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PRESENTS THE COACHING SERIES...

“A PANE IN THE GLASS”

Straight, Simple and Silent

by Bill Tschirhart

The genesis of this essay was a golf tournament, and not just any golf tournament, but the Canadian Open at Royal Montreal in 2001. I was in the Montreal area on the basis of an invitation from my friends at Curling Quebec to participate in a high performance camp. Someone got tickets to the opening round of the golf tournament and suggested I arrive one day early to use the tickets to take in the round. After about 0.75 sec. of agonizing personal debate I relented and booked my flight. Watching a golf tournament is the best spectator sport in my opinion. You can choose your seat and remain there as long as you wish. You can follow a group or watch them all pass by your location. I chose not to be among the thousands who followed one Eldrick Tiger Woods around the fabled grounds of Royal Montreal but rather parked myself beside a tee box and watched the best athletes in the world as they “hit the golf ball”. I wanted to take note of both the differences in their respective golf swings but more importantly, what they all did that was the same. My conclusion was that for a two foot span of the golf swing (one foot before the club met the ball and one foot following) virtually every golfer looked the same. What happened leading up to the two foot span, and after it, was frequently different. On the way back to the hotel, I started to think about a curling delivery in the same manner. The result was “Straight, Simple, Silent”. Enjoy!

One of the great delights in working with high performance curlers in Canada and around the world is the participant observations one can't help make. From a technical point of view, it is obvious to this observer that virtually all the best players of our game have three aspects of the delivery which are identical. Music has its "three tenors", comedy its "three stooges", literature the "three musketeers" and now curling has its three S's; STRAIGHT, SIMPLE and SILENT.

I am amazed at how "straight" elite curlers can slide. There is nary a hint of a drift in their slides. How do they do that? The key is the position and the movement of the sliding foot.

In the stance or hack position, balance (the real key to sliding straight) is achieved by placing one foot under one shoulder and the other foot under the other shoulder. The "hack foot" (yes, that's the one actually in the hack), will have the toe on the bottom of the hack* and the ball on the

sloped portion. The "sliding foot" (the slippery one) is flat on the ice with (now follow this) the heel of the sliding foot opposite the toe of the hack foot. Why? Balance!

But the key to all of this is what coaches who have taken courses from me know as "the silly little space". The space is the distance between the hack foot and the sliding foot while in the hack position. *It should be about the same as the width of a brush handle.* But, most curlers don't do that. Most curlers have the sliding foot on the ice overlapping or directly in front of the hack foot. They say it gives them better balance in the hack (the jury is out on that by the way). Good idea except for one small item. The sliding foot has to "move"! If your sliding foot is in front of the hack foot, you will have to move it around the hack foot in a pattern we call a "C" curve. Think about this. You want to slide forward in a straight line and the only thing which connects you to the ice moves in a curved path...hmmm! Bottom line, move the sliding foot as you will, but move it straight. How much the sliding foot moves is the topic of a future essay on power.

As the stone moves forward, the sliding foot moves behind the stone. And that's another interesting point. Some players don't have their sliding foot directly behind the stone for a very good reason. It has to do with eye dominance. If you are right handed AND right eye dominant, it is unlikely that you will want to have the stone on the midline of your body. If you did, you wouldn't be seeing the target with your dominant eye, which is your right eye in this instance. You probably will shoot off your right shoulder. There was a time when as an instructor I might try to "correct" this fault but I know better now. I'll be sending a separate essay on "eye dominance" in the near future.

Before we leave this topic, let's discuss line of delivery. The athletes with whom I work ALL slide straight. You must do that if you have any hopes of playing this game at an elite level. A certified instructor can teach anyone to do that. It's strictly mechanics. But what's the sense of sliding straight if you slide straight off line most of the time? There is another ingredient which you must do each and every time you execute a shot. You must **establish** the line of delivery. I enjoy asking players what body part they use to line up in the hack. I get quite a variety of responses from hack foot, to hack knee, to hack thigh, to shoulders to... I rarely get the best answer. It's "hips". You see, the lower extremities can move around without the whole body actually changing direction. Shoulders can't turn much without affecting the entire body. But, move your hips and you move everything. Hips are the most *reliable* body part for alignment. As a result, I encourage curlers to stand slightly behind the hack, set the hips square to the intended line of delivery, get into the hack, then use some of the secondary body parts such as those listed above. Once you are lined up, forget that aspect of the delivery. If you can slide straight, it's over! Concentrate on the correct weight for the shot!

I use a red center line ribbon to demonstrate the various lines of delivery to a new curler. I place one end at the hack and roll out the ribbon to various places in the house at the other end of the sheet. Now, as a player, I can't help but visualize my red ribbon as I line up behind the hack and reach forward with my hack foot on line with my red ribbon (pay attention to this seemingly useless bit of trivia as it is foreshadowing). By doing this you have established your line of delivery.

Where is the sliding foot during the slide? It should be directly below the base of the sternum (that long, narrow cartilaginous portion of one's anatomy in the breast area which connects most of the pairs of ribs). That's the balance point for most people! At this point, ***the weight of your body should be evenly distributed on your slider!***

"Simple" refers to all the movements in the course of the delivery. Extraneous movements can only detract from the purpose of the delivery, which is to propel the stone with the proper velocity on the desired line. Only by examining one's delivery in some recorded medium can one determine if all the movements are required. You don't need an instructor for this. Just ask yourself "why" each time you see a body part move. If you can't come up with a reason for it, then you might get some help. In most cases you'll simply change or remove the movement.

Extraneous movement is a dead giveaway that a curler either does not practise or does not have access to a delivery clinician. Keep it simple! All the best curlers do. You should as well.

In the last few years, it has become obvious to me that curling deliveries of our most elite athletes are becoming less and less complicated. With all due respect to recreational curlers, they, as a group, rarely practise. They rarely attend curling clinics and as a result, rarely even think about making changes to their deliveries. And, when you see them play, they have the most complicated deliveries imaginable. On the other hand, our elite athletes attend high performance camps and get the best instruction they can find. They practise purposefully. They think about and understand the curling delivery. As a result their curling deliveries are clearly in the simple category. Hmmm?

"Silent", the last "S", is probably the most important. It refers to the release. ***If you have a million dollar delivery and a two cent release, you have a two cent delivery!*** It may seem strange that I would describe the release by volume. I really don't mean silent, as in the absence of sound, but rather that it is so smooth, it appears silent. We have all seen curlers whose release looks like an explosion with the hand literally flying off the handle (a noisy, inconsistent release to be sure).

A great release begins with the grip. The second finger pads are on the bottom of the handle and together. The side of the thumb is on the side of the handle. The wrist is high. This position promotes a smooth, *silent* delivery.

In the hack, with this grip, the handle is set at either 10 o'clock (for a clockwise rotation) or 2 o'clock (for a counterclockwise rotation). As you slide toward the release point, rotate the stone, with a positive rotation from the initial position (2 or 10 o'clock) through to 12 o'clock. Open your hand (it will now be in the "hand shake" position) and leave it there until the stone comes into your field of vision. If all members of the team use this grip and release, the "look" is the same for all players on the team. Life then becomes so much simpler for your skip. The whole team benefits.

By the way, when was the last time you checked the distance from the start of your rotation until the actual release? It should not exceed the length of a brush handle. Have someone stand along

the side line and drop one glove at the onset of rotation, and the other at the release point. The owner of the gloves should be able to pick them up without moving!

Another thing. As a team, does everyone release the stone at basically the same place? Take four cups and place the numerals 1 through 4 on the bottom of each. Place them at the release point (along the sideboards) of each player (the lead is 1, the second is 2, etc.) Be sure to check a variety of weights when you do this. If you discover that release points are all over the map, make some changes. This is a team sport.

Oh, by the way, please don't stifle (as Edith Bunker would have said) your follow through. Let your delivery come to its natural conclusion, all the while posing with that release hand. And when you do come to a stop, check to see if you're still on "my red ribbon". You should be if you slid straight.

Here's a coaching hint. Try to impress upon your athletes that if they are to improve a curling delivery, they first must understand it. Ask your athletes to describe their delivery in detail. You will be amazed how many struggle to do this. It's the "in detail" part that is the key. Once you understand the biomechanics of the delivery, it is easier to examine one's own and then change it.

You may wish to refer to essay #18 in this series, "[Delivering the Curling Stone 101](#)".

The three S's, are they evident in your athletes' deliveries? Check that out and I'll see you soon behind a pane in the glass.

**Some coaches/instructors insist that the hack foot be placed into the hack in such a way that the foot does not actually touch the bottom. They want the hack foot to be entirely on the sloped portion of the hack so there's no chance that the toe of the hack foot (the very last part of the hack foot in contact with the hack before it leaves) will slip on the base of the hack which can be well worn and slippery in many curling facilities. I get that!*