

COACHING NEBCC

SKIPS and DIRECTORS at the HEAD

This is a transcript from a previous coaching clinic held at
North Epping Bowling Club.

Welcome

Welcome to today's coaching session on how to be a better Skip and Director at the Head. Today's program will include going out onto the green to look at reading the head and shot selection.

Introduction

Today's session is the result of some of our bowlers asking for help to improve their game as a skip and/or director at the head, to improve team harmony, and to learn about reading the bowls in the head so as to make a more informed choice of the shot to play. It is also hoped that the information will be of some benefit to those bowlers with limited experience who get asked to play skip or find themselves in a position where they have to be the director at the head.

Some of the things I am going to mention today are suggestions that I hope will not only build a better team but will encourage players to be a better team player and develop a better team spirit.

Content

Almost everything I am going to talk about really comes under the heading of communication. E.g. even when a decision has to be made on shot selection the call has to be communicated back to the player.

But before we get onto some of the communication issues let's have a look at what makes a good Skip and Director at the Head. Bearing in mind that as well as the skip being the director at the head, when he/she is at the mat end, the third in a four's game, second in a triple's game, and the first to play in a pair's game, all have to take on the roll of Director at the Head.

Skip

The role of a skip is most demanding as he/she has the responsibility of directing both players and play in such a manner that it will achieve the best possible result.

During a game of pennants (4 players per team) and 21 ends your team will deliver 168 bowls not including dead ends and the roll-up. Likewise the opposition will play the same number of bowls and the skip has to watch and pay attention to these as well. The skip should be concentrating and watching the 336 bowls to be played during the game and will have to make a shot selection for the majority of his teams deliveries. The skip must also continually assess the strengths and weaknesses of both teams in order to determine what shot to play.

Not all skips are necessarily the best players (though very often they are), but more importantly they should be a person who can keep everyone playing as a team. Good skips have an instinctive ability to manipulate play and players to his team's advantage. How often have you heard it said that: "A combination of average players working as a unified team can often beat a team of hotshots playing as individuals"?

Third/Director at the Head

The third/director in a four's game has to be a good bowler with the ability to play a range of shots. I also believe it is the most difficult position to play because most of the time you are being called to play shots with 8-11 bowls already in the head and you do not have the benefit of having viewed the head from close range. More on this later.

He/she must also have the ability to communicate and work in close harmony with the skip. He/she must be a diplomat in knowing when to provide information to the skip and when to remain quiet.

I would like to expand on this comment because it is a pet hate of mine if I see or hear the director at the head telling the skip what to play when he/she has just walked from the head or nothing has changed at the head. If the skip asks for an opinion then that is a different matter. I have seen situations where the third has told his skip what to play when passing and the third hasn't been to the head yet. If the opposition does this sort of thing then I really don't mind. I think it must work in our favour. There is a saying that has been around for a long time: "a good third must be up and shut up". However, some skips are a little more lenient in this regard and are more likely to want a second opinion. It is important however that the skip does maintain control of the team.

As far as I am concerned it is also a real NO-NO when someone still continues to provide information/feedback/instructions to a player that is on the mat ready to bowl. If the skip or director at the head wants to tell the bowler something and they are ready to bowl, they must be stopped, let them get back off the mat, and then give them the message before they start their delivery routine. If the bowler starts to think about the incoming message when he/she is about to bowl they cannot be concentrating on the two most important things that should be on their minds. '**LINE and LENGTH.**' In that order.

A good third should also accept some responsibility for team harmony. Anything negative at the end opposite the skip should be addressed by the third. Encourage team players if they are having a bad day and stop negative comments from your players, such as:- after a bad delivery,-"why did he/she call me on that hand;" or "what is the skip playing that hand for." If a player continues to do this sort of thing it will only undermine the team spirit. Maybe the player with the issue should be putting their hand up to be a skip. (At what grade you might ask?)

He/she should also be good at deciding the result at the completion of an end, and if asked, the position during play, (more on this when we talk about communication). Always measure if in doubt (better safe than sorry) and do not let the opposition talk you out of shots. It does happen. Today we will not be going into detail about deciding the result of an end and measuring unless time permits. If anyone does need help in this area you can always ask one of our coaches or one of the umpires.

Both the skip and whoever is director at the head have the responsibility of marking touchers, removing dead bowls and protecting the head. They should also have a good knowledge of the rules.

Communication

Now back to communication. Communication can be: verbal, body language, hand signals and other signals.

It is important to be aware of any hearing and/or visual difficulties of your team.

- **Before the game:** communication for the skip can start before you get on the green. Engage with the team. If a new player joins the team make them welcome. Make them feel wanted and part of the team. Establish what you expect from them and mention your game plan. Learn their strengths and weaknesses and explain your method of communication during the game, i.e. via the third and ask about when and/or if they like immediate feedback in relation to the length their bowl is either short of or passed the target (not always the jack).
- **Pre-match practice:** pre-match practice on the green you are about to play on is all about making sure your delivery is smooth, comfortable and coming out of the hand on the line you have selected. It is also about getting a good idea of the grass required and the speed of the green. Because I like my team to concentrate on draw bowls during this pre-match practice, I stay at the head removing short bowls until it is my turn to go to the mat end. I do not want my team to be practicing on shots and drives until they are happy with their draw game.

Let any new team players know why you do this. I do have a hand-out for this if anyone would like a copy.

- **During the game:** Rule no.1. **NO NEGATIVITY.** Be that verbal or body language. Remember that nobody puts down a bad bowl or makes a wrong call on purpose. For instance you should not have to tell someone to take more grass. If someone is having a bad day and is continually crossing the head; he/she does not need to be told to take more grass, they can see it for themselves; try using a bit of reverse psychology, ask the player for a positional bowl that does not cross the head. You may be surprised how often this can be successful. If a bowl is delivered off line but the weight is good, give positive feedback; say 'good weight'.

As a skip I like to sometimes communicate with my third in passing just to let him/her know what I am thinking about the situation at the head and particularly if I am aware of danger, e.g. no back bowls. Part of the reason for doing this is so that he/she does not think that they have to tell me what I already know. I will also sometimes just indicate what hand I am thinking of playing.

Other times I might ask the third to pass on a message to one of the players or say something to the third that also needs to be passed on to the rest of the team. Such as "it feels like the green has started to speed up/slow down; please mention it to the others".

It is difficult sometimes, and can be time consuming, to engage the lead and second in conversation during the game apart from giving positive feedback as they play. If it is necessary to say or ask something of the lead and/or second be prepared to do this in passing, but only if it is your mat. If it is **not** your mat then stay at the head end of the rink to talk to the player. You can then go to the mat end after the opposition has played and it is your mat.

- **Give clear directions:**

Hand to play: forehand or backhand. Hand well out to the side.

Other signals: position bowls. Wind direction. Be conscious of the hidden jack, show where it is.

Distance: Know what each player wants in the way of feedback like the distance long or short of the jack. Some players want to know as soon as their bowl has come to rest. If it is off line, again the bowler does not need you to tell them it is off line. They can see it for themselves. They can see how far off the line they are so your signal has to be an indication only of the distance long or short. Be accurate with these indications. [Demonstrate].

Position: for a positional bowl clearly indicate the hand to play and exactly where and possibly why you need the bowl there.

Weighted shots: They can be just through the target (jack/bowl), a metre on, through the head but don't lose your bowl, ditch weight or a full bloodied drive. Again there should be no confusion so it is important to give clear instructions that they must understand; remembering there can be hearing and sight problems.

Position at the head during play: if a player from the mat end asks for information at the head listen to the request and be accurate with your reply. If the request is: "what is the position?" He/she usually wants to know how many shots you are up or down. Have a good look and with both verbal and hand signals give your answer, e.g. one up; two down; etc., and if you think it appropriate point to the bowls in question.

If you are not sure this may be an appropriate time to suggest the bowler comes to the head to make up their own mind as well as help determine what shot to play.

If the request is "whose bowl is that on the way in?" You should be able to visualise the line the bowl will take and pointing at the bowl, indicate yours or theirs. Do not go around all the bowls on that side of the head indicating who owns what.

If the request is "that lasts bowl, what is it's relation to the jack?" again be accurate and if it is relevant give a reply in reference to 'jack high'. Does everyone know the meaning of 'jack high'?

Hand signals from the mat end: In most cases I tend to leave the lead to play their own game. It should not take them long to sort out the best hand to play. Be that up and back on one side of the green or around the clock if the conditions and the run of the green suggest that this is the most consistent. They should be aware that all I ask for is bowls in the head. My job is to let them know beforehand. However, if I notice a problem with a particular hand on the green I will talk to them about it and we make a change if warranted.

With my second and third I do not expect them to be on the mat until they know what shot is required. I often encourage them to indicate the hand they think they should play. The reason for this is that I then know what shot they are going to be most confident with and therefore most likely to succeed. If however, I don't want them to play that shot it is very important that I communicate to them the shot I want and, as important, is the reason why. If they are not convinced, then they should come to the head. We discuss the situation, weigh up the pros and cons, and together we consider the options and agree on the shot to play. I then know that they are going to be more confident in the shot and we are more likely to get a better result.

Don't ask them to play a shot they are not happy with.

If the head changes when the skip is at the mat end the same thing applies. The director at the head should not be hesitant to call the skip to the head if he/she thinks it

beneficial. Some skips are more likely to do this. Others have more confidence in the call of their director at the head which can often be the result of having played together for a long time and have developed a good rapport with one another.

Don't call for impossible shots: I have seen people call for a shot that I know their bowl will never achieve without divine intervention. Such as drawing around a bowl that is quite a way to the side and not far in front of the jack. Understand the track of your team's bowls and know your players ability.

After the game: we should try to make time for the team to have a chat after the game to try and find out if there is anything we can do to improve. This is one of those things that always somehow find its way into the too hard basket. Please do it if you get a chance.

TO SUMMARISE

- Don't be negative.
- Provide positive feedback.
- No negative body language.
- Anything negative will not help the team.
- Communication is so important so that everyone is working together and understands exactly what is expected of them and the team.
- Give clear messages and signals so that there is no confusion.
- Go to the head if necessary or if there is some advantage to be gained.
- The end result we hope will be an improvement in team spirit, a more enjoyable game of bowls, as well as a few more wins.

Roy Gallop

Chairman of Coaching

This was followed by a talk from Bill Daley on tactics before we went out onto the green to look at reading the head and shot selection.