

Recruiting Team Members

By Jon Mielke

It's summer and curling may be the last thing on your mind. But, it's never too early to start thinking about next season's team. Do you have the same foursome as last year, or do you have to do some recruiting? If you do, what skill sets do you need to make your team better and to make the season fun?

Please keep in mind that my columns are written with league curlers in mind. Highly competitive teams will have much more demanding job descriptions for each position than typical league teams. It is, none-the-less, good to know what strengths are associated with each position. Even if your roster is set, each player should know what is expected of them so they can work to improve in related areas.

If you are recruiting a new player for your league team, start by considering the kind of league that you are playing in and what your goals are for the season. If you are playing in a novice league, don't put together a team of all intermediate curlers. Playing against a "loaded" team won't be fun for other teams and your team won't get better by playing against weak competition. Play in a league that is suited for the skill level of your team.

As for position skill sets, there are some attributes that apply to all for positions. They include things like being fun to be with (both on and off the ice), being a good sportsman, being a technically proficient shooter, being a team player with a positive attitude, and being a good communicator and a good sport.

Regarding leads, they throw mostly draws (guards and into the house) and occasional taps and hits. Not everyone is cut out to be a lead, but the free guard zone has made the lead position as important as any other, and maybe even more so. Leads don't have to throw the variety of shots as other positions, but good leads make good ends possible. If the lead is struggling, it is going to be a long night on the ice.

Leads also have to be great sweepers and judges of weight. They have to be good at timing stones and communicating related information to teammates. Good leads pay attention to little things like pre-shot cleaning of the slide path, constantly "dusting" stones as they move down the ice, timing the other team's shots, etc. Good leads are also consummate cheerleaders.

Like leads, seconds also have to be good throwing various kinds of draws and taps. They are also called on to throw more hits and should be proficient at throw both regular and up-weight hits. Having a second that is a good hitter will help a team get out of messy ends when the opposition has plugged up the middle with free guard zone stones. Like leads, seconds also need to be good at timing, sweeping, judging weight, and communicating.

Thirde throw all kinds of draws and off-weight and regular hits. Thirde don't sweep as much as leads and seconds, but they still need to be capable sweepers that are good at judging weight; they usually leave timing to the lead and second. Thirde are good at reminding front end players, in a positive way, what shot that is being played. They are also good cheerleaders when other teammates are struggling.

In addition to their shooting and sweeping duties, thirds also heavily involved with skip duties related to reading ice and strategy. They have to constantly be mindful of strategy and must be comfortable with taking over in the house when the skip is throwing. Skips depend on thirds to help out with strategy but thirds also have to be willing to defer to skips when they disagree on what shot to play – don't put doubts in the skip's head. When they are in the house, thirds need to have a clear understanding of the shot that is being played and they need to be good at reading ice and calling line. They remember virtually every shot that has been thrown and are able to help the skip, when necessary, with knowing how much ice to take. Good thirds like to throw tough shots.

As for skips - they are called on to throw guards, draws, taps, and hits. They love challenging shots and pressure situations. They need to be able to finish off a good end or to bale a team out when an end hasn't gone as planned. Skips need to be leaders that instill confidence in their team. They need to have a positive attitude toward their teammates and the opposition.

Skips must be continually attentive – they watch every rock that is thrown in order to learn the ice and they're great at calling line. They know “SHEETZ” (score, hammer, end, environment, teams' abilities, etc.) and know how to use the free guard zone to generate offense or to play defensively. Good skips work at improving themselves and they are willing to work with teammates who want to improve their game. League skips also have to be willing to accept the fact that some players may simply like to play and are not willing to practice. If that is the type of team that a skip has put together, they need to live with it and have fun. They do the best that they can with what they've got. If they want something more, they join a second league or put together a different team next year.

Most league curling is a recreational and social activity. Everyone should play their best, but they also need to remember that they are not playing for a national championship. Reread the “Spirit of Curling” and behave accordingly, both on and off the ice. It is what makes our game special.

In the next summer issue, we'll talk about some personal goals that you want to set for the upcoming season – things that will help make you be more proficient, that will help you make more shots, have more fun, and win more games.

Until next time – have a good summer and good curling!

(All of the author's previous training articles are available on line at: USA Curling – Inside the USCA – CNews Columnists – Columns by Jon Mielke).