think you do.

Shotmaker

Ironically, skips don't normally have to make the most difficult shots. But those shots that skips do attempt, they need to make consistently. Typically skips will have to be proficient at drawing the 4-foot, making hit-and-stick shots on open rocks, and throwing the occasional guard. If you are throwing a lot of runback doubles or angle-raise takeouts as skip, you might need to go back and review the strategy and team management sections! Skips normally throw mostly routine shots, but need to make them a high percentage of the time. The old adage, "If you can't draw, you can't skip," is close to the truth. The draw to the 4-foot is the one shot every skip need to have in their arsenal, and is probably the most common shot skips will throw to save an end, or to score an extra point. If you are still the player that will hit shot stone in the 12-foot rather than draw to the 8-foot, then you may not be ready to throw skip rocks. If you want to skip, perfect the routine shots: draws, hits, and guards. The circus shots are a rarely employed bonus shot.

When is one ready to skip?

There is no magic formula to decide when to jump into skipping a team. However, to enjoy success as a skip, one must be able to confidently throw accurate draws, open hits, and guards. These shots are those that you will learn and can master while playing lead or second. If you can't make a relatively high percentage of your skip rocks, you won't win many games. If you can master this kind of routine shot-making, then you may be ready to jump into the skipping world, where you can begin to hone your strategic and ice-reading skills. You can develop some understanding of strategy and tactics with off-ice

study, but ice-reading will come with experience. You will know when you have graduated from a novice to veteran skip when you no longer fear throwing the last rock, but rather *want* the rock in your hands to make the winning shot.

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

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