



Instructor's Corner

Roger Rowlett

Directional sweeping in the Brier and what it means for club play

I know many club members watched many of the games of the Brier on ESPN3 in mid-March, and what a fine field it was! I had the privilege of being able to attend the games in person. While there was much discussion of directional sweeping on the TSN coverage we were able to view, it was difficult to fully appreciate the impact of directional sweeping from the TV coverage alone, which is kind of like watching a game through a telescope. In person, the impact of directional sweeping during the Brier was obvious and dramatic.

So what's all the fuss?

For those who have read the last few Instructor's Corner articles, you know that "directional sweeping" is all the rage. It involves using an angled sweeping stroke with a single sweeper to gently but significantly nudge a rock in a particular direction, namely in the direction of the push stroke of the single sweeper. The effect can be as much as a stone's width or more depending on the thrown weight and ice conditions.

In the Brier, directional sweeping is especially effective on hack weight shots, and the top teams utilized this weapon well to neutralize their opponent's scoring chances. This stratagem was especially evident during the playoff games. Basically, if a team *fully* buried a stone behind a center or corner guard, it could be easily removed. If a stone was buried more than 5-6 feet behind a guard, the opposing team threw a hack weight shot (either turn) with relatively tight ice, and held the stone straight and tight by the guard using low-side directional sweeping. A few feet before passing the guard, the low-side sweeper let up and the high-side sweeper would push the stone over behind the guard to get anywhere between 2/3 of a rock or a nose hit on the buried rock. Very few of these come-around hits were missed. The only way to prevent directional sweeping from removing these buried rocks was to hide a stone closer to the guard. But stones buried less than 5 feet behind the guards were all too easy to remove by a short runback, which at this level is rarely missed. The result is that it was impossible to hide a rock behind a single guard. Ben Hebert made a humorous if telling comment on the ice during the Page 3-4 game. When the front end was asked if shot rock was too buried and difficult to remove with a come-around shot, Ben replied "Last year, yeah!"

The impact of directional sweeping was dramatically seen in the Jacobs-Gushue games. In the last round robin game, Gushue repeatedly tried to hide stones behind single guards to no avail. The result was 5 consecutive blanks by Jacobs' rink until they coaxed a mistake out of Gushue's team and took control of the game. In the Page 1-2 game hours later the same day, Gushue opened the first end by throwing two center guards, just like you might if tied in the last end of play without hammer. This was a surprising turn of events, but it allowed Gushue to keep some rocks in play and attempt to force Jacobs to one. With two guards, it was possible to bury stones tight behind the last guard without fear of a runback. (Getting two angles perfect on a runback is very difficult to do.)

What does this mean at the elite level?

Despite the prohibition on sweeping materials that have strong directional sweeping characteristics, there is probably still too much control of stones with some of the allowed fabric materials. Some of the top teams exchanged their Balance Plus brush heads with the newer, approved, but still more effective Hardline brush heads (*sans* pressure plate and magic fabric). Expect additional restrictions on allowed fabric materials at the pro level that will reduce the directional effects of sweeping next year. There is talk of regulating sweeping technique, but this may be very difficult to achieve in practice, without getting out a protractor and measuring sweeping angles. Who wants the refs running curling?

What does this mean at the club level?

Directional sweeping is here to stay. The genie is out of the bottle, and he doesn't want to go back in! If you are not using directional sweeping at the club level, you are missing more shots than you should. In limited experience with directional sweeping with league and bonspiel teams, I can say that it is definitely possible to save or salvage 3-4 or more shots a game if directional sweeping is properly employed. You need strong sweepers (dusters need not apply) and good technique to do it right, or at all. But on club ice, you can definitely move board weight hits a half-stone or more, and hack weight shots a stone or more on fast ice. In a previous Instructor's Corner article, I discussed managing misses: for most ends the score is determined by the net misses for each team. Each miss you save potentially means a point scored for you or not given to the opponents. Mastering directional sweeping may mean an extra point or two in your favor in each game, and that can lead to more wins.

Front End Clinic

Look for a front end clinic early next season right after the ice installation. This clinic, which will be aimed at players wishing to improve their front end play, will include sweeping technique, rock placement, using interval timing to enhance your weight judgment and teammate's shot making, and of course directional sweeping.

*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*