

Calling Line

By Jon Mielke

Calling and judging line are some of the toughest jobs for many skips, especially those who are new to being in the house. This article will hopefully help these skips decide where to put the broom, when to call for sweeping, and what to watch for when the “Plan A” shot isn’t going to happen.

An important starting point to making shots is knowing where to put the broom. Since the ice is usually different from one game to the next and certainly from one club to the next, a skip should use the first few ends to figure out how much the ice is curling. Experiment early in an end or when you have an open house – play draws down both sides of the sheet and from the outside in and from center to the outside. And be sure to watch the other team’s shots, too. Learn something from every rock that is thrown.

When calling draw shots, it is important to put the broom down on the tee line; it makes a great tape measure. If ice is taken at the center of the eight foot and the shooter hits the broom, watch to see where the rock ends up. If it comes to the center line, you know that the ice is curling three feet on that part of the sheet. If it crosses the center line by a foot, you know that the ice is curling four feet.

It is common to see inexperienced skips move up and down the sheet to position the broom adjacent to the desired location for the shot being played. For example, if the skip is calling for a middle guard, he or she may go about ten feet in front of the house and place the broom somewhere to the side of the center line. Putting the broom three feet to the side of the center line at that location is actually taking much more ice than placing it three feet to the side at the tee line. On draws, be consistent – always put the broom down on the tee line. It will help you learn exactly how much draw shots are curling and exactly where to put the broom.

These suggestions only apply to draw shots. When calling regular and off-weight hits (hack weight, board weights, etc.), the broom is typically placed laterally from the stone that a team is trying to hit. Conversely, when playing a runback or a double that requires a precise hit, skips may find it easier to call line by standing farther back along the line of delivery. It is also important to note that a skip needs to take more ice for a hit at the back of the house than for a hit on a long guard. It is 27 feet from the hog line to the back line and a rock is usually going to curl more if it has farther to travel.

In addition to figuring out how much the ice is curling, skips also have to figure out *when* rocks curl. The curl on some ice may be gradual over the length of the sheet, but often the curl is most dramatic inside the hog line as the rock slows. If most of the curl is late, skips need to anticipate the curl and, if sweeping is going to be necessary to clear a guard, sweeping must be called for *before* the break is observed. If the skip waits until the rock starts to “bite,” it’s usually too late.

A couple key things have to happen if a skip is going to be in a good position to make the right call for sweeping. First, the skip must be in the right place. Often times, even if the skip puts the broom in the right place, they have their body in the wrong place. All too often, a skip lines up

the shaft of the broom and their body parallel with the center line, rather than as an extension of the line of delivery (the invisible line from the shooter's hack foot to the head of the skip's broom). If the skip's body is not in the right place, it is impossible to know if the shooter hit the broom. The skip also needs to move his or her body laterally as the rock is traveling down the sheet. The skip needs to stay in line with the stone's path in order to judge whether or not sweeping will be needed to clear guards.

The other thing that needs to happen is that the skip must know the speed of the stone that is coming towards the house. A rock that is six feet heavy or six feet light will "bite" at a different location than one that is perfectly thrown. Weight-related information must come from the sweepers. There is nothing more frustrating than dead silence when a skip yells out, "How's the weight?"

Ideally, teams use a zone system to call out weights. A "one" is a long guard, a "three" is a short guard, a "seven" is tee line, a "ten" back line, etc. Alternatively, sweepers should at least call out something like "top eight," or "back line" to let the skip know what is coming at them. Sweepers should make related judgment calls at least three times along the way – once as soon as the shot is released, once near middle sheet, and again near the hog line. It is okay to be wrong or to change your mind as the rock is traveling down the sheet – even misinformation is better than no information. Making related judgment calls will also help sweepers become more proficient at judging weight. Being able to judge and communicate weight is an extremely important part of a sweeper's job. Skips simply cannot call line if sweepers don't communicate weight.

In a perfect world, skips would always put the broom in the right place and shooters would always hit the broom with the right turn and the right weight. Unfortunately, that doesn't always happen. And when it doesn't happen, skips should not give up on the shot – they need to think on the fly and try to get something out of the shot. If Plan A isn't going to happen, what is the next-best outcome?

Skips should have a Plan B in mind, even before a shot is thrown. They may even communicate to the shooter concerning what is an acceptable alternative to the shot that is being called – "it's okay if we wreck" or "it's okay if you're light." Know what is an acceptable miss and what definitely cannot happen. Play for the best possible outcome, but always have a Plan B in mind.

For example, if a "come around draw" is thrown narrow and is obviously going to wreck on a guard, the skip should not throw up his or her hands in disgust and call off sweeping or just automatically have the sweepers keep on sweeping. If the called shot is going to be missed, look for the next best outcome. If the shot is going to wreck on a guard, where is the best place to hit the guard – on the left side, on the right side, or on the nose? Sweeping is going to determine where the rocks hit. Get something out of the miss and, if necessary, use the sweepers to make it happen.

Always have a Plan B in mind, but sometimes you may even have to settle for a Plan C. More often than I care to admit, I have sheepishly apologized to an opposing skip for being more lucky than good. But I've also won lots of games by being better at calling line than the opposing skip and getting something out of shots that were less than perfect.

A skip's job is not easy and line calling and making related decisions on the fly are important functions. Like so many things in curling, calling line is a team effort. It starts with putting the broom in the right place, shooters hitting the broom and having a clean release, and sweepers who are good at both sweeping and judging and communicating weight. All these things will contribute to making Plan A shots, but they will also help your team get something out of shots that are less than perfect.

Until next time – good curling!

(The author appreciates insights provided by Sandra McMakin, Chair of USA Curling's Training and Instruction Committee, and Matt Mielke, former junior national champion and soon to be MD in residency in the Twin Cities. All of the author's previous training articles are available on line at: USA Curling – Inside the USCA – CNews Columnists – Columns by Jon Mielke).

