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PRESENTS THE COACHING SERIES...

"A PANE IN THE GLASS"

Routine vs. Ritual

By Bill Tschirhart

As humans, we universally share many characteristics, not the least of which is the fact we are creatures of habit. We would rather continue to do something that's counterproductive, irrelevant, pointless (insert negative adjective here) than change, even though the change might be productive, relevant, meaningful (insert positive adjective here).

Absolutely the very worst reason to continue to follow a particular course of action is because you've always done it that way but I hear that so often, frequently when someone tries to justify why he/she does something a certain way all the while expecting different results. Do you realize, that's a definition of insanity, a definition I cite frequently, "*insanity (n) - doing the same things over and over but expecting different results*". Curling teams are the champions at this in the guise of preparation.

I have sat with countless teams who have looked me straight in the eye and exclaimed, "*We're going to enter more bonspiels. We're going to practise more frequently. We're going to practise longer. We're going to join more leagues.*" Great ideas! The only problem is, you might simply provide opportunities to get really, really good at doing the wrong thing. Practice can be dangerous, but that's for another time.

As a professional educator, I spent about half my time in the classroom and the other half on fields, courts, diamonds etc. Those who know me well might suggest I enjoyed my time more in the latter educational environments. I have a surprise for them. They'd be wrong. I really liked the classroom part of my career! I liked to experiment with my students. For example, I didn't like "seating plans". I wanted to know with whom the students wanted to sit. It told me much about them as individuals and as a group. So, when the administration allowed, I had no seating plans and I announced that to my students. Guess

what? Even though they could sit anywhere in the classroom they wished and that could change each and every day, I was amazed that with very few exceptions, the students sat in the same desk for every class. Young people like structure. They don't like surprises. You can guide a young person in pretty much any direction when you thoughtfully take the time to explain what's going to happen, why it's going to happen and where and when it's going to happen. It's when you leave out those precepts you get into difficulty. Trust me!

Adults are no different. I recall attending university classes. There were no seating plans of course. Guess what, I sat in the same desk pretty much for every class. Why? Comfort! It made me feel secure. It was the known as opposed to the unknown.

When it comes to motor skills, that comfort level is quite evident. Watch anyone who learns a new skill. Once the basics have been mastered, the individual will prepare to perform ritualistically. They will repeat the same actions, some seemingly irrelevant to the task at hand, each and every time. If you were to ask them why they do those things, the first reaction will likely be surprise. There was no awareness of the action whatsoever. Even if the person did know the idiosyncrasies exhibited, I dare say he/she could not likely provide a plausible explanation for them. That's ritual, *repeating an action with little or no awareness or reason.*

As curlers, we all have pre-shot rituals. My favourite is the facial expressions that curlers have when they are sliding with the stone and are about to release it. There's a certain curler in the southern hemisphere who is the champion facial contortionist. It defies description. You have to see it to believe it! Ritual can also be a tug on the sleeve, a tap on the spectacles, a rub of the nose etc. all done to place you into your comfort zone. No explanation required!

But, talk with elite athletes especially in our sport and you'll learn that each has a pre-shot routine as well, a carefully choreographed series of actions, some physical and some mental, each with a purpose. And there you have the difference between ritual and routine. ***Routines are repeated actions which have a purpose while rituals are simply repeated actions.***

Some of the more famous pre-shot routines belong to Colleen Jones (that sip of water was not to quench thirst but I'm not sure where the twist of the hair fits into her scheme) and Russ Howard (that spin of the stone was not to remind him of the rotation required on the shot). What you don't "see" are the array of mental routines that elite athletes use prior to executing the shot. For example, from everything I have heard and read from sports psychologists, a mantra is an essential component to a pre-shot routine.

I wish I could provide a list of pre-shot routines that each curler must have in his/her repertoire but that's virtually impossible since we are all different, but one thing's for sure in my mind, ***if you haven't prepared a thoughtful pre-shot routine with each component selected for specific purpose, you are sabotaging that sound technical curling delivery you have worked so hard to acquire.***

Enjoy working with your athletes, help them establish sound pre-shot routines and I'll see you soon behind "a pane in the glass".