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PRESENTS THE COACHING SERIES...

"A PANE IN THE GLASS"

The Oil Light

by Bill Tschirhart

One of the memorable coaching experiences for me came about when I was asked to join with a noted sports psychologist in the community that hosted the national women's championship that year. The idea was that he would present the theory of sports psychology while I added a practical note from time to time. Our target audience was a group of local coaches who attended the one day session on the opening weekend of the aforementioned championship.

At the conclusion of the coaching symposium, we received very positive feedback which was most gratifying but the best part was the new friend I had made in my co-presenter. To add value, he was also the sports psychologist to one of the teams in the competition, a team that was favoured to do well. Since my sports psychologist friend was relatively new to the sport of curling, he asked if I might sit with him to explain the technical and strategic aspects of the game. I was pleased to do so.

Our first opportunity was in draw number four. His team sported a 1-2 w/l record at the time and things were not going well in the game we were witnessing. And that's when it happened.

The skip called a relatively routine shot of the second player. As I recall, it was an open draw to the four foot with the brush on the edge of the eight foot circle. As the skip placed the brush, the second shouted loudly from the business end of the sheet that she wanted the other turn!

When I recount this situation at high performance camps, I engage in a little role playing to display the body language of the skip as she reacted to her teammate's admonition, no let me rephrase that..**command** to set the brush for the other rotation, but since I can't display my best thespian skills for you, suffice to say that the skip reacted with great disdain and literally stomped across the sheet and slammed the brush into its new position. Upon noticing this, I playfully jabbed my elbow into my companion's ribs and added, "Lots of luck, Doc!" to which he replied with a statement that I shall never forget, "**The oil light is on!**"

My reaction to his "oil light" statement was puzzlement as I didn't have the foggiest idea where this was headed. He went on to explain that the oil light is the "engine light" on the instrument panel in one's vehicle. He asked me the same question I will now ask you.

"When you're driving and the oil light/engine light illuminates, there are three things you must do and in a set order. What are they?"

The answer seemed obvious to me. **First you must stop!** If you continue to drive you can and likely will do serious damage to the most valuable part of the vehicle, the engine. After you have stopped, duh, **you need to find out what's wrong** and **then make the necessary repairs.** It's pretty basic! But how does this apply to a team?

He went on to say that for every team, at least once in every season, the oil light will come on for the team. Unfortunately so many teams don't recognize it and move along only to "crash and burn" sooner or later in the season. Someone needs to recognize the light and begin the process described above. But how do you know the oil light is on?

- **Performance drops.**
- **Players lose trust and faith in one another.**
- And the big one, **one player blames another for the team's woes.**

It's clearly more difficult to recognize the oil light on a team that does not have a coach than for one that does!

Fortunately for the team in question, they had a skilled and caring sports psychologist. Immediately following the game he sat them down and informed them that if they continued down the path they had chosen, it was highly unlikely they would perform well with a potential national championship equally unlikely. This team was comprised of three players who had skipped at a high level and thankfully, a dedicated lead. The sports psychologist looked the two "skips" who were playing third and second and asked them if they wanted to continue on their own agendas or play their position to the best of their ability and help to make the team become greater than the sum of its parts (where have you heard that before)? In other words, he stopped the team in its tracks, stated what was wrong and provided the solution. The rest was up to the team. Fortunately the team heeded his advice, made the right choices and "ran the table" in the round robin and continued its fine play in the playoffs and were crowned national champions.

This was a happy ending, but I suspect that there are many teams who either ignore the oil light or are not aware of its signals with dire consequences. But, now you know better! Don't fall victim to the oil light.

In the next essay in the series I'm going to provide the best activity I know to avoid the oil light in the first place. Stay tuned and for coaches, enjoy working with your athletes. I'll see you soon behind a pane in the glass.