

You're the Teacher

By Jon Mielke (jcmielke3@bis.midco.net)

It's the start of a new season and many of you are playing on league teams with one or more first-year curlers. Regardless of whether these new curlers have been to a learn-to-curl session or not, they still have a lot to learn.

At this point you and the other veterans on your team are their primary instructors. These new players are anxious to learn because they want to get better. Don't shirk your responsibility because you think you're not qualified or you don't want to sound like a know-it-all. They want and need to hear from you. Here are some key items that you should focus on - don't expect to lay it all on your new players all at once and most things will require repeated reminders:

Balance - It's hard to make a shot if you are worried about falling down. New curlers will eventually figure out how to slide in a stable position, but without some instruction their slide may be on their knees or leaning on the stone for balance. Help your new players get started correctly with their slider foot positioned under their chest and their hack foot extended straight behind them. Get their broom gripped firmly and the arm at the 10 o'clock position to keep them from tipping forward or sideways. Have them practice sliding out of the hack without a stone with their shooting hand off the ice so they don't get in the habit of leaning on the stone for support. All the other elements of a good delivery are more achievable if the shooter has good balance – the time spent on developing good balance will be well worth it for both the player and your team.

Alignment - Help your new players understand that they are shooting at the skip's broom and that their body and the stone should slide out of the hack on a straight line toward the broom. Good alignment starts by having the player standing behind the hack and stepping into the hack with the toe of the hack foot pointed at the skip's broom; shoulders and hips should be at a 90 degree angle to that line. When the shooter squats in the hack, the stone should be positioned in front of the hack foot and directly on top of that line. The forward press with the body and the stone should be straight towards the broom, the drawback should be straight away from the broom, and the delivery should be straight at the broom. Sideways movements will result in missed shots so keep things straight.

Rock Speed - New players need to know that curling is a game of finesse and that finesse cannot be achieved if the stone is shoved down the ice. The rock's momentum must come from something other than a push with the arm – it comes from several sources but mostly from leg drive out of the hack. Make sure that the stone is out in front of the shooter's body during the set-up process and watch to insure that the rock is not pulled back under the shooter's chest during the drawback. Pulling the stone back with the arm is like loading the gun for a sure miss because the subsequent forward motion will be either off line or off weight or both. The stone is drawn back by the torso and stays out in front of the body throughout the entire delivery process. Also remember that momentum should not be generated by taking the slider foot way back behind the hack and then throwing it forward during the delivery. Doing so will almost always throw the entire body offline.

Handle Grip & Rotation - Tell your new players that if their fingers turn white their grip is too tight. Keep the wrist high with the pads of the middle three fingers cradled under the bottom of the handle directly above the center of the stone. The thumb goes across the handle and gently pinches the handle with the side of the pointer finger. During the set-up process the handle of the stone is cocked to either the 10 or 2 o'clock position and held there until about the last four feet of the slide. At that point it is gently rotated toward the 12 o'clock position and released. Strive to achieve about three revolutions as the stone travels down the sheet. And for my friend John in Dallas, I'll say it again, "Remember – a million dollar slide and a two cent release will get you a two cent shot!"

Safe Sweeping - Explain to new players that sweeping makes slow rocks travel farther and fast rocks go straighter. New curlers are typically not very effective sweepers so focus on making them safe – don't wear a slider when sweeping, always position your body so you can look forward down the sheet, and don't run. Once you have those basics firmly implanted, talk about applying downward pressure with a side-to-side motion. Keep the sweeper's head directly above the head of the broom to achieve maximum pressure. Learn to sweep on both sides of the stone. The start position is right next to the hack and not halfway down the sheet. Sweep close to the stone but don't "burn" it.

Be Ready - Eight end games should be playable in two hours. Make sure that new curlers are at the club and ready to start at the designated time. Also help them know how to be ready to throw as soon as the skip calls the shot – they start getting ready as soon as the player ahead of them is sliding down the ice, they have their slider, their stone is cleaned and positioned in front of the hack, and they are standing behind the hack waiting for the call. If every player wastes 10 seconds per shot, the game will take an extra 21 minutes to play.

Yield the Ice - The ice belongs to the opposing team as soon as your team's stone comes to rest. The skip should get behind the back line and the shooter and sweepers should move off to the side of the sheet. Don't make the other team wait for your team to get out of the way.

Broomstacking & A Shot Well Played - Curling is a game of etiquette. Help your new players learn the things that make our game so unique and so special. Congratulate a good shot by the other team and don't applaud a missed shot. And don't forget to socialize with the other team after the game. These post game chats are also a good time to do some off-ice coaching and instruction on some of the points outline above.

Until next time – good curling!

((Jon Mielke is a Level III instructor and a Level III coach. He is the past chairman of the USCA's Training & Instruction Committee, a member of Bismarck's Capital Curling Club, and a 2012 inductee into USA Curling's Hall of Fame. All of his previous training articles are available on line at: USA Curling – Media – Curling News – Columnists – Jon Mielke)).