

Knowing When and Where to Build A Wall

By Jon Mielke

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There has been a lot of national debate lately about the need to build a wall. Regardless of the outcome of this national debate, building a wall in curling can be a good thing. It is, however, important to know when and where.

The most traditional wall in curling is built by a team that does not have the hammer and is trying to steal. It involves putting up guards to block the opponent's path to the four foot. The hope is to 1) protect a stone that is already in or near the four foot, 2) curl behind the wall before the opponent does, or 3) tap one of the guards into the four foot while leaving the shooter in front of the house as a part of the wall. Naturally, the team with the hammer will try to impede construction and to thereby keep an open path to the four foot in case it needs it to avoid a steal.

It is important to note that this location for a wall should typically not be pursued if a team has a significant lead. The team that is behind needs guards to score a big end. If you put up guards the other team may use them. To keep an opponent from using your guards, throw your rocks into the house and somewhere in front of the tee line. Hope to lure them into a hit game that will result in little or no scoring. When you're up, guards are not.

If your team has the hammer and is looking to score, wall construction typically involves throwing corner guards and trying to force play toward the outside of the sheet, thereby keeping the path to the four foot open in case it is needed to avoid a steal. Sometimes teams try to get a guard on each side of the sheet and sometimes they might look for two guards on one side. It may be a narrow wall but sometimes it is possible to hide several stones behind even a small wall. The key will be keeping subsequent draws behind the wall and above the tee line. Going behind the tee only invites the other team to follow you in and to take away the possibility of using the wall to your advantage.

Another option when a team has the hammer is to build a wall towards the back of the house. If the other team is trying to avoid a front-of-the-house wall and throws a stone into the four foot, the team with the hammer may consider throwing a tap or a split to get one or more rocks around the back twelve foot. Getting rocks spread out around the back of the house sets up the possibility of getting a jam when the other teams tries to remove a stone that is farther up in the house. These rocks also give you something to draw to with your last shot. Building a back house wall is an aggressive move and requires good shot making to make related taps or splits. Use this approach sparingly and only if your team's abilities allow.

As the preceding paragraphs indicate, there are some situations that call for building a wall. There are, however, some wall locations that should not be pursued. These locations are typically a foot or two behind the tee line either in the middle of the sheet or towards the outer rings. These walls typically result because a rock is unintentionally thrown a few feet deep or when the opposing team taps one or more of the other team's stones behind the tee.

Subsequent shots by either team will typically be thrown to be shot and to a location above the tee line or frozen to a stone behind the tee. Hitting that stone back into the wall may leave it still being shot while drawing around it may be difficult. If the wall has forced play to the outer rings,

the team with the hammer may be forced to play its last shot as a draw to the middle of the sheet for a single point. In either case, a wall just behind the tee line often results in either a single point for the team with the hammer or a steal by the team without the hammer. If you build a wall close to but behind the tee line you are typically inviting trouble.

Building walls is an important offensive tool but teams must take care to build them in the proper location and following basic curling strategy. Try to force play to the middle of the sheet when you do not have the hammer and to the outside when you do. If you are ahead try to force play into the house and if you are behind put up guards. Play the scoreboard and build accordingly.

What Makes A Good Skip – Part II. I always appreciate feedback on my articles. Sometimes it comes in face-to-face discussions when I travel around to various curling events and sometimes it comes via email. I especially appreciate an email that I received from Andy of the Columbus Curling Club regard my recent article concerning what makes a good skip.

Andy did not take issue with any of the qualities that I talked about but he pointed out that I overlooked some critical elements. He said that the most important attributes of a good skip are that they are a positive role model, a team player, a leader, a teacher, and a sportsman. All the other qualities of a good skip go out the window if people don't enjoy playing with you or against you. It is all about the Spirit of Curling. Thanks, Andy. I couldn't agree more!

Until next time – I hope you had a good season. Maybe play in a summer 'spiel between now and the fall season. Good Curling!

Jon Mielke lives in Bismarck and is a Level III instructor, a Level III coach, and a member of the US Curling Hall of Fame. All of his previous training articles are available on line at: USA Curling – Media – Curling News – Columnists – Jon Mielke.