

## **ABCs of a Good Delivery**

**A series of articles from *US Curling News* on:**

- **Alignment**
- **Balance**
- **Curl (**Grip, Turn & Release**)**

### **The Most Important Line**

*By Jon Mielke*

What is the most important line on a sheet of curling ice? This is a question that I routinely ask skills clinic attendees or individuals who want advice on how to improve their delivery. Respondents typically look bewildered and offer a variety of responses. Ultimately, I suggest that the most important line is the invisible line from the hack foot to the skip's broom.

Instructors, whether they are teaching beginners or doing refresher work with intermediate curlers, talk about the "ABCs" of a good curling delivery – alignment, balance, and curl (grip, turn, and release). Balance is something that curlers must learn and eventually take for granted and the release can warrant an article all its own (a million dollar slide and a two-cent release produces a two-cent shot). So, for now, let's focus on alignment and the invisible line.

Experienced league skips can often tell if a teammate is going to miss a shot, simply by the way he or she sets-up in the hack. Sometimes it is simply the way that the shooter's body is positioned – are they lined up to drive out of the hack straight toward the broom? The simple answer for shooters is to clean the ice in front of the hack, clean the rock, set it in front of the hack, and then stand-up behind the hack and wait for the skip's call. When the skip's broom is in position, step into the hack with the hack foot pointed at the broom. Then kneel down and square your shoulders to the invisible line from the hack foot to the skip's broom.

The next, all-important step is to get the stone centered on the invisible line. Quite often, the rock is misplaced and subsequent movements are not on the invisible line. Just watch, many curlers start their delivery with a misplaced rock or take the stone back to a point in the middle of the hack rather than to the hack foot. In either case, the resulting shot will probably not be at the broom.

Starting the stone on the invisible line and bringing it back to the hack foot also places the stone in line with what is typically the shooter's dominant eye. This allows the shooter to look over the top of the stone and directly at the skip's broom during the slide – much like looking down the barrel of a gun when aiming. That's a good thing.

With the body square to the broom and the rock centered on the invisible line, subsequent body and rock movements throughout the delivery should be either straight away from or straight toward the skip's broom. Any sideways motions will have to be corrected for at some point during the delivery (C-curve) and will often result in a shot being thrown wide or narrow. Keeping things simple and straight will result in more made shots.

Shooters can also do a performance check on themselves once the stone is out of their hand and traveling down the ice. Rocks typically do not start curling during the first 10-15 feet after the point of release. Take a look – is the released stone on the invisible line? And how about the shooter's body – is in on the invisible line and going straight toward the skip's broom? If not, the alignment was faulty and the shot will probably be wide or narrow.

So, don't forget to look at and use the most important line on the curling sheet – that invisible line from your hack foot to the skip's broom. If you line up with and slide down that line and keep the rock centered on that line, you will make more shots, win more games, and have more fun.

For more intermediate skills materials, check out USA Curling's website at [www.curlingrocks.net](http://www.curlingrocks.net) (click on Inside the USCA – New Training Tools – Skills Camp Handouts). Good curling!

*(Jon Mielke is a Level III instructor and a Level III coach. He is the immediate past chairman of the USCA's Training & Instruction Committee and a member of Bismarck's Capital Curling Club).*

## **“B” Is For Balance – Part I**

*By Jon Mielke*

Remember the “ABCs of a good delivery” – alignment, balance, and curl (grip, turn, and release)? In my recent *Curling News* article, I talked about the most important line on a sheet of curling ice – the invisible line from your hack foot to the skip’s broom. That article was all about alignment. But, proper alignment and a good release cannot occur consistently if the shooter doesn’t have good balance. Good balance and alignment need to become second nature so the shooter can concentrate on things like weight control. So, how does a person develop good balance?

At the outset, I have to tell you that balance is so important that it is going to be the topic of this article plus one in the next *Curling News*. Balance – a good place to start is with a “dry land” exercise to develop and reinforce a good balanced delivery. If you can’t get into and hold a good, balanced position on a dry floor, how can you expect to do it on ice with a piece of Teflon on your foot?

Here the drill: in the privacy of your own home, stand with your feet shoulder width apart and then take a half-step forward with your slider foot, placing it directly centered in front of your chest. Next, lower your body by extending your non-slider foot directly behind your body, with the leg fully extended, the top of the back foot flat on the floor, and the sole of that foot facing skyward.

Pay special attention to the angles of various parts of the slider foot and leg. The foot should ideally be angled out with the heel under your sternum and the toe pointed slightly to the left (for a right-handed curler). If you can’t get to that position, at least point the toe straight, but definitely not to the right. The portion of your leg from the knee to your ankle should be angled back toward your hips. If it is vertical, it will raise your center of gravity and make it harder to balance. If it is angled forward, you’ll end up doing the splits because your slider will slide out away from your body. Also try to angle the hip-to-knee portion of your leg to the left so your knee moves toward your left armpit. Again, this will allow you to drop your center of gravity lower and make it easier to balance.

Make sure that you keep your right hand extended ahead of you – don’t use it for balance. Ideally, you shouldn’t use your left hand for balance, either, but it is a better alternative than using your right hand. After all, you don’t want to be leaning on the stone or you will get it moving from side to side and messing up your “invisible line” alignment.

Get into this position and hold yourself there for 15-20 seconds and then gradually try to raise yourself up. Go through this up and down cycle a few times every day prior to and even during the season. It helps beginning, intermediate, and even experienced curlers develop balance, coordination, flexibility, and leg strength.

Once you’re getting into and staying in the proper sliding position on dry land, you’ll be better prepared to take to the ice. Watch for the next issue of *Curling News* and more on developing better balance. Ultimately, it will help you hit the broom more consistently, make more shots, win more games, and have more fun. Until next time, good curling!

(I had a pleasant e-mail exchange with Jim from St. Paul after my recent article concerning the most important line on a curling sheet. He wanted to know what adjustments could be made to help someone who shoots right-handed but is left-eye dominant. An excellent question – and the topic of a future article. Thanks, Jim!).

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## **“B” Is For Balance – Part II**

*By Jon Mielke*

Well, winter is right around the corner and it's time to get back on the ice. It's a perfect time to work on the ABCs of good delivery – alignment, balance, and curl (grip turn & release). We talked about alignment and a little bit about balance in last spring's issues of *Curling News* (available on-line). So, now you're ready to do it on the ice.

Start by placing a plastic cup at the near hog line, somewhere within 18 inches of the center line (the cup is a substitute for the skip's broom and the outer edge of these locations is equal to shooting to the outside edges of the house at the other end of the sheet). Next, step into the hack, with the ball of your hack foot about halfway up the incline of the hack. Stand with a stone in front of you, your feet about shoulder-width apart, and the slider foot flat on the ice with the heel about even with the toe of your hack foot.

Point your hack toe at the cup and square your shoulders and hips with the invisible line that runs from your hack foot to the cup. Next, squat down and relax. Your non-shooting arm should be on top of the broom with the handle running under your armpit. The broom's pad or bristles should be pointed up (not laying on the ice). Grip the broom about 18" from the head and point it at about the 10 o'clock position – not straight to the side and not straight ahead. Maintain positive pressure on the broom – better on the broom than on the stone. Now, here is a little cadence to help you with what comes next: rock, foot, rock, foot, slide.

From the kneeling position (or you can start with your hips slightly elevated) and with the rock centered on the invisible line that runs from your hack foot to the cup on the hog line, lean slightly forward to enable the rock to move slightly toward the cup. This motion simply breaks the inertia between the stone and the ice. Don't use your arm to move the rock – use your upper body. If the ice isn't sticky, you can even eliminate this “forward press” motion.

Next, pull your hips up and back behind the hack. At the extreme end of this motion, you should be able to imagine that you are sitting in an invisible chair. This motion will also pull the rock back. Make sure you pull the rock back with your body and not with your arm. The rock should move straight back to your hack foot, right along the invisible line that runs from your hack foot to the cup. Your slider foot moves back, too, to a position where the toe is about even with the heel of your hack foot. Your weight transfers from being about 50-50 on both feet to being largely on your hack foot.

Now you're ready to start moving forward. It is very important to start moving the rock, your upper body, and your slider foot forward before you start driving out of the hack with your hack foot. As your slider foot moves forward, it also moves inward so it can get centered under your chest and directly behind the stone. As it moves into position, drive out of the hack with your hack foot (slide). Remember, all the stone's momentum comes from the drive out of the hack – not with a push from your shooting arm. Your shooting arm should stay fairly straight, with only a relaxed flex, throughout the entire delivery. Also remember to keep the rock moving along the invisible line and keep your shoulders and hips square to the cup.

Repeat this practice slide until you get comfortable and things start to feel rhythmic and automatic. Move the cup back and forth along the hog line and adjust your set-up in the hack

accordingly – always squaring to the cup/skip’s broom. Be sure to reposition the stone so it is always centered on the invisible line from your hack foot to the cup. Also, watch to see where your slides are ending up. Are they directly on top of the invisible line and straight to the cup? If not, try things like adjusting your body in the hack, repositioning the stone during your set-up, and eliminating any unnecessary side-to-side motions in your delivery. Stay straight – you and the stone should always move straight to the cup, regardless of its location. If you can’t hit a cup that’s 33 feet from the hack, how can you expect to hit the skip’s broom that is 125 feet away?

Now take several more slides without the stone. Everything else is the same but concentrate on sliding with your shooting hand on an invisible stone – not resting on the ice for balance. Learn to balance without a stone so you don’t lean on the stone during your delivery.

Once you start feeling comfortable with your slide, you will be able to push harder out of the hack. This is important because the stone’s momentum comes from your drive out of the hack and not from a push at the point of release. Remember, draw shots on keen ice need a light kick out of the hack; heavy ice requires a stronger kick. For take outs, bring your hips farther back and apply more leg drive.

Keep working at it. You will find yourself making more shots, your skip will love you, and you’ll win more games. Good strategy only makes a difference if you’re shooting over 50%. Do your part and have more fun in the process.

Until next time – good curling!

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## **Poor Release = Two Cent Shot**

*By Jon Mielke*

Years ago I heard Bill Tschirhart of Canada's True North Curling, Inc. say that a \$1 million slide and a 2 cent release will produce a 2 cent shot. For all that I have said in previous articles about proper alignment and good balance, none of that matters if you don't have a good grip, turn, and release. So what makes for a good release?

A good release starts with a proper grip. First of all, remember that you are not trying to choke a chicken. If your knuckles are turning white, your grip is too tight. Slide your four fingers under the handle with the pads of your fingers at about the middle knuckle at the bottom of the handle. Don't let your fingers fan out – keep them close together. Don't jam them into the curve of the handle and don't let your little finger drift off the back. If you do, you will end up either steering the stone narrow or flipping it wide.

Keeping your wrist high above the handle, now fold your thumb over the top of the handle and lightly pinch the handle on the side opposite your palm. Your palm should not be touching the handle. Here is a little drill to make sure that your grip is directly above the bolt hole (e.g. the center of the stone). Once you have gripped the stone, stand up over the stone without moving your grip. Now, using only your shoulders, lift the stone a few inches that then gently set it back on the ice. Listen to how many sounds you hear as the stone hits the ice. If you hear more than one, your grip is not centered. Adjust your grip either forward or back and try again. When you find the "sweet spot" you will only hear one sound – the entire cup hitting the ice at the same time. From now on, never throw another shot without your grip at that "sweet spot."

So, you're in the hack, you are aligned to the skip's broom, you're balanced, and your grip is good. Now it's time to cock the handle. Depending on which turn is being played, turn the handle to either the 10 or 2 o'clock position. The handle should stay in that location until about the last 4 feet of your slide. During that last 4 feet, gently but firmly turn the handle toward the 12 o'clock position and release it. Make sure that your hand is not on the handle at or past the 12 o'clock position or you may end up steering the stone and getting it immediately off line.

Remember, a curling stone does not start to curl until it is well beyond the point of release. If the stone is immediately off that invisible line from the hack to the skip's broom, there was probably a faulty release. Here is another little drill to check out your release. Set a plastic cup on the ice about 5' beyond where you normally release a stone (remember to keep it within 18" of the center line at the hog line – that is equal to shooting at the outer edge of the house at the other end). Next, set up another cup 10-12 feet farther down the ice, on a line that runs from the delivery side of the hack and through the first cup. (A great way to set this up for several throws is to use a string or laser set up from the hack. Once you have the cups set up in a straight line, use a marker to put light marks on the ice so you can reposition the cups after each practice throw. Don't worry, the lines will come off the next time the ice is scraped).

Now, shoot at the nearest cup – you and the stone should go straight to that cup and, once you release the stone, it should hit both cups. If you miss the nearest cup, your alignment was probably bad. If you hit the first cup but not the second, there is probably something wrong with your release. Start over and try again until you get it right. Strive to hit the cups with the exact center of the stone. If you miss at close range, you will be way off at the far end.

Remember to count the rock's rotations as it travels down the ice. For the ice in most clubs, curlers should strive for 2 ½ to 3 revolutions and everyone on your team should have the same number of revolutions. A "lazy" handle will curl more or may even lose its turn and an over-rotated stone will tend to run straighter. Be consistent as an individual and as a team – you will make more shots and win more games.

Also strive for a common release point for everyone on your team. Rocks with drastically different release points will curl differently. Consistent release points and rotations will make reading the ice and anticipating curl much easier for the skip.

It's nice to look pretty as you're sliding down the ice. But remember, a \$1 million slide and a 2 cent release will get you a 2 cent shot. Until next time, good curling!

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