

Tactics vs. Techniques – Intro to Basic Strategy

By Jon Mielke

Most of my previous articles have focused on mechanical techniques related to a sound delivery and effective sweeping. It is important to remember, however, that you can lose a game even if your team shoots 100%. Making a shot that was ill-advised can be as costly as missing a shot, and it could cost you the game. Conversely, if you call a smart game, you can win, even if the other team out shoots you.

Good strategy starts with having a game plan and a goal for every end. In terms of a goal for each end, skips should always start their thought process with basic curling strategy – when you have the hammer, score two or more or blank the end (and keep the hammer), and when they have the hammer, steal or to force the other team to settle for a single point. If you always score two with the hammer and the other team never gets more than one when they have the hammer, you will win every time.

As simple as that strategy sounds, it is certainly easier said than done, plus there are exceptions to every rule. To help skips wade through all the strategy and shot calling possibilities, remember the acronym “SHEETZ”:

- **S**core – what is the score? If you are way ahead or way behind, you may need to adjust your strategy to be more aggressive or defensive.
- **H**ammer – who has the hammer? You can take more chances if you have the hammer. If they have the hammer, being aggressive may send you to the warm room early.
- **E**nd – what end are you playing? Do you have several ends to play or are you near the end of the game? Where you are in the game will impact your approach to the end.
- **E**nvironment – how is the ice? Is it keen or heavy or is it changing during the game? Are there runs or falls? How are the rocks? Are they evenly matched or are there some bad ones and, if so, who is throwing them? These and several other factors may influence what shot you call and how an end is played.
- **T**eam – What is your team good at – hits or draws? Don't call shots that a teammate is not capable of making, and try to force opposing players to play shots that they struggle with. What is your team's mentality? Are you a defensive team or are you aggressive? Play to your strengths and their weaknesses.
- **Z**one – use the free guard zone to your advantage. Teams can pursue an offensive or defensive style of play if they understand and use the free guard zone. Strategic shot calling, by itself, will not make this happen. Team members must be able to make the shots. It takes both sound strategy and shot-making to win hard fought games.

Here is an example of how “SHEETZ” considerations may impact your strategy for an end. Let's assume that you are playing the 7th end of an 8 end game. You are up by 2 and have the hammer. With the final shot, your skip is looking at an empty house. Do you throw it through to blank the end and keep the hammer, or do you draw for a single point?

Basic strategy would tell you to throw it through and keep the hammer. Personally, however, I would take a single point. Here is why. If we take the point, we will be up by 3 playing the last

end. Even more importantly, we will throw first in the 8th end. Throwing first allows us to dictate how the end will be played. We can throw up a center guard, or we can throw into the house, or we can throw it through.

You definitely would not throw a center guard. There is an old saying – “When you are up, guards are not.” A guard is an offensive move and you do not need offense when you are up 3 playing the last end. If you throw a guard, it is a rock that they might be able to use to score a big end. Conversely, if you throw a rock to the top of the 4 foot, what are they going to do? Hopefully they panic and decide to hit it. Then you are into a takeout game and they will never get 3, unless your team misses lots of hits. If they throw a corner guard, you can throw another rock into the rings and now they have two rocks to deal with before they can even think about scoring 3.

Let’s go back and assume that you decided to blank the 7th end and keep the hammer. Now they get to go first. They are going to throw a center guard. You will probably play a tick to open up the middle or you might just play to come around the center guard. They are going to throw more guards with their next couple shots and there will probably be lots of rocks in play before you can start hitting with your second’s stones. Now you are into a potentially messy end – just what you wanted to avoid. Remember - sometimes one is enough.

The moral of the story – start with basic curling strategy and use “SHEETZ” to establish a goal for the end you are playing, but also be looking ahead an end or two to figure out where you would like to be. Determine what you would like to have happen (Plan A) and what is an acceptable alternative (Plan B). You should also determine what is totally unacceptable so you can play to avoid that outcome. If you do not have a plan, you are planning to fail.

The free guard zone rule is something that warrants a whole separate newsletter article. Most curlers know what the rule says, but many do not know how to use it to generate offense or to play defensively. To play smart, you need to know. That will be the subject of my next column.

Until next time – good curling!

(The acronym “SHEET” was originally conceived by Wisconsin’s Lynita Delaney. Sandra McMakin, the current chair of the USCA’s Training & Instruction Committee, suggested adding the “Z” to emphasize the importance of the free guard zone. The acronym “SHEETZ” has been formally adopted by the Instruction & Training Committee for use in all of its instructional programs. It replaces “HI SEA” – Hammer, Ice, Score, End, and Abilities. All of Mielke’s previous instructional articles are available on line at: USA Curling – Inside the USCA – CNews Columnists – Columns by Jon Mielke).