



Instructor's Corner

Roger Rowlett & Mary Jane Walsh

I've been playing lead for a few years, and now find myself playing second this year. What does a second do?

S. Trey Stone

If you are a relatively new curler, you have probably been playing lead on your league teams. We've addressed the importance of leads in a previous Instructor's Corner article: the bottom line is that there are no "unimportant" positions on a curling team. Everyone on the team has a critical role to play, and must perform well for a team to be competitive. Seconds are no exception.

With the lead, the second on a team comprises the all-important front end that sweeps the last 4 stones of the end, and each front end player sweeps 6 stones every end. That's one important consideration for seconds (and leads) to consider. You throw 2 stones, and sweep 6 every end. Maybe you can afford to have a bad day at the office in the hack, but not with the brooms! As a developing second, you need to continue to hone the weight judgment for rock placement that began when you were playing lead. Indeed, you may be the senior member of the front end, and will have the principal responsibility for final decision-making on weight judgment.

If you become really good at this position, you will also be entrusted with keeping track of ice speed down different paths of the ice, suggesting interval times for shots, especially for the third and skip, and monitoring and communicating to the skip changes in ice conditions. If your front end is divided into a "timer" and a "pouncer", the second is often designated as the timer. If curling at the competitive level in timed events, the second is often put in charge of monitoring game time and communicating the time situation to the skip.

Probably the most significant issue facing players transitioning from lead to second is getting used to throwing more hits. As a second, you are throwing the first stones after the expiration of the free guard zone each end, and this often means clearing out guards or chasing counters out of the rings at the first opportunity. As a lead, you probably didn't get to throw that many hits, and if you did, they were probably frequently right up the middle of the sheet. As a second, you should strive to throw accurate hits anywhere on the sheet; and consistent hit weight every time. Nothing will drive your teammates crazier than throwing a different weight hit every time: it is impossible to set proper ice and anticipate the curl of takeouts if inconsistent weights are thrown. An important skill is peeling guards when in the lead late in the game. You don't need to throw nuclear weight to be effective—it is more important to throw accurately—but a second that can accurately throw a heavy rock can be invaluable for peeling guards or making doubles.

Of course, in the free guard zone era, seconds cannot be one-dimensional shooters. A good second must also be able to replace center or corner guards cleared by the opposition, freeze to an opposition stone, or draw around a guard placed by the lead. Talk to any good second, and they will probably tell you the most challenging situation to master is throwing a hit with one shot, and then a delicate come-around draw or freeze with the next shot. Mastering weight control is a skill that must continue to be nurtured as you learn to play this position.

Perfecting your release, and making it clean will become increasingly important when throwing heavier weight shots. Even a slight side motion in your release will dramatically affect the trajectory of a thrown hit.

So how do you hone your skills to be a better second? Well, it's just like what your piano teacher said: practice, practice, practice. You can't get better at shots you never throw, or learn weight judgment for rocks you never sweep. You can't forget to maintain the skills you learned to be a successful lead. So read the Instructor's Corner article for practice suggestions for leads—you still need to do that! In addition, you might add these practice ideas:

- Practice throwing hits—with a partner to catch rocks, please! Have your partner set up a stone in the house (or in front of the house) and set the ice to make a nose hit (simulating a hit-and-stick or a short hit-and-roll) or to hit a half a rock (simulating a peel). Have your partner advise you on the accuracy of your slide and the quality of your release. If you are having consistent trouble with line of delivery or release, make an appointment with an instructor to work on these issues.
- Practice consistent hit weights. Even better, practice throwing hits of different weights on command. Have a partner set up a rock in the house, set proper ice and call a hit weight to throw. (I would suggest a weight described as a hog-to-hog interval, e.g., "10"—as in seconds). Have your partner time your shot hog-to-hog (or use your instructors' speed trap equipment) to evaluate your weight control. Anything within 0.5 seconds of the call is a workable shot weight. On typical fast ice conditions (24 seconds draw time hog to tee), 8 seconds is a peel, 9 seconds is firm takeout weight, 10 seconds is "bumper" and 11 seconds is close to "hack". (Every team will have a different idea about this—the point is to get used to throwing certain weights on command.) If you can throw three weights on command—whatever your teammates call them—you will be able to make a lot of different kinds of firm and finesse hits.) Determine the heaviest weight you can accurately throw, and don't throw more than that in your games. Inform your skip what your comfortable hit weight range is.
- Practice throwing shots of drastically varying weight. Working with a partner, throw a hit, then throw a draw to the tee line. This type of "random" practice is known to be very helpful in training your brain and muscles for game-style performance and problem-solving.
- Want to learn how to accurately throw heavier weight hits? Work first on perfecting your line of delivery. You will also benefit from strength conditioning to build core and leg muscles. When you don't have to use maximum strength to throw harder shots, you will be able to deliver shots more consistently, and will be able to better maintain balance necessary for a true line of delivery. But no amount of strength conditioning will make up for poor delivery mechanics.

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