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PRESENTS THE COACHING SERIES...

**“A PANE IN THE GLASS”**

**THE DANGERS OF LEARNING ABOUT  
CURLING STRATEGY BY WATCHING TV**

by Bill Tschirhart

I love to go into curling facilities in the weeks immediately following a TV event! I see devoted, dedicated recreational curlers “trying” to emulate their curling heroes by copying the type of strategy and tactics seen on TV. I just shake my head but I do enjoy the amusement! They need to give their heads a shake and here’s why.

ICE

The ice that’s prepared for a “made for television” event is dramatically unlike any ice upon which you’ve likely ever played. I call it “pampered ice”. And just as the name implies, it’s ice that has been prepared with tender loving care, for a specific event and for players with exemplary skills with special emphasis on weight control.

How many golfers do I have out there? If you consider yourself a serious/competitive/low handicap golfer and have never played on a course that has been prepared for a professional tournament, if you get the chance, take it but it will be a humbling experience. Trust me!

Forget that the holes will be 15-20 % longer than those to which you have become accustomed. The fun will start on the greens. If you three putt one or two greens per round, you’ll triple or quadruple that and you may even have (ugh) a four putt experience or two for

your resume. Augusta National, home of the famous Masters Golf Tournament is a perfect example. On television, the greens almost appear normal but in actuality, if you were to play them it would appear as though someone had buried elephants on most of them. And they are f-a-s-t with a capital “F”! Good luck with that! Traps, oh yes, traps, you may not even be able to see the putting surface from most of them. Lastly, on your home course where you acquired that low handicap, the level of the greens and the fairways are mostly consistent. On that pro course the greens are almost all elevated so choose the right club my friend and don’t be wrong.

Pampered ice is much like that. It rewards shots that are delivered perfectly but shots that are not, especially if the weight is incorrect, are punished. At your home curling facility, the ice is prepared for game after game. By that simple fact alone, it must be durable. Unlike pampered ice which is scraped following each draw, curling facility ice might get scraped every few days if you’re lucky. Due to regular scraping, the quality of the pebble is different. The elite teams you see on TV get lots of “finish” on their draws. They can draw behind a stone that’s just biting the top of the 4’ and bury it on the lid. Try that one at your own club! Then, if that triple raise takeout is required, with “up weight” a stone that will draw 6’ will run almost perfectly straight on pampered ice. If you had 6’ of draw at your club, you’d need a least 1’ with full takeout weight for a hit.

Curling facility ice is generally very forgiving. Pampered ice is not! Deliver the wrong weight and your stone will take a path that will have you looking for a place to hide.

As a result, the strategy and tactics employed by those TV curlers is very different!

## STONES

As you might imagine, the stones used for TV spiels are not your garden variety stones either. They are a select set of stones that are used primarily for elite events. They are prepared to be “aggressive” (curl) when matched with that aforementioned pampered ice. The preparation referred to is sometimes used in curling facilities but usually to the chagrin of the club members as this “preparation” is not permanent. In fact, it is quite temporary but it makes for stones that “perform” to the extent that the strategy and tactics employed by TV teams is significantly different from that of their recreational colleagues.

Even though the stones used in these events are manufactured and selected for that purpose, each elite team has a “rock book” that documents the characteristics of each of them. The result is that an elite team rarely if ever, asks a stone to do something it simply can’t do. My guess is that most recreational curlers do not have such a book and rarely give much thought to the different characteristics of stones. They are NOT all alike!

Before I leave the issue of stones, there’s one more difference between elite and recreational teams. Elite teams have a thorough understand of how stones will react when they come into contact with one another. Sure, they likely will have played many more games than most recreational teams but there’s another reason for this knowledge base. They take the time in practice (oh, there’s that “p” word again) to set stones into positions they feel they’ll encounter in games and try different contact points with target rocks to actually witness the results. What a novel idea!

## BRUSHING

I’m going to be brutally blunt here. The brushing exhibited by the vast majority of recreational curlers pales, I mean PALES in comparison to the brushing the elite teams get primarily from front ends who are not only very fit in terms of cardio-vascular and muscular & endurance strength but have excellent technique to take advantage of that level of fitness to say nothing about their ability to judge the weight of the stone. Elite brushing, combined with the ice and stones referred to above, can significantly affect the way a stone tracks down the ice.

On “club ice” stones track along a path that is relatively uniform in shape. In other words, the locus (path) of a moving rock forms a more or less regular curved line. On pampered ice, the rocks tend to track relatively straight and then “break”. If you’re not accustomed to watching for the “break point”, inexperienced brushers may brush the rock “through the break” and miss the shot. In the vernacular, the brushers make a lot more shots for their teammates than you might even think they do!

## SHOOTING PERCENTAGE

For the reasons stated above, the overall shooting percentage of elite teams is clearly superior. They make more shots therefore they can execute game and end plans more

effectively. They don't even think they MIGHT miss a shot. Most recreational curlers HOPE they make the shot. How can you assemble game and end plans on that basis?

### SHOT OUTCOME

Most recreational teams play the vast majority of their shots for one of two purposes. The called shot is either destined to either "be" shot rock to "remove" shot rock. Most of the shots called by elite teams are for neither of those reasons. Take notice of this the next time you watch a TV event. This more than anything else is a clear indication that the strategy employed by elite teams is different!

### ICE READING

Even though pampered ice is very consistent, elite teams create a mental topographical map so that if there are subtle anomalies from sheet to sheet, they are aware of them and know what to do with them. Again, they don't waste shots asking a stone do something the ice will not allow it to do. Recreational curlers tend not to have the desire or discipline to create such a topographical map. Mostly it's simply a matter of observance and memory (oh yes, don't forget about those rock characteristics, they might be more the cause of what you "see" than the ice). You'll notice that I said elite "teams" read ice very well. I did not say elite "skips". The entire team should know what the ice will allow!

### ROTATIONS

On occasion, an elite team will call upon a team member to deliver a shot whereby the stone rotates a number of times which is not within the 2 ½ - 3 rotation range recommended by the curling stone manufacturers to execute a particular shot within its end plan. Those "occasions" are relatively rare and require great skill and not all elite teams will even attempt to vary rotation, as it is fraught with danger. Don't even think about it!!!

### THE WEAPON

If there's one, single reason why elite teams play the way they do (lots of rocks in play) with what appears to be reckless abandon, especially early in ends, it's because the skip knows he (and I wish I could say "she" but I can't) has a team that at any time, can deliver a stone

accurately at high, and I mean HIGH velocity to not only redecorate the house, but do so in a manner that positively changes the situation. It's the one single factor that places those teams into that elite status. I'm not likely going too far onto a limb when I speculate that you don't have "the weapon". If I'm correct, then how can you play the way those elite teams play?

## STRATEGY/TACTICS DISCUSSIONS

In my strategy workshop, one of my aims and objectives is to provide a meaningful language so that teams can effectively talk about the strategy and tactics it will employ. And, even though the strategy and tactics employed by elite teams are surprisingly uncomplicated, they know exactly what the game plan and end plans are. Each member of the team is "on the same page". Experience has demonstrated to me that for recreational teams, there's rarely any discussion about a game plan and almost never is there any communication of end plans. I feel part of the reason for this is a lack of a common language which will allow a team to effectively communicate thoughts and ideas that ultimately can be put into action. I might suggest that if this is the case for your team, you read the essay on strategy presented earlier in this series (see p. 6).

## TACTICS

Thus far, if you're a recreational curler, you've taken some "hits" but now it's the elite teams' turn to take one.

In the previous section, I indicated that the strategy employed by elite teams is uncomplicated. Don't confuse that with stones in play. Some of the "situations" they face are really complicated due to the large number of stones and the equally large number of possibilities for different shots. I'm sure like me you have sat on your couch bewildered at the complexity of some ends.

When people question me about elite strategy I frequently characterize it as "***act and react***". At the risk of contradicting myself, there's not as much planning as you might think! Usually the "big three" factors (end, score & last rock advantage) drive any planning that does take place. Before a game, an elite team will have discussed the upcoming game and therefore know how it's going to start the game (pursuing scoring opportunities, protecting against scoring threats or positioning shots to determine the plan the opposition might use) but from there it's all

about the situation that exists based upon the shot executed by the opposition and how the team will react to it. The result of all of this is the rather limited array of tactics employed by elite teams.

The best example of this are the four lead stones played in most ends when the score is close and it's not near the end of the game. The first stone is a tight center line guard. The team with last stone advantage will draw around to a position in front of the tee line. The second lead stone of the team without last stone advantage will freeze to it followed by another freeze on the second stone of the team with last stone advantage. Game on! Usually at this point, one skip will ascertain that the "angles" are not suitable and a call upon "the weapon" to redecorate and then it's assess and reassess to the conclusion of the end.

That's a pretty limited array of tactics. There are other responses to that tight center line guard that you will rarely see on TV which, in my opinion, are just as effective as that draw around the guard. In my workshops I remind the participants that the team without last stone advantage wants three things to happen.

- restriction of the scoring area (thus the prerequisite tight center line guard)
- protection from the front (again, thanks to that tight center line guard & the 4 rock rule)
- protection from the back (which you provide when you draw around)

In essence, *if the team with last stone advantage employs the "draw-behind-the-center-line-guard" tactic it's doing exactly what the opposition wants!* Keep that in mind! I won't at this time go into the other tactics. I'll save that for another time but I'm sure you can be more creative than those elite teams.

I hope I've provided some evidence that you should not try to emulate your curling heroes in terms of strategy and tactics. They are wonderful role models in so many ways but the strategy and tactics you use should be based upon factors that exist for your team under the playing conditions you encounter. My suggestion is to re-read "[Strategy, It's Not Rocket Science or Brain Surgery](#)" from this series. If you don't have it or the dog ate it, send me an email message and I'll make sure you get it.

Before I close, I hope I have not offended recreational curlers nor discouraged them. My goal with this essay is to help them play better by avoiding the TV pitfall. What I hear from recreational curlers is, “We just play for fun!” If that’s the case, why do recreational curlers have a much broader grin and “appear” to enjoy the game more when they perform better?

Don’t confuse “performance” with “competition”. You can improve performance and ultimately enjoy the game much more without competing. It’s quite possible to improve your personal and team performance without feeling that your team should hit the “cash spiel trail”. Oh, and by the way, those elite curlers you see on TV, they’re having a great time!

I’ll see you soon behind, “A Pane in the Glass”!