

## **“Stick” With It**

By Jon Mielke

I like to think that I was a fairly good curler. I was pretty much right up the broom most of the time and used interval timing to develop muscle memory that allowed me to throw a wide variety of weights with a fair degree of accuracy. I won a state men’s title, four state senior titles, and skipped a team on the 2012 Scots Tour. I seemed to be getting better with age, due in large part to all the curling clinics that I attended, both as a student and as an instructor, I always picked up something new and was willing to work it into my delivery.

Things started to deteriorate for me several years ago. I was diagnosed with pulmonary fibrosis – a lung disease that turns healthy lungs into leathery scar tissue that is incapable of feeding oxygen into the blood for delivery throughout the body. My current lung capacity is at 20-30% and I simply do not have the energy to drive out of the hack. If I do, I feel like I am going to pass out. Gone are the good old days of sliding down the ice with the feeling that comes with a solid, balanced delivery, a good release, and a shot that is destined for success.

So, what options did I have? Well, I could either quit playing or try curling with a stick. I decided to stick with it. Now, after two seasons as a stick player, I am still definitely a work in progress, but I think I am getting better. Here are some related observations.

Alignment is just as important for stick players during the setup process. Get the stone positioned on the imaginary line that runs from the hack foot to the skip’s broom and move the stone and your body straight along that line through the point of release. I think it is a bit harder for a stick player to know if they are on the broom because they are not down behind the stone – their dominant eye is a full body height above the stone. Constructive feedback from the skip should, over time, let the shooter know if they are coming out on the stick or if they need to make related adjustments.

The old saying that a million dollar slide and a two cent release will produce a two cent shot applies to stick players, too. I can turn shots in or out just as easily with a stick as I could before. Like everyone else, stick players have to pay special attention to cocking the handle and turning the stone towards the 12 o’clock position at the point of release. It is vitally important that stick players keep their shooting elbow close to their body and that they apply the turn with their wrist and not the elbow. Getting the elbow involved increases the tendency to throw shots wide or narrow. Also, make sure that the turn is applied positively in order to avoid lazy handles – still look for 2 ½ to 3 revolutions the length of the ice. For me, hitting the broom with this many revolutions has been especially challenging.

The toughest part of stick curling, at least for me, is throwing the right weight. I used to use leg drive and muscle memory to throw weight. I could tell almost immediately out of the hack whether or not I was throwing the right weight, but not anymore.

Some stick curlers still deliver with a slider on their non-hack foot. They build up speed as they slide toward the hog line and release with little or no arm extension. Conversely, I deliver without a slider. I build up a little speed by walking slightly faster as I near the point of release,

but most of the momentum that I apply to the stone comes from arm extension. This is something that we definitely do not teach to non-stick curlers. Right or wrong, that is how I do it.

When I am throw draws, anything from long guards to back house or hack weight shots, I still put an interval time (e.g. 3.5) or long time (e.g. 23.5) number in my head when I am in the hack to tell myself how hard to throw. Doing so definitely helps but I am still not as precise as I once was. Hopefully I am still a work in progress and will get better with practice. I also have to remain a student of the game and need to watch more experienced and accomplished stick players to see what works for them and what might work for me.

Guards and hits are, for the time being, the easiest shots for me to play. So, when I play with more experienced teams, I typically shoot lead and then hold the broom. In less competitive league games, I still call the game and shoot skip's stones. Thank goodness for tolerant teammates.

There is still a rush from making a killer draw or a great hit and roll, but it just does not happen as often as it once did. For those of you who can still play a solid game without a stick, cherish every shot. There is no substitute for the feeling that you get when you are sliding down the ice toward the skip's broom. But for those of you who are like me and have had to look to the stick as an alternative, remember that your curling career does not have to be over. It may be like starting over and it may take a while to figure out what works for you. But don't forget the basics and stick with it. It's a Grand Old Game, no matter how you play it.

Until next time – Good Curling!

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## Got Drift?

By Jon Mielke

It is pretty common to see curlers drift during their slide. For right-handers, their body tends to drift to the right of the intended line of delivery when throwing down the right side of the sheet, especially when throwing takeouts. Exactly the opposite happens for left-handers.

If the shooter has the rock on the correct line, one of two things then happens, either the sideways movement of the body pulls the stone off line or the shooter lets go of the on-line stone and then loses sight of the exact path of the stone because the stone and the body are moving on different lines towards the far house. Neither outcome will contribute to a made shot.

So, where does the drift come from and how can it be fixed? In most cases, the drift is caused by a sideways movement of the slider foot and leg. Visualize yourself (a right-hander curler) getting set up in the hack for a takeout on a stone at the outside right edge of the far house. Your shoulders are square to the invisible line that runs from your hack foot to the skip's broom and your stone is directly on top of that line.

Everything in your delivery sequence is perfect. Your forward press is straight at the broom – you lean straight at the broom and the stone moves slightly forward directly on top of invisible line. Your draw-back is perfect, too. Your hips come up and straight back away from the broom. You pull the stone back to your hack foot, using your body without cocking your elbow and you drive out of the hack with the stone still on top of the invisible line.

And then it happens – your body and the stone are moving on different lines. The rock is moving down the invisible line but your body is drifting to the right of the desired line. Where did that come from?

The most common source of drift for right-handed curlers is the sideways momentum of the left leg. The opposite is the case for left-handers. Remember that almost everything in the set-up process relates to the all-important invisible line. The hack foot is pointed down the line at the skip's broom, the shoulders are square to the line, the rock is on the line, and your dominant eye is looking down line (unless you are left-eye dominant).

But, your slider foot is not on the line, it is to the left of the line so it can move back beside the hack during the draw-back sequence. As you move forward during the delivery, the slider foot must move to the right in order to get centered under your chest and behind the stone. Especially when throwing hits, this slight left-to-right movement gets intensified to get the slider foot to the right place faster and to generate more weight. Unfortunately, the slider foot quite often does not stop at the proper position and then move down the sheet on top of the invisible line – all that body mass just keeps moving to the right, off the intended line of delivery.

There are three mechanical things that curlers can try to eliminate drifting. First of all, do not take your slider foot too far back during the drawback sequence. The toe of the slider foot should not go farther back than about even with the heel of the hack foot. Taking it farther back will necessitate a faster forward movement in the slider foot which will increase the likelihood of overshooting the desired position of the slider foot during the subsequent slide. Practice by putting a plastic cup behind the hack along the path that the slider foot takes during the drawback process. Put it on the slider foot's path about a foot behind the hack. If you hit the cup during your delivery, reduce the amount that you are taking your slider foot back.

A second adjustment that you may look at has to do with the line of your slider foot during the draw-back movement. On shots down the right side of the sheet, do not bring the slider foot back parallel to the centerline – take it back parallel to the invisible line, moving slightly from right to left and away from the hack. If the slider foot is taken straight back along the side of the hack, it creates the need to move the slider foot straight forward along the side of the hack and then to the left in order to get it under the chest and behind the stone. Conversely, taking the slider foot back on a slight outward-to-the-left line will reduce the need to move the foot and leg to the right to get it on the desired line. Make things as straight and simple as possible. Sideways movements create problems so try to eliminate them as much as possible.

The third adjustment, and perhaps the biggest, is to think “merge” when moving the slider foot into the proper position. Do not be too anxious to get the slider foot in behind the stone and under the chest. Rather than jamming or jerking the foot into the right position, image that you are smoothly merging your car from the on ramp on to a freeway. Make it a nice, gradual movement. Doing so will reduce the tendency to overshoot the desired sweet spot behind the stone and under the chest. Getting the related body mass moving down the invisible line will eliminate the sideways movement of significant body mass that contributes to drifting.

Hopefully these adjustments will help you eliminate drifting. If it does, you will make more shots and win more games.

I hope your season is off to a good start. Until next time – Good Curling!

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