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STRATEGY – IT'S NOT ROCKET SCIENCE OR BRAIN SURGERY

by Bill Tschirhart

I don't personally know of any single topic that has been the focus of more discussion, consternation, frustration and salt & pepper shaker maneuvering than curling strategy. But, please notice the title. It's not rocket science or brain surgery! With that out of the way, let's begin and we'll do that with a question. How important is strategy to the final outcome of a curling game? What's your answer?

Here's my answer and it comes from years and years (more than I care to recall) of coaching and watching teams of all skill and experience levels play. It's not very important! Why? I'm glad you asked!

The best answer is skill based. Consider this. If your team shooting percentage is less than 50%, you don't make enough shots to worry about strategy. You need to focus on getting some technical assistance. If your team makes in excess of 85% of its shots, then you make so many shots, strategy again is of little consequence since I have yet to see a skip call a shot which is not going to improve the situation! But, if your team shooting percentage is between 50% & 85%, you need to make the most of those shots.

In other words, don't use strategy as a scapegoat. Your team missed more shots than your opposition did. And, the shots you missed were "killer shots". That's why you lost!

I like definitions. They frame the whole matter and strategy has its share. Trust me. I've seen them all but here are the ones I like best.

Strategy is the shot called, in light of a predetermined game plan, based upon a variety of factors which reflect the team's strategic philosophy. What a mouthful that one is but notice the order of this sentence. More about that later!

Strategy is a plan that ensures that when you out curl the opposition, you also win the game.

There is nothing, I say nothing that is more frustrating than to feel as though you have executed shots to a higher degree than your opposition and yet you lost the game.

Strategy is a series of decisions that ultimately determine the effectiveness of the shots your team is able to make on the outcome of the game. Notice the word "decisions"! Strategy is a decision-making process. But, many teams don't have the foggiest idea of the components of that process.

That's what this essay is about. I'll show you how to make the decisions that will maximize the shots your team is able to make. I can't make the decisions for you. No one can and nor should they unless they're a member of your team. Your strategic plan needs to fit your team. You should not aspire to anyone else's strategy. You can learn from more experienced and skilled teams but don't try to emulate their strategy hook, line and sinker!

Before I go on there are some acknowledgements I want to make. Even though this essay has my by-line, I'm not the author of all of this material. There are several national coaches with the Canadian Curling Association who have put in hours upon hours of work to put this "workshop" approach to strategy together. In fact, in summary form, the activities suggested here, which I hope you find "user friendly", are the product of a number of seasons of synthesis and evaluation. I liken it to computer software. When it's user friendly to the consumer, you have to know the software is extremely sophisticated. That clearly is the case here.

Before I reveal just how simple this process is, I want to make one distinction. **Strategy and tactics are not synonyms.** Now, before you rack your brain trying to recall what your fifth grade teacher said about "synonyms", simply put, strategy and tactics do NOT mean the same thing. They ARE related but that's as far as it goes. Allow me to illustrate the difference between (not among, that would involve three or more items, forever the teacher) the two.

Strategy is a plan, be it general or more specific in nature. Tactics are the ways in which the plan will be implemented. I wish I had the proverbial "nickel" for every team that has asked for help with their "strategy" as the team is convinced it's an area that needs some work. When I watch the team play then sit down with the team after the game, I usually begin like this. "Your strategy is quite sound but your tactics don't match your plan." Here's a curling example!

Let's say that the opposition has a stone just biting the eight foot circle on the center line (which in essence means it's in front of the tee line). It's a lead stone and it's the only stone in play. Your plan is to

deal with that stone. To ignore it and place your stone in another location would be a different plan and therefore different "strategy". I can think of six different "tactics" for the chosen "strategy" of dealing with that stone. What might they be? Try not to look ahead. Put this down or turn your eyes from your computer screen and list them. I'll wait!

Hi! Welcome back. I watched an episode of CSI while you were working on those tactics. Here they are (in no particular order).

- Hit and stay.
- Tap it to a position behind the tee line (perhaps straight back or in a sort of tap-and-roll alignment).
- Hit and roll out (peel).
- Freeze (i.e. draw to the stone).
- Split the stone off the center line keeping it and the shooter in the house.
- Hit and roll to a position in the eight or twelve foot circles

Now try the tactics for the strategy of ignoring the stone.

- Draw to the side of the house.
- Place a corner guard.
- Place a center line guard.
- Deliver the stone purposefully through the house.

I know! I know! Some of you keeners out there are rolling your eyes with some of the tactics. That's because you're placing the strategy or tactic into context already. Good for you! And that's precisely the point. There are factors that mitigate against one strategy over the other and one tactic over the rest. OK smarty pants, what are the factors that dictate strategy and tactics? Make your list!

Well, the list can be long indeed and the subject of discussion in the curling lounge over a beverage of your choice but there are three that clearly stand out. They are END, SCORE and LAST STONE ADVANTAGE. They are always factors that need to be considered. Hey, when you talk about a game situation, what do you say? "It was the ninth end. We were down three and didn't have last rock." But, to be sure, there are other factors. The list below is a partial list. As situations and venues change, so does the composition of the list of factors.

- Ice conditions.
- Stone conditions.
- Opposition skill level.
- Your team's current skill level (you don't always bring your "A" game!).
- Number of stones to be played in the end.
- Fatigue.
- Momentum.
- Time of day.

These factors will shuffle in importance. They constantly change as the game progresses. Being aware of the factors that are at or near the top of the list is a skill onto itself and clearly is one of the characteristics that set one person apart from others as skip material. And, since we're on the subject of responsibility, let's get one item off the table right away. All members of the team should be aware and participate in the strategies and tactics a team employs. That does NOT mean that there's a committee meeting on the ice prior to the calling of every shot. Yikes no! But all members of the team, as you'll see, will play a key role in the process that goes into creating the strategic plan and the tactics to be employed.

It's a simple four step process (this is the user friendly part)!

1. DISCOVER YOUR TEAM'S STRATEGIC D.N.A.
2. FORMULATE A GAME PLAN.
3. CREATE AN END PLAN.
4. CALL THE SHOT THAT COMPLIES WITH THE FIRST THREE STEPS.

Go back to the first definition of strategy and read it once again. Now perhaps you understand why I noted that the definition is written in "inverse order". On other words, it's backwards! So many curlers feel that strategy is but one thing, calling the right shot. They're not entirely incorrect but they have it backwards. The shot called is the "end product" of a process. Without the process, the shots called are entirely unrelated and that's what gets teams into trouble from a strategic and tactical perspective. I like to say to those people that if that's your definition of strategy, ***it's like building a house starting with the roof!*** I believe there's a lot of "roofing contractors" out there!

I want to make one more point before we continue and it's about jargon (language). One of the reasons why those hard-working CCA national coaches took up this strategy teaching challenge in the first place was due to the fact that when teams talked about strategy, the conversation often broke down due to a lack of a common jargon. You will learn some new words here. Use them! It's arguably one of the best parts of this whole process. You will now have a common language! OK, let's get to the heart of the matter and find out about those four, simple steps!

STEP ONE – DISCOVER YOUR TEAM'S STRATEGIC D.N.A.

I'm continually amazed at the high number of curling teams that have never had a discussion among their members as to how they wish to play the game. Teams talk about ice, stones, bonspiel dates, uniforms, food & equipment etc. but rarely about how they want to play the game. Amazing!

Every team has a built-in philosophy of how the game should be played. It's the result of four individuals' collective skills and experiences. It's one of the factors that should bring four curlers together in the first place (oops, you DIDN'T consider that when you formed the team? Yikes!).

There are but three types of teams, **offense first**, **defense first** and **blended attack**. Your team will naturally prefer to play the game based upon one of the three types.

Offense First – Notice the adverb "first" (and with the second type, defense "first"). That was not placed there haphazardly. It's key to the understanding that an offense first team, when considering its strategy and tactics possibilities, will always look for the offensive ones "first". It may not ultimately choose that course of action but it's clearly the first consideration!

Defense First – On the other end of the spectrum are the teams that will consider the defensive options first. Like their offense first cousins, they may not choose the defensive path for a variety of reasons, and choose to play quite offensively.

Blended Attack – As the term implies, this is a combination of offense and defense and, as I will illustrate, can be the most challenging way to play.

In each case, there are three key components that are required for a team to play effectively and the first component is the same for all three. You either want to play like an offense first team, a defense first team or a blended attack team or you feel a necessity to play like one of them. You never have to justify your desire to play in one of the three styles. It may not be prudent for reasons I will soon illustrate but it's your choice. From time-to-time, an offense first team will play like a defense first team or a blended attack team. From time-to-time, a defense first team will play like an offense first team. And, by definition, a blended attack team will ultimately have to decide to continue to play offensively or defensively.

There was a time in our sport when a team could play like an offense first team or a defense first team from one end of the season to the other. Those times are gone! **Job #1 is clearly to learn to play as effectively as possible "your natural way" but sooner or later, your team will have to learn to play like the other two!!!** That's simply the competitive environment in which we find ourselves today.

For each style of play there is also a team skill set necessary. **For an offense first team, the finesse shots must be played well.** You know what they are, the taps, guards, come-arounds, freezes etc. **A defense first team will play the up weight** particularly well. They are the take outs, peels etc. **And a blended attack team must be able to play all the shots well.** I believe I mentioned earlier that a blended attack style, although perhaps the best way to play, can be the most challenging.

Here's where the rubber meets the road. For each style of play there is an intangible quality that can't be ignored, which is exactly what so many teams do!

An offense first team must be resilient! It will play with many stones in play. It needs to be aware and accept the fact that it's providing scoring opportunities **for both teams** and occasionally, the opposition will be the one to score. If your team is playing that style and that occurs, you can't look as though someone has shot your dog! That can't bother you! **A defense first team needs patience and plenty of it.** It's going to be involved in many close, low scoring games with most going down to the last stone of the last end or even an extra end. If you are uneasy about that, then perhaps that's not the style for you. **And for the blended attack team, who must decide not only between offense and defense but exactly when to do so, you need someone to make the decision and three others to seamlessly agree. It puts a lot of pressure on your team dynamics.** They had better be rock solid (pun intended)! Sometimes is difficult to know if your natural way to play is that of a blended attack team. Here's a good measuring stick. If your team, likely through the one calling the shots, is constantly **calculating the odds**, then that's a reasonably good sign that you have the makings of a blended attack team.

An offense first team usually does not calculate the odds. Exactly the opposite is true and occasionally they will "buck the odds" (imprudently in my mind especially when the team does not have last stone advantage) and get burned, sometimes "in spades". The same is true for a defense first team but in a slightly different disguise. They will be so protective against a potential scoring threat (they're like a long-tailed-cat-in-a-room-full-of-rocking-chairs) that it borders on paranoia.

As you can see, step #1 is an off-ice activity that might require several hours or at least several sessions. It's time well spent! Not only that, it's essential that you do so! You need to make this decision wisely. Take a good hard look at how your team really plays. It should be based upon what I call "competitive data" and that's not "shooting statistics" per se. I will have more to say on that subject in another essay in this series but for now accept that's it's what's really happening on the ice, not what the members of the team "think" is happening or would like to see happen!

STEP TWO – FORMULATE A GAME PLAN

This is the one aspect of strategy that most curling teams "attempt" at least. Usually there will be a discussion about how they plan to play various stages of the game taking into account a variety of factors. That's a good thing so I'll simply help you streamline that process. Drum roll please! Here's another definition.

A Strategic Game Plan serves as your team's general blueprint to start the game, previewing your basic objectives along with your intended progression from the first end to the last. (Full marks to my friend Rob Krepps for this one.)

The operative words here are "general" and "start". Here is some new terminology to help. If, you decide to start the game playing like an offense first team, then you intend to **pursue** scoring opportunities. That might change quickly but that's OK. Remember, it's only a plan to "start" the game. On the other hand, again due to reasons known only to you and your team mates, you may feel that it's best to **protect** against scoring threats by your opposition in the initial stages of the game. You may discover rather quickly that you have your "A" game and your opposition is struggling and decide to take advantage of the situation and switch to offense and therefore begin to pursue scoring opportunities. Lastly, you may decide to play a more wait-and-see role and play shots primarily to see the reaction you get from the opposition. As a result, you **probe** in the early portion of the game.

That's it! Your game plan then is to **pursue, protect or probe**. Three simple yet powerful words!

STEP THREE – DECIDE UPON AN END PLAN

This, in my mind, is a great failing for so many curling teams. Before I go on about this, another drum roll please, definition. ***A Strategic End Plan serves as your team's specific blueprint to start an end, clearly defining your outcome priorities along with the tactics that you will use to achieve them.*** (More thanks to Rob.)

Notice this time it's not a "general" plan, it's a "specific" plan but again, it's only a plan to "start" the end. That plan can switch on just one shot. You might decide, again for a variety of reasons, to pursue a scoring opportunity. Therefore you will play the end as an offense first team would play it. On the other hand, again for a variety of reasons, you may feel it's more prudent to protect against a scoring threat from the opposition and therefore begin the end playing like a defense first team. If you believe that it's in your best interests to simply place stones in potential positions waiting to see how the end unfolds, then you start the end playing like a blended attack team.

The terminology adopted for an end plan includes colours, **green, red and yellow**. Yes, it's like a traffic signal! Green means "go", red means "stop" and yellow signifies "caution". And here's where a little

team dynamics comes into the picture. Team dynamics is all about effective and efficient communication both on and off the ice. In this case here's a suggestion I know works.

When the end concludes and the thirds (mates) agree on the score (that's the official conclusion to an end of curling by the way) have your third/mate meet with the skip at center ice. Turn to the scoreboard and consider those "big three" factors (*end, score & last stone advantage*). Decide between you what the next end plan will be (green, red or yellow). By the time the third/mate returns to the delivery end, the stones should have been cleared at which time the message can be passed along to the front end. Do this for each and every end!!!! If your team does nothing else, this alone will improve your w/l record!

STEP FOUR – CALL THE SHOT

If you have done steps 1, 2 & 3, the shot to be called will literally bubble to the surface. In some cases there may be more than one shot that fits the bill. In that case take a look at the player who will be playing the shot. Duh, choose the one that he/she is most likely to make and with a tactic to match (wow, this is cerebral stuff isn't it?)!

SUMMARY

STRATEGIC DNA	GAME PLAN	END PLAN	SHOT
offense first	pursue	green	finesse
defense first	protect	red	up weight
blended attack	probe	yellow	potential

PARTING THOUGHTS

This entire essay was intended to provide a template for your team to understand the difference between strategy and tactics, to understand the process of establishing a plan and to motivate you and your team to take the time, away from the ice surface to proceed through the process. I'm well aware that some of you, reading to this point, might be somewhat disappointed. You expected, at some point, that I would help you call the right shot. Well, I did but in the manner of the parable of the starving fisherman. Rather than give you fish to eat which will keep you alive for a finite period of time, I've provided the fishing gear and skill to use it so you can feed yourself indefinitely.

Be realistic! It's great to watch the athletes on TV but trying to emulate their strategy and tactics can be disastrous to your club team. Make the most of the shots your team plays well. List them and stay within them. That doesn't mean that your team needs to be locked into those shots. If your team feels it lacks some of the weapons it needs, get some help from coaches and instructors in your area. There's no rule that states that a club team can't practise!

Think "outside the box"! Don't fall into lockstep with your contemporaries. Be prepared to use tactics that are not quite so common. There's more than one way to play many shots. If you choose a less common tactic, one your team has practised and mastered, it can prove problematic for your opposition.

There is no "risk free" strategy regardless of the type of team you are (offense first, defense first or blended attack). An offense first team risks having a big end scored against it. By the very nature of the way an offense first team plays (lots of stones in play) it creates potential scoring opportunities for BOTH teams. Occasionally your opposition will take greater advantage of that situation by simply playing at a higher level in an end or, again due to the fact there are so many stones in play, get a lucky "tick-tac-toe" shot leaving you up to a particular body part in alligators, a situation from which your noble "last rock chucker" cannot bail the team. When that happens, you can't fold you tent! On the other hand, that defense first team that's constantly protecting against scoring threats will give up scoring opportunities in doing so. And, I think I've already established that the nice, safe role of blended attack is fraught with risks, not the least of which is the strain on team dynamics in addition to miscalculating those odds.

Lastly, don't blame strategy when it's tactics that are your problem (now that you know the difference between them). This is all about "making curling shots!"

Enjoy working with your athletes. I'll see you soon behind "a pane in the glass"!