



Instructor's Corner

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I'm practicing nearly every day but my game performance doesn't seem to be improving. What gives?

—Lyten Arrow

Practice with a purpose

How many times have you gone out to practice on a spare sheet to “throw rocks?” Yeah, been there, done that, too. The issue with “throwing rocks” without a plan is that you have no way of evaluating if you are getting better. And is repeatedly throwing that in-turn (or out-turn) draw to the pin down the same path a realistic game-skill development strategy? How many times in a game do you get to throw 8 rocks in a row, seconds apart, down the same path until you get it right? To get the most out of practice, you need to have (1) a plan, and (2) a way to evaluate your progress.

Practice good habits!

If you practice bad habits, you will only ingrain them. It takes a minimum of 25-30 repetitions to learn a new physical skill from scratch. However, to extinguish an old skill (say, a delivery flaw) and replace it with a new one it takes a minimum of 50-60 repetitions. And worse, until you have thoroughly extinguished the old skill by practicing the new one many more times, the “old” (bad) default skill will magically reappear at the worst possible moment when you are tired or lose concentration. The best way to avoid practicing bad habits is to work with an instructor who can spot potential delivery flaws. Once you know what to do, make sure you put in a large number of repetitions to keep the “old, bad, you” from coming back when you least want it, like when making a critical shot during one of your games.

Work on one thing at a time

Most folks can't think about more than one thing at a time when trying to perfect a physical activity. Choose an issue to work on, and try to ingrain it through repetition. Some physical delivery issues one might choose to work on could include things like (1) getting the slide foot behind the rock, (2) putting sufficient rotation on the stone, (3) maintaining a proper grip and release, (4) sliding on the target line, (5) eliminating a “C-curve” in your delivery, etc. Some more advanced shot-making issues might be practicing (1) throwing draws to a specific interval time, (2) throwing hits to a specific hog-to-hog time, (3) practicing sweeping rocks to a specific spot, etc. Whatever you practice, have an instructor or a practice colleague evaluate your results, or set up equipment that will allow you to self-evaluate your results. Keep in mind your club instructors have a whole grab-bag of goodies you can use, including an automated split timer. This equipment is available for use during regularly scheduled “Meet the Instructor” nights.

Different kinds of practice for different folks

Novice and experienced curlers probably need to focus on different issues during practice. For novice curlers, the biggest barrier to game performance is consistent delivery mechanics. Novice curlers will gain the most benefit from practice designed to “groove” good delivery mechanics, and this might involve quite a bit of repetition. Some recent scientific studies suggest that for many intellectual and physical activities, repetition may be more important than “talent.” While more experienced curlers

cannot neglect the physical aspects of delivery mechanics, this group may benefit most from spending time working on refining their shot-making repertoire and identifying and eliminating bad habits.

Experienced curlers may benefit from less repetitive practice. At least one expert in psychology and motor behavior suggests that for experienced athletes, “blocked practice” (repetitive drills) are not as effective at improving game performance as “random practice.” So while novice curlers may benefit from grooving physical skills through repetition, more experienced curlers might benefit from practice sessions that more resemble changing game situations. So, instead of throwing 8 in-turn draws to the pin, and 8 out-turn draws to the pin on the same sheet, you might try changing things up each shot: a guard, a draw around, a hit, a come-around tap-back. Decide on a shot and outcome, and then evaluate your effort after the stones come to rest. To add even more variety, move to another sheet, where you have to figure out the proper weight and line all over again. Another possibility is to play a one-on-one “game” with a practice partner where you allowed to make only guards, draws and taps. The idea is to train your brain and muscles to think about how to solve a shot problem from scratch from the limited information you have available—exactly the skills you need in game situations.

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