

Get Ready for the 5 Rock Rule

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Curling changed forever in 1993 when rules were modified to create the free guard zone and the related free guard zone rule. Boring games of nothing but peels became a thing of the past and the skill sets required of every player took a quantum leap forward. Offense became the name of the game. It took a while for everyone to adapt but players and spectators learned to love it.

Well, get ready for even more offense. Starting with the 2018-19 season, World Curling Federation rules change. The current 4 rock rule will become a 5 rock rule. Under the new rule an opponent's stones in the free guard zone may not be removed from play until after the 5th rock of the end has been thrown. Canada has already adopted the new rule and it is expected that the USCA will do likewise. Similarly, it is expected that local clubs will follow suit.

So what will this change do to how games are played? Well, it depends. As is the case with the 4 rock rule, utilizing the 5 rock rule will depend on the skill levels of the teams involved. For teams with inexperienced or more recreational curlers the rule change should have little impact. If a team's front-end players cannot routinely throw center and corner guards, come-around draws, and ticks the change will not change anything.

The 5 rock rule will generate more noticeable changes directly related to the skill level of the teams involved. In more competitive league and bonspiel games and especially at competitions leading to national and international championships, expect more rocks in play, more finesse shots, fewer blank ends, and higher scoring games. TV viewers will like the change just like they enjoy mixed doubles – lots of things can happen and more big ends. Large leads will almost never be safe.

The current 4 rock rule is actually already a 5 rock rule for teams *with* the hammer. The team with the hammer cannot start playing hits on an opponent's free guard zone stones until it is throwing its 3rd stone – the 6th shot of the end. The new rule will not technically change things for the team *with* the hammer.

But from an analytical standpoint, the biggest beneficiary of the expanded rule will be teams that are behind on the scoreboard and have the hammer. Under the 4-rock rule the team without the hammer can start peeling guards with its 3rd stone - the 5th rock of the end. Under the new rule they have to wait until they are throwing their 4th stone - the 7th shot of end. If the team with the hammer wants to generate offense, the new rule gives it a chance to do so. More guards typically lead to more scoring. Being behind and forcing the opponent to a single point will become even more important to mounting a comeback.

The 5 rock rule has been in use in Canadian Grand Slam of Curling events for several years but it will be new to most US curlers starting next season. How to use it and how to defend against it will be an evolutionary process but Canada's experience suggest that the result will be more rocks in play, more offense, and fewer blank ends. Skips will have to think harder and everyone will have to make more shots. Curling fans will love it.

The one negative of the 5 rock rule may relate to more skip indecision and corresponding thinking time. Without a time clock games may get longer. Clubs that do not already have time limits on league games may be forced to impose them. And as is already the case, there will be frustration on the part of fast thinking and fast playing teams that are anxious to get in 8 ends before time runs out. Finding ways to penalize slow-playing teams may become more pressing.

Our Grand Old Game continues to change. We have gone from a no free rock rule to rules based on 3, 4 and now 5 rock free guard zone rules. Time clocks have been implemented and games have been shorted from 12 to 10 ends and 8 end games in competitive play may be just around the corner. Eighteen second ice is a thing of the past for most clubs and lightening fast ice has become common. Curling is now routinely played in arenas on non-dedicated curling ice. Corn brooms are history and there are more curling clubs in the world than ever before. Televised curling has created curling fans out of people who will never set foot in a curling club. The game is more fun to play and the skills demanded of elite players are greater than ever.

It was a fun time to be known as a curler during this season's Olympic and world events. Curlers and non-curlers alike approached me and wanted to talk about curling. I received texts and e-mails from people that I hadn't heard from in years. Thanks and congratulations to all of the U.S. curlers who competed on the world stage. You made us proud and contributed more than you can imagine to the future of curling in the United States and even around the world.

Hopefully all my readers will have a great summer – maybe play in a summer ‘spiel! 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.