



Instructor's Corner

Roger Rowlett & Mary Jane Walsh
USCA Level II Certified Instructors

I seem to be sliding on the broom, but my rocks always seem to overcurl or float wide. What am I doing?

—Widener Arrow

The three essential elements of a good curling delivery are alignment, balance, and release. Alignment and balance have the largest effect on line of delivery, and newer curlers gain the most benefit from working on these two areas, and understandably concentrate first on achieving good balance and keeping the stone and body aligned on the path from hack to broom. Unfortunately, grip and release often gets short shrift during the early stage of learning the curling delivery. The flaws of a bad grip and release will become more apparent once a curler masters alignment and balance. Indeed, a sloppy release will ruin an otherwise wonderful delivery. Once you have reached a certain level of consistency in delivery mechanics, working on grip and release can do wonders for your shot-making. You may notice that many elite curlers do not employ the grip and release described in this article. Elite curlers have spent years perfecting their unusual grips, play different kinds of shots, and don't generally play on club ice conditions. If you have 20 years to perfect your own unique grip and release, then by all means go for it! But you if want to quickly achieve better shot-making results, consider the basic grip and release mechanics described here. (And many elite players, including John Morris, Glenn Howard, and Kelly Scott, have quite classical grip and release mechanics.)

Gripping the stone

A poor release often starts with an improper grip. The proper grip is shown in the accompanying figure, and is the one we teach to new curlers. The stone handle should be cradled just above the middle segments of the fingers, with the wrist held high, directly above the handle. The thumb is on the side of the handle. The stone is primarily gripped with the thumb and forefinger. The hand should be centered on the center of rotation of the stone. The space between the thumb and forefinger form an inverted "V" that should point directly down the handle of the stone. An easy way to visualize the grip it to pretend you are picking up a bucket by the handle. That's the grip: extended wrist, handle resting on top of the middle segment of the fingers. Here are some of the grip issues we commonly see (recognize anyone?):

- "Death Grip"—It is not necessary to apply a lot of force to grip the stone. You are not strangling a varmint. A firm but light grip is sufficient. The idea is to grip the stone just tight enough that you control it. Pressure between the thumb and forefinger is sufficient. It is difficult to release the stone gently and consistently from a "death grip."
- Low wrist—Dropping the wrist is a common delivery flaw. If you can see the back of your hand or your palm when you grip the stone, then you have dropped your wrist one way or the other. Once you drop your wrist, the center of your hand is no longer over the center of gravity of the stone, and you will likely send it off course one way or the other when you apply rotation. If the "V" between thumb and forefinger is pointing right down the handle, you have the proper grip.



- Mis-centered grip—Gripping the stone too far back on the handle or too far forward will also result in moving your wrist off the center of rotation of the stone. Once again, if your grip is off center, you will likely impart some side motion to the stone when you apply rotation. Put the center of your wrist directly above the center of the stone. For those with large hands, this may mean the front of your hand will be up against the gooseneck. For smaller hands, the hands will be farther back from the front of the handle. Find the correct spot and grip the rock this way every time.

Applying rotation

Properly conditioned curling stones are designed to curl consistently when 2 ½-3 rotations (from release to stop at tee line) are applied. With fewer rotations, you will get more, but unpredictable, curl and a higher frequency of “picks.” With more rotations, rocks will run considerably straighter. Aim for 2 ½ -3 rotations and throw this consistently. To apply rotation the rock handle must start slightly “cocked” from the line of delivery. A clock analogy is useful: The handle is at 12 o’clock when it is aligned directly at the broom along the line of delivery (*not* parallel to the centerline!). When you are in the hack, you should cock the rock to approximately 10 o’clock (in-turn for right-hander) or 2 o’clock (out-turn for right-hander). *HOLD* this handle position until it is time to release. During the initial part of the delivery, your hand should be extended in front of you (with broom or stabilizer hand equally in front of your to maintain shoulders square to the line of delivery) with just a little slack or bend in the delivery elbow. At release the arm is extended and the handle is turned to 12 o’clock. The motion is akin to turning a doorknob to open a door. This motion should be performed smartly enough to impart the desired 2 ½ -3 rotations for a tee-line draw. Typically, rotation is applied over a 3-4 foot distance during the slide. At the completion of the rotation, the “V” between thumb and forefinger should be pointing at the broom. And the stone should be released. Here are some of the rotation issues we see (I would like to say I never do any of these, but I would be lying):

- “Oozy turn”—Rotation starts as soon as the slide starts out of the hack. The result is that the turn is too slow or absent because it is applied over too long a distance—a “lazy handle.” This release is all too frequently followed by “\$&!#, it picked again!”
- “Flip” or “Dump”—Rotation applied with a dropped wrist. This result in pushing the rock to one side or the other. A flip or dump can be also caused by extending the elbow and hand in a direction not aligned with the broom. The stone, wrist, and elbow must be in a straight line, and aligned with the line of delivery.
- Over- or under-rotation—This is when you release the stone before getting the handle turned to 12 o’clock. If you under-rotate the stone you may be a little wide; over-rotation may result in “turning it in” or “starting the rock” which will make it narrow or overcurl. Let the “V” be the guide. If the “V” of your hand is pointing at the broom at the end of the rotation, you have made a proper rotation and the stone should run true.
- Not extending arm during rotation—If you just turn your hand to apply rotation without extending your elbow, you will have to drop your wrist. (The wrist bone is connected to the arm bone, the arm bone is connected to the elbow bone...) When you drop your wrist, you will push the stone to one side or the other.
- Pushing the stone—You are *not* pushing the stone during the rotation and release. You are *extending* your elbow so you can turn your wrist naturally and apply rotation. If you push the stone, it will often go off line. It’s very difficult to consistently push in a straight line. OK, so Kevin Martin pushes every up-weight peel shot in his no-lift delivery, but he’s practiced this for years. If you are as good as Kevin Martin, go ahead and push your stones! If you are not as good as Kevin Martin, your stones may not always go where you want them.

Release

Once you have applied the proper rotation to the stone, all you have to do is let go. The quieter you make the release, the less there is to go wrong. All you really must do to release the stone is to loosen your grip and open your hand slightly. That's it. The stone handle should easily slip from your hands if you have applied the full rotation to 12 o'clock. The "V" should be pointing straight at the broom. Hold your hand in this final position and continue the slide for a full three-count before making any changes in this position. The quiet follow-through of hand and body will help ensure that you do not impart any unintentional lateral motion to the stone during the release. Some common issues we see (which one is you?):

- "The Flourish"—When the stone is released, the throwing hand makes a grand gesture, possibly celebrating the shot about to be made. The release hand flies to the side, or up, or up and out. Unless you are multi-tasking, practicing conducting the Utica Philharmonic while you are curling, keep the release hand quiet and steady. Any movement of the hand *after* release started *during* release, and will likely make the stone go off line.
- "The Crutch Clutch"—As soon as the stone is released the stabilizer is rotated in front of the curler so the release hand can grab it. See above. (Broom-sliders can't do this.) If your release hand is moving during the release, so is the rock. Knock it off! If you have to grab the stabilizer after the delivery to keep from falling down, you need to work on balance aspects of the delivery. In a properly balanced delivery, you should be able to lift the broom or stabilizer off the ice after releasing the rock and stay upright.
- "The Pop-Up"—As soon as the stone is released, the shooter immediately pops up to a standing position. What's the hurry? OK, if you thought moving your hands was bad for keeping the stone on course, what do you think moving your whole body will do? Stay in the final slide position for a full three-count before stopping your slide.

Why release is important

It doesn't take much to ruin an otherwise good curling shot. A stone travels for up to 24-25 seconds on a draw shot to tee line, maybe half that for a takeout. If your release adds as little as a half-inch per second of side motion, you will be off-target at the far end by as much as a foot. Cleaning up your release may be all it takes to get more consistent if you have a mechanically good slide.

Training suggestions

The good news is that if you find yourself working on your grip and release to improve your game, you have probably developed otherwise good delivery mechanics. Have a certified instructor evaluate your grip and release. Even better, have a certified instructor record a video of your grip and release so you can see it for yourself and make the necessary corrections. Practice using the proper curling grip and throwing the correct number of rotations. Count your own rotations or have a friend do this while you practice draw shots. Remember, it takes 25 or more repetitions to learn a new task, and perhaps twice that many to begin to eradicate old habits and replace them with new ones. If you are having trouble releasing the stone at 12 o'clock directly at the broom (aligning the "V"), practice releasing stones with a tube over the handle. We have found that certain toilet tank PVC tubes, or the cardboard tube from a roll of Vet Wrap are just the right size to fit over a curling handle and fit comfortably in the hand. Your instructors have some of these to borrow. When throwing draws with the tubes over the handle, it is not possible to release the stone unless the handle is pointed along the line of delivery. Try this suggestion to get the feel for where your hand (and "V") should be on release.

*Good curling! Have a question for Instructor's Corner?
Have a suggestion for an Instructor's Corner article?
Seeking an instruction session?
Send an email to curlingschool@uticacurlingclub.org*