



The Curling Manual: Advanced Strategy

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Advanced Strategy

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The subject of advanced strategy comes up a great deal. Many people ask how to improve their strategy beyond the basic principles. Unfortunately there is no absolute answer for any strategy since all games, players and shots change continuously. Typically, the same guidelines and principles that apply to basic strategy also apply to advanced. The biggest difference is the proficiency level used in applying the skills. Advanced strategy is the combination of:

1. Your team's technical skills
2. Your skip's game plan and shot calling tactics

For example, a team that is highly proficient in shot making and sweeping can easily apply a more complex, higher level of strategy than the developing team. Another example is your skip's ability to assess the opponent's technical ability. A highly trained curling instructor will be more proficient at this than a curler of similar experience but with no training or fault analysis background.

Getting the most out of your team

A rule of thumb in advanced strategy is knowing what your team can do and never asking them to do what they can't. This sounds simple and logical but many skips ask the team to throw rocks that have a "high degree of difficulty" when a simpler shot can achieve almost the same result.

The Basic Rule

With only a few exceptions, skips today play the hammer ends to either blank or score multiple points, depending on the end and score. With the Free Guard Zone Rule, scoring two or more is easily achieved with even a moderate degree of shot making skills. The non-hammer skip will usually try to steal or hold the opponent to only one. These conflicting strategies make the game fun.

This section covers some advanced topics. It is essential that you are familiar with the basic concepts first. The Basic Strategy Section will move you through basic and intermediate levels of game planning and shot calling. This section takes the skills in the Basic Strategy section and uses them to win games.

Advanced topics included in this section are:

- **Game Control**
- **The Automatic Deuce**
- **Assessing Your Opponent**
- **Professional Skipping**

Game Control

"Control" is a very broad term. In curling strategy it means positioning your team to win. A good skip will always give the team an opportunity to win, providing the team has a moderate skill level. Being "in control" of a game can be defined as:

- Tied or ahead with the hammer
- Two or more points ahead without the hammer

Many top-level skips believe that a score of “**down one with the hammer**” in the late, even ends is also a control position. This varies with each skip. Talk to as many skips as you can to get a sense of this.

Let’s assume that your opponent can execute a two-point strategy at will with the hammer (the “automatic deuce” is discussed later). This means if your opponent has the hammer, they can score two with good shot-making. If you are tied, your opponent will move up two with their deuce. If you are up one, they will be up one after the deuce. The key to game control is to position yourself so that you will be in control even when your opponent scores two.

When to Take Control

Positioning yourself for control begins with the coin toss (or in competition, the assignment of the hammer). After you have assessed your opponent in your pre-game meeting (basic strategy), you may decide to “spar” for an end or two. This means playing open, conservative shots until you feel comfortable enough with the ice to be more aggressive. If you have the hammer in the first end, you may decide to play for control from the beginning. Scoring two in the first end of any game is significant as it puts you in a control position from the beginning.

Game control is much more significant in the later ends of the game. It is absolutely critical in the concluding ends (8, 9 and 10).

Obviously the amount of effect control has on the outcome the game is determined by how long or at what point you are in control. Although being two points ahead after the first end of a ten end game is significant, it is much less significant than the same score after eight. The classic control position would be having last rock in the late, even ends of a close game.

One thing that skips have different opinions on is whether or not it is considered a control position to be down one with the hammer in the tenth end. Many skips believe this to be a control position because they believe the automatic deuce concept.

The Automatic Deuce

Since the four-rock Free Guard Zone Rule was put into play in the early 1990’s, the nature of game strategy has changed considerably. If either of the two skips are willing to play aggressively (more rocks in play), the other skip must play along, at least for the first few rocks. No longer can a team decide to play hits all game unless the opponent is also willing to play this way. The automatic deuce concept refers to the ability of any team at any time to score at least two rocks with the hammer. For this to happen, the hammer team must execute at 90-100% in the end. Oddly, the non-hammer team can give up two points (scenario #2) without missing a shot. Below are some examples of how to take two at will.

Scenario #1 - Red is down four with the hammer in the sixth end of the game. Clearly the

hammer team (red) must get back into this game.

Yellow Lead #1	Throw-through
Red Lead #1	Corner guard
Yellow Lead #2	Tries the “tick” shot and misses
Red Lead #2	Corner guard opposite side
Yellow Second #1	Peels corner guard #1
Red Second #1	Draws behind corner #2
Yellow Second #2	Peels corner #2
Red Second #2	Draws to opposite side to sit two

At this point the hammer team simply matches hits with the opponent for two points. In this scenario, the yellow team has essentially conceded two points here, probably to avoid giving up three or more. As you can see, the non-hammer team is powerless to defend against two if the hammer team can execute. In this case, the hammer team just scored two and is now down two. If they can hold their opponent to one in the next end, they regain hammer and can try this again, coming within one point.

Scenario #2 - Red is down one with the hammer. This is a close game, obviously and both teams may want to play more aggressive shots. Either way, you can score two if you execute.

Yellow #1	Draw to top four
Red #1	Corner guard
Yellow #2	Freeze to yellow #1 in the top four
Red #2	Hit and roll behind guard (leaves yellow #2 in four foot)
Yellow #3	Peel corner guard
Red	Hit and roll to other side of house

At this point, the hammer team simply matches hits with the opponent for two points. As you can see, the non-hammer team is again powerless to defend against two if the hammer team can execute. One key shot here is the hit and roll behind the corner. Another key shot in this scenario is the yellow team’s decision to peel the corner guard. Yellow gives up two without missing a shot. The reason yellow peels the guard is to defend against giving up three or more, which could happen if the guard is left in play.

Both scenarios point out the key role of the lead and second players. Without proper execution of the front-end, the team must rely on misses to score more than one point with the hammer.

Advanced Skills Assessment

Let’s assume that you have gone through a comprehensive assessment process with your own team so we can concentrate on the opponent. Good teams assess their opponents using a system, not just by trial and error. This section offers a few suggestions on assessing your opponent.

Assessing Your Opponent

Becoming a student of delivery mechanics makes you a better skip. Understanding the key components of the delivery can gain you a significant advantage when calling shots. Few players are mechanically perfect. Because of this, they have certain weaknesses in their deliveries that you can exploit.

Pre-game

Before the game is your first opportunity to assess your opponent. First look at equipment particularly the shoes and brooms. Low-end equipment can indicate low-end skills. Many teams have matching uniforms but this is not a good judge of skills.

Practice slide

A former world champion once told us “all players look good from the side”. This is quite true especially in the practice slide. Never judge a player by their practice slide alone. Most people are on their best behavior because lots of people are usually watching. Use the practice slide to judge the real basics such as balance.

Shaking hands

The handshake process is an overlooked area of skills assessment. It's very subtle because there is no direct correlation between interpersonal skills and good mechanics. There may be a correlation between interpersonal skills and personal confidence. The handshake is sometimes your first encounter with a certain person. A soft handshake with no eye contact can indicate shyness and possibly a lack of confidence or self-assuredness. Challenge this team earlier than you normally would. On the other hand, strong, confident handshakes may indicate confidence and self-esteem. You may not be able to take advantage here.

See *The Game Flow* section for the proper handshake method, W.E.S.T.

First rocks

The first time your opponents throw a rock in the game is the best time to assess the delivery mechanics. Note the position where they draw the rock back to. If it's not on the centerline, you can take advantage early on the different geometry of their line of delivery.

Balance

Remember, balance is the most fundamental of all delivery components. An out-of-balance delivery will cause inconsistency and line-of-delivery problems. Most out of balance right-handers will drift to the right. This means they tend to float the out-turns out and turn the in-turns in.

High/Low

Check how high the delivery is. This can be an indicator on how consistent the draw weight will be. A high delivery (head and chest almost upright) may be extremely consistent with the draw because they have a broader view of the playing field. This makes draw calibration easier. On the other hand, a low delivery, which looks impressive, will have difficulty with draw weight consistency.

Leg Drive

Note the type of leg drive for each opponent. A strong, stepped leg drive with no body drop will cause inconsistent draw weight. On the other hand, a fluid all-body delivery will be very consistent

Assessing Your Team

Before you successfully exploit your opponent's weaknesses, you must think objectively about you own team's skills. If you've been playing together for a long time, you probably understand their strengths and weakness through trial and error.

Professional Skipping

Good skips are made through time, training and experience. This section shares some tips from experienced skips that allow you to play within the rules and focus on executing the game tactics.

Skips Position

The rules allow the skips to take almost any position in or around the house. The "Spirit of Curling" dictates, to some degree the guidelines of good sportsmanship when it comes to positioning. Skips should first encourage their teammates to position as prescribed by the rules. Leads and seconds position themselves between the hog lines when not shooting or sweeping. The best teams in the world stick close to this rule.

Where should you stand as the non-throwing a skip?

Your first responsibility as a skip when the opponent is throwing is to assess the shot and ice. Position yourself behind the back line and stay still as the opponent is throwing. Distracting movement of any kind is a violation of the rules. In timed games, the throwing team has control of the sheet from hack to back line. Once the opponent's rock touches the tee line however, the rights of both skips are equal.

Position of the throwing skip.

Obviously, you have control of the house when your team is throwing. You are free to wander around the house looking at angles and assessing the situation. Once you decide on the shot, take a position roughly near the "center of action" of the called shot. The exceptions to this guideline are guards. Stand in the house for guards. This gives you a bigger perspective of the curl of the ice. You may need this knowledge later in the end.

Brooming

Deciding where to place the broom on any given shot is the skip's responsibility. In playdown games, the practice session will give you a good sense of how much curl there is on the ice. With no practice, the skip must decide without good information. As a general rule, place the broom 6-8 inches from the edge of the rock for takeouts. If the ice is perfectly straight, you will hit the edge of the rock. If it curls, sweep it and catch the other side. For draws, place the broom 2-3 feet from the intended target.

Place the broom on the ice on alignment with the line of delivery. Many inexperienced skips place the broom perpendicular to the tee line, regardless of house proximity. On outside shots, this will be inconsistent with the line of delivery and cause a visual problem for the thrower.

Sweep calls

Sweep call can be broken down into two categories:

1. Weight calls
2. Line calls

In the *Sweeping* section, we talked about how sweepers judge draw weight so we'll leave draw sweep-calls to them. Sweep calling for line is purely the skip's responsibility. Almost all shots have some "line" component. Knowing when to call sweeping for line is one of the most difficult parts of skipping. One reason why it's so difficult is because it's a very hard skill to teach. Good line callers have good spatial orientation. They can visualize the complete curl "arc" within the space of the sheet. Like other skills, some people are better at this than others. The first step in learning to judge line is to fully understand the arc of a curling rock. On a draw, the rock remains on the line of delivery for only a short time after release. As soon as the rock leaves the hand, the forces of friction (and frictional melting) take over and the rock begins to curl. There are several things that contribute to when and how much a rock will curl.

- Condition of the rocks – sharp or flat
- Ice conditions due to ice making
- Ice conditions due to wear and tear of a game
- Release point
- Release type (hard or soft)
- Any lateral movement at release

Any or all of these factors can contribute to when the rock will leave the line of delivery. This can differ from as much as a foot out of the hand to never. This is the real trick to sweep calling.

Generally, the desired outcomes on line calls for takeouts are rolls and caroms. Double and triple takeouts require good line calls. The best line callers visualize the entire arc that finishes "through" the intended rock target. Trying to call sweeping to hit a rock in a certain spot is much more difficult to do properly. Skips with weaker spatial skills must rely on this method.

Here are some tips for judging sweeping for line:

- Understand how your teammates release the rock
- Assess as quickly as possible the rock and ice conditions
- Stand a few feet back from the target area. This allows you to see a larger plain.
- Position yourself slightly inside the arc. Judging movement towards you is easier than judging movement away.
- Train yourself to anticipate the "break" (the point when the rocks leaves the line of delivery) of a rock

The Throw (drag)

The term "throw" is a billiards term used to describe how the forces of momentum and inertia

are applied when two or more pool balls make contact. The same principle applies in curling. When two stationary rocks are close together (within four inches) the action of a takeout on them will favor the path of the thrown rock. Even if the stationary rocks are miss-aligned, the arc of the moving rock will be continued. Stationary rocks four inches or more apart will carom.

Straight Side

If there is a difference in how the rock curls depending on the turn, choose the straight side for throwing takeouts. Assuming your teammates can come within 6 inches of the broom, contact will almost always occur. The same takeout on the curl side may miss entirely.

Live/Hot Hit – Dead/Cold Hit

These terms refer to how rocks move after they make contact with each other. Visualize the examples from the skip's position. An out-turn striking a rock on the left side will bounce off the rock in a lively fashion due to the rotation of the moving rock. The contact is working "with" the rotation. Hitting at the same point on the right side with an out-turn will come off "flat" or "dead" because the contact is working "against" the rotation.

Jam Side

This refers to takeout shots when there is another rock (usually yours) that you don't want to touch or "jam" onto. Play the shot on the opposite side of the arc. As viewed from behind, if the object rock is right and your rock is back and left, play the out-turn. It is less likely for your rock to over curl (sweeping) than to run straight. If you play the in-turn, there is 50% more chance of jamming your rock in back, particularly if the rock runs straight. The out-turn works with the arc and momentum.

Skipping Equipment

Skipping does not require special equipment. There are some advantages that can be gained through some quick equipment knowledge. If possible, wear a gripper over your slider when skipping. This will allow you to never get caught off balance and allows you to move quickly to an unanticipated situation.

Choose a broom that can be the most effective for short bursts of energy. High friction brooms are best since the skip generally sweeps from the tee line to the back line.

Skipping Etiquette

- Be as cordial as you can
- Avoid constant talking that might distract you and your opponent.
- Stand quietly with minimal movement when the opponents throw
- Never discipline your teammates during a game

Watching the clock

Another responsibility of the skip is to manage the clock during a championship game. It is your responsibility because you have overall control of the game. It's a good idea to appoint someone (usually the vice skip) to monitor the clock throughout the game and report slow or fast play to you.

Learn more about CurlTech's comprehensive and effective curling tools, techniques, and strategies at:

<http://www.curlingschool.com/>