

Strategy basics of curling for beginners

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Introduction

We all know that curling is a turn-based strategy, where 2 teams make shots one after another. Sometimes curling is called “chess on ice”. Teams make moves and experienced captains (skips) think few moves ahead. But, in contrast to chess, where the figure exactly comes to the specified cell, curling stone can not get to the specified location. Everything depends not only on the capabilities of the players, which is naturally very important but also on the “control” of the shot and the choice of these shots by the team captain.

In this work, I would like to make out the strategic component of the game from the side of learning to curl. My work will suit beginners and club level players.

Unfortunately, I often see that teams pay attention only to the analysis of classical strategic schemes, and do not learn the strategic way of thinking. What seems to be two very different approaches. In my opinion, the first approach seriously loses second. And a team that coaches a strategic mindset will, in most cases, win over a team that knows the textbooks well, even if it is technically prepared a little worse. Naturally, the world champion can just win because of statistical indicators when playing with a team from the club level. But this is clear without long articles.

“If you play with the Hummer, then play the side guard” - this is what I have heard many, many, many times. This rule, like other similar ones, is widespread and almost looks like a dogma. But if we take a look at the games of the top teams, we will see that not always the best teams stick to it. Moreover, after a couple of shots, the scheme from the textbook may well fall apart, and then it is certainly necessary to turn on your strategic brain.

In each of the parts, I will sort out different questions and aspects of teaching strategic thinking: why do we need a strategy, do we need strategic plans, or maybe just enough to watch a couple of games on YouTube? At the end of this work, there are several practical exercises for training strategic thinking that will be useful for new curlers.

Defenitions

First, I would like to determine what is strategy and tactics.

So, the dictionary definition of strategy is as follows:

Strategy (from Greek στρατηγία *stratēgia*, "art of troop leader; office of general, command, generalship") is a high level of the plan to achieve one or more goals under conditions of uncertainty. In the sense of the "art of the general," which included several subsets of skills including tactics, siegecraft, logistics, etc., the term came into use in the 6th century C.E. in East Roman terminology and was translated into Western vernacular languages only in the 18th century. From then until the 20th century, the word "strategy" came to denote "a comprehensive way to try to pursue political ends, including the threat or actual use of force, in a dialectic of wills" in a military conflict, in which both adversaries interact.

In the book "Strategy basics" Gabrielle Coleman gives the following definition: "Strategy is about intent. You and your team should know what you want to accomplish with every end and shot. If you do, the rest of your decisions become simpler. If you have a clear goal for the end, your skip can quickly narrow down his or her possible shot choices. If you have a clear goal for each shot, your shooter and sweepers will know the "pro-side" error for the shot and will be more likely to get the rock to an optimal position—even when it's a little off course."

To make it more detailed, I've asked what a strategy is and how to train the strategic skills of players from different levels. The question was answered by both top-level players and novice curlers, the youngest of whom is 9 years old. It was very important for me to find out what is the difference in the understanding of concepts from different people and groups of athletes.

For example, Ezhen Kolchevskaya - Czech national team curler: "Strategy - long-term process planning to achieve the goal. Learning should start by setting criteria that lead to the determination of the process and the strategy."

Another question that, in my experience, often causes problems for players: what is the difference between strategy and tactics? Naturally, each of us heard these words, but do we have a clear understanding of what it is? How do these concepts work on the curling platform? What do they consist of and how to learn, develop the necessary

strategic and tactical skills? In general, you need all this for curling, or you can just work on the statistics of throws, forgetting about the theory?

Let us examine the questions one by one. So the strategy is a common understanding of how to play to achieve a certain goal. And tactics are those actions that need to be taken directly to achieve the goal. The tactic is a specific move, a specific decision, a specific shot. From the curling side, the skip makes decisions, based on the strategy, he discusses one or another way of game and shows one shot or another.

At the top level, when the statistics of most players reach 80-90 percent, strategy and tactics are becoming increasingly important. The statistics of the shots lose their importance, in contrast to the club level, where players rarely go to such significant indicators. Decisions aimed at the whole game, rather than at one situation, become more important. Ultimately, all these situations are the result of the team's strategy.

Components of the strategy

It's better to have bad plan than nothing.

Good teams use three types of strategy all the time:

1. **Game Plan:** The overall plan for the game (e.g., “We hit better than they do, so let’s use a conservative, open style of play.”)
2. **End Plan:** The scoring goal for each individual end (e.g., “Steal 1” or “Score 2”)
3. **Tactical Plan:** The shot choices needed to execute the end plan (e.g., “We need to steal, so let’s put up a center guard.”)

Game plan

A game plan is an overall picture that helps throughout the entire game. Sometimes it is very difficult to determine a plan for the whole game. In this case, you can define a plan for a part of the game: the first 2 ends, the ends in the middle of the game, the ends at the end of the game. Again, the game can continue in different ways and therefore it is sometimes important to determine the plans depending on the score and the situation in the game.

Example of the complete game plan:

University of Waterloo Game Plan (1992)

(Source: A goal without a plan is just a dream, article, Jerome Gazdewich)

THE GOLD PLAN (offense)

1. The opposition can only place stones in one of four locations,
 - a) in the free guard zone
 - b) in the house in front of the tee line
 - c) in the house behind the tee line
 - d) through the house
 - e) If a) draw around (regardless of the guard’s position relative to the house and the center line)
If b) draw towards it (not necessarily a freeze)
If c) tap it to the back of the house (to set up a jam)
If d) establish guards of our own (probably corner guards)
2. Direct play to the sides of the sheet.

3. Use hack to board weight to remove opposition guards to keep our stones in play.
4. Keep lots of stones in play!

THE BLACK PLAGUE (defense)

1. Try to play the end in the house.
2. Sense the danger guards pose. If there is ONE guard and ONE opposition stone in the house, peel the guard first.
3. Play the first half of the end very carefully. Use full takeout weight to remove stones.
4. In the latter half of the end, use offensive tactics to steal if the opportunity affords itself.

BONNIE & CLYDE (straight steal)

1. On the first stone of the end (ours), place a short center line guard.
2. Regardless of the position of the second stone of the end (theirs), place a long center line guard.
3. Continue replacing those vertical guards.
4. Don't go in too early (third's second stone)!

End plan

The plan for the end is the goal of the team for the nearest game segment (end).

Here are some examples:

- Prevent the non-hammer team from stealing more than 1 (or 2, or more): Preventing an opponent from scoring is different than trying to blank or score one point. With a "prevent" goal, the hammer team is only focused on preventing its opponent from getting into a position to steal (e.g., by clearing center guards) and doesn't care whether it scores or blanks. A hammer team might choose this goal if it has a significant lead, or is tied or up in the final end.
- Score 3 (or more): In high-level play, it's very difficult to score three or more. The tactics used to do that are different from those used to score two, and the hammer team usually needs a few misses from the non-hammer team to accomplish this.

- Score 2: This goal, also known as a “deuce,” is the most common end goal for hammer teams.
- Blank: In a “blank” end, neither team scores, but the team with the hammer gets to keep it in the next end. Since having the hammer makes it easier to score, teams with the hammer will blank ends on purpose to carry that advantage into the next end. For example, if a game is tied with two ends left, the hammer team might blank the second-to-last end, so it can have the hammer in the final end.

How to determine a plan for the end? The following questions will help to do this. Naturally, you should not start doing this in a national championship game without any training practice. It is better to start with a couple of questions on training, ask them yourself constantly before each end, then add a couple more and bring this process to automatism. Over time, this will be a developed skill that does not require any additional effort. Often I hear “well, I will do it in a real game”. If the skill is not formed, then in the game for the result the player will not ask himself these questions.

First, you need to decide on what is the best outcome, what is acceptable, and what is the worst - what the team wants to avoid. Understanding the answers of these questions will give the team a common vision of the situation. Often, young teams play only to win, in each end they try to win, losing sight of what is necessary to win the whole game, and not a separate end. Yes, every end and every stone is important, but it is even more important to win the game.

What else will help? Here is a list of questions, the answers to which will give a clear understanding of the situation:

- Do you have the last shot (the “hammer”)?
- What are the skill levels of your teammates?
- Who can draw?
- Who can hit?
- How accurate is each player?
- What end is it?
- What’s the score?

- What are the ice conditions? (e.g., Will the curl in the ice make it easier or harder to hit? Does your team feel comfortable enough with the ice speed to draw consistently? Are the ice conditions changing?)
- What are your opponent’s strengths and weaknesses?

Example 1: It’s the ninth end of a ten-end game. The score is tied and your team has the hammer. All things being equal, your odds of winning the game if you’re tied with the hammer in the tenth end are good. Therefore, you choose “Blank” as your end plan for the ninth. (“Score 2” is also a good end plan. However, to get two points, you must put more rocks in play, and when you do that, you make it easier for the non-hammer team to steal—and you may not want to take that risk.)

Example 2. First end. The team without the last stone in this end defines the following goals: the best outcome is to win 1, the acceptable outcome is 0 or lose 1, the worst outcome is to lose 2 or more. Accordingly, they begin with a stone to the house. They don’t care at all that the opponent can try to take out the stone, the main thing is not to lose 2 in the end.

Tactical plan and shots choice.

As stated above, it is important to determine what is the best, acceptable, and unacceptable result. For this, it is better to prepare a table of the following form:

End	Score difference	With hammer	Without hammer
8	-2	Corner guards, try to protect your stones	Central guard, steal 1 or 2
9	0	Take at least 1, try to keep the center open.	Steal 1 or lose 1, 1 central guard
3	4	Win at least 1 stone in the end. Do not allow the loss of the end. Open house.	Do not allow the opponent to win more than the 1st stone. Try to leave this opportunity for the opponent. Minimum of stones.

Each shot should be a reflection of a prepared plan for the end. Naturally it happens that everything collapses in 1 minute, when one of the players makes a mistake. But even in this case, you can try to return to the game and complete the task.

2 simple questions for training the mindfulness of the choice of shot:

- What is the purpose of a particular shot or what do I want to do with this stone?
- If everything works out as it should, what will my opponent do?

If there is no answer to the first question, it turns out that we do not know why we play this stone at all. So, we have a tool, and why we don't use it?

The answer to the second question will give us a scenario after the shot. We will immediately see what options we leave to the opponent in the game. This is very important because, based on the weak points of the opponent, you can leave a difficult stone for him, provoke an error. Or, you must make a difficult choice for your opponent, which will put pressure on him at the key moment of the game.

Why do we need strategy?

Strategy is our guiding star, it shows what we generally want to do. Whether we will play aggressively or conservatively, whether we will try to win only one stone in the end, or lose is not such a bad option.

Everyone wants to win, this is the normal desire of each player. But in reality, sometimes you need to lose a little to win further. Naturally, an experienced player knows this and is therefore not afraid to lose 1 stone in the end without a hammer, in order to try to take 2. The kid who just came to this sport can be very upset if the team lost in the end. Naturally, every young curler has his own vision and attitude to the game. And this is where the coaching starts working. Understanding all this, the coach is simply obliged to prepare the team for the match, to discuss what to do and how. This will be the strategy of the children's team.

It happens that children of the same age group play against their older friends and obviously cannot win the game. You cannot compare a player at the age of 14 and experiences at the age of 1-2 years of a game with a player at the age of 20 and experiences at 8 years of play. These are two different players for all indicators. Therefore, the coaching task and coaching strategy is very important for the correct formulation of the task for the team.

The attitude to the strategy vividly illustrates the point at which the beginning teams and the top take a timeout. Beginners, as a rule, take time in a situation when the result of the game is already on fire. Usually this is the last end and the last stone. In fact, this time-out is superfluous, there are only 2 options left, and even those are not very easy. The opposite situation of the best teams, it happens because they have the concept of “key end” and “key shot”. Teams take timeout not only when there is a problem, but also when it is possible to win a lot of stones in one end, thereby obtaining significant benefits in future endings. The correct timeout can give teams not only an advantage on the scoreboard, not only solve the problem, but also help to confirm the decision of the players, thereby giving more confidence in the game.

Strategy and tactics are not magic pills, they are not secret ingredients. These are tools that you need to be able to use, but which can greatly change the team play.

Influence of players' abilities on strategy and tactics

Before analyzing this issue, I would like to share one incident that happened to me:

I was a member of the adult curler camp in Prague, which was organized by the World Curling Federation. I was very pleased to meet with the coaches of the Russian team in wheelchair curling, Anton Batugin and Margarita Nesterova. One day, the organizers gave us a game practice, we split into teams and started playing. It should be noted separately that all the teams consisted mostly of completely newcomers, who didn't particularly distinguish them from the draw. The teams of Anton and Margarita won in their subgroups. I began to ask skips how did it happen. They've said that they used one simple tactic: with the first throw they tested the player, and on the second they gave him the same task by slightly changing the brush. At the same time, they were naturally prepared not only for Plan B, but also for C and D. Instead of playing the widely used schemes from the textbook, they focused on what players can really do. It turns out that by their actions they greatly increased the statistics of the team as a whole, and, accordingly, the team's chances of success.

The players' ability to play one or another stone is very important, in my opinion, they give the skip an understanding of what kind of shot he should ask to do, how to build an end. He needs to know his players as best he can to properly form a Task. There are many parameters that affect the task, but the ability of the player to make a certain hit is the most important of them.

Imagine that, based on the game situation in the middle of the game, you have 2 main options: a draw for a guard (come-around) and a take roll, also behind the guard. You know that on training player is not very effective with the take-outs, but in 60% of the draw, he performs well. What shot will you ask him to do? I think that the draw will be the answer of the majority of skips.

Interesting, but at the club level, where the players are still very far from the statistics of the top teams, I see a completely opposite situation. Both children and adults offer impossible hard shots without good reason. Even Kevin Koe would have thought even an extra 10 seconds over such a shot. But the players at the local curling club do not bother at all. Needless to say, 99% of such shots do not end with the expected result.

It can be argued that if you don't try, you will never succeed. This is a true, but only in the case when the transition from simple to complex shots is carried out, and not vice versa. When a player is able to make hit-and-stay in 60-70%, then it is quite possible to move on to double and triple take-outs. But if the percentage of the discussed stone does not exceed 10, then most likely with a double-takeout one should only count as a miracle.

At different levels, players have completely different techniques. Even at the World Cup, these differences exist. It would seem that everyone can do everything, the arsenal of any player there is huge and is not limited to three shots. But there is a specificity.

For example, at the World Championship of the season 2018-2019, Jamie Sinclair (USA) built the whole end for the goal of one last promotion through the stone at the beginning of the house. In three games, she was able to win many stones in one end. When this happens not for the first time, for everyone around it is clear that this is not a luck, but the preparation from a training session, a shot that the athlete obviously trained a lot and for a long time, having achieved statistics of more than 80% while performing it. The main goal of the team until the last stone was to create a situation with a large number of stones of its color in the house and its own shooter at the beginning of the house, which would not be closed by guards. All the other shots were the preparation of a particular throw with the ability of the skip to make this shot.

How many shots you can make with probability above 50% is your arsenal. That will show you how your team will play, not only from the technical side of the issue, but also from the point of view of strategy. It is like a toolbox in which there can be a complete set for all occasions, and there can be only a screwdriver and a hammer.

When you choose a shot, pay attention that the player really can make. In this case, draws and draws around the guard can be different shots, because mentally the second shot is more difficult. Tapback often has the same speed as teeline draw, but technically it is a more difficult shot. Therefore, do not expect that since a player can make a draw, he will easily go with a tapback.

Therefore, I propose to assess the complexity of shots on the scale of opportunities of the particular player who will make this shot, and not in principle, is it a difficult or simple shot. It is also necessary not only what he have done on training, but also the statistics that he has today, at the moment. The question ultimately should be: Can my player make such a shot today?

Unlike adults, children often don't have so much power to make the fast hit. Therefore, taking out opponent's stones is a very difficult task for them. However, when analyzing situations, I often hear variants with complex double-teakouts. For myself, I clearly determined that I would tune the team to create situations in which there would be don't need even to consider such options. In the arsenal of children, there is often nothing but a guard and a draw, however, you need to be able to use these tools.

If the opponent's stone is better than yours, but at the same time it is open to direct knocking out, then it is enough to play a little faster draw than ask for a take-out. Kids cannot make a great shot like Brad Jacobs. they are just in a different weight class. However, the draw they can do and statistically it is better.

Therefore, children's curling strategy should be more focused on the capabilities of the child than on standard strategic schemes. In the process of growing up and by constantly testing the capabilities of the same player, they can gradually move to training new hits and expand the player's arsenal. Each of the shots consist of several elements, has its own structure of implementation. You can start with one of these elements, then add the next one and thus achieve proper execution. You should not immediately ask about the execution of the take-out, the player will not execute it, will be upset and, perhaps, will lose the desire to go to curling rink in future. There will be a demotivation of the player.

Let us examine how to train take-out. When teaching a take-out, I will work on the correct balance of the player, the position of his body, then I will work on speed and see how far he can go from the hack, arrange a competition in a team who will travel further. Next, I will work out with the release and will ensure that the player pushes the stone strictly in front of him, and only when all the elements are ready, I will go directly to the take-out shots. If we are talking about children's curling, then

the first take-out can and should be done on half of the sheet. It is very important that the player will see the dynamics and the results of his throws.

There are different age categories and, accordingly, different possibilities, but regardless of this, children cannot even perform 5 different new things at the same time. Children are not small adults! Therefore, in the process of training you need to focus the attention of the child on only one element. If all other motions are not very well, but player will not lose focus and will leave the training session with a completely understandable and great result. He will not feel uselessness and sadness.

When the statistics of the new shots goes over 50 percent, you can enter this shot into the game as a basic one.

The experiment I conducted shows that playing with an eye to the possibilities can bring a good qualitative result. Once I asked the first team number for the whole game to perform the same shot. And the second player is also one shot, but another. Both players were newcomers and didn't have many tools at their "bag". You will agree that it is much easier to tune in to one shot than to ten different ones and constantly switch between them. The top teams do not do that, but now I'm talking about a team of people who came to curling yesterday, not 20 years ago. Throughout the game, both players performed shots by 50%. I, like a skip, knew exactly what to count on and made my plans for this. No, our team did not become the champion of the country, but did not take the last line either. We won 2 of 5 games. I agree, this is a good result for the new team consisting of people who have just discovered this wonderful sport. This experiment shows that if we will look from the side of real possibilities of teammates, then you can achieve quite a good result. In fact, I increased the chances of success when I asked to do the same. People tuned in, stopped fearing that they would fail, and enjoyed the game. In the end, the whole team was happy with the competition.

Exercise to determine the capabilities of each player.

Each of the players writes in the table how many shots of 10 he can perform according to the following categories: guard, start of the house, 4 feet zone, end of the house, backline, hack, takeout. Zones may be different if the situation requires it. It is very important that each player makes table by himself.

The result should be the following table:

	Player 1		Player 2		Player 3		Player 4	
	prediction	result	prediction	result	prediction	result	prediction	result
Guard								
Start of the house								
4 feet zone								
End of the house								
Backline								
Hack								
Take-out								

There are no losers in that drill. If player thinks that his ability is 5 and at the end its 8 - ok, great, you're better the you think. If it's 2 from 10 - so, you should know what the reality is and train that till the result you need. But anyway team can use this information in a game when they will chose the shot.

Why we can't just copy YouTube?

Today we have tons of games on YouTube. So, it's actually possible to watch professional games without a stop for years. And it is amazing opportunity! Of course, except the entertaining, we can take experience from top-level teams. And as much we see as more understanding skill of the game we can have. Top teams see more ways to execute the goal, see more B plans on every shot and can show us how to make communication really useful. There are more smaller parts and skills we can take from the top-level curling to our game. Lots of times teams on that level of curling can repair the situation after bad shot, which is also great example of professionalism. Skips are calm and players are confident. Another point is that we can see that everything is possible, kids can have their heroes from one of the teams and may have motivation to be like that man. On every level of play if you are not top-player you can find something for your motivation and skills upgrade from top-level.

But it's also important to see another side of the coin: we can't simply copy top-teams. Why? Let's look to several reasons.

It often happens that novice players try to copy the stars, looking at the final of the World Cup on YouTube. When discussing the next shot and often at the most crucial moment, the choice falls on a double takeout or on a similar complex shot. Why shouldn't I do that?

The first thing that is important to consider is that players at the World Championships look much better statistically than club-level players. There, everyone can do everything and show from 75 to 100 percent of statistics. The club level often starts at 20 percent and rarely exceeds 60. Accordingly, the tools of club level players are much narrower than those of the best players in the world. Before repeating the tactics of the best teams, it would be nice to ask yourself: "Can I do that? Did I try it on training? What is the real chance to make that?"

Second thing is that top-level teams work with tactics and strategy all the time. There is a common goal in the end. And everyone understands the general line and common tactics. What can not be said about the novice curler and often about the players of the club level. I rarely see teams that speak before each end. Players are mentally in different places. We can often see long discussions because of this reason.

Players 1 and 2 almost never are in the discussion, because all teams have goals, a common goal, and each plan processes in its place.

All this is very important, top-level teams work out strategies and tactics in advance. There is a common goal in the end. And everyone understands the general line of conduct, common tactics. What can not be said about the club level. I rarely see each other. Players are mentally in different places. We can often see long discussions for this very reason. The team catches the eye often very quickly. There are a number of goals for the players, for players of 1 and 2.

Third, their strategy and tactics line up through the whole game and never ends on a specific end, if this is not the last end. This is achieved by training games and preparing every single game. The team works out of the ice no less than on the ice. And often more. This work gives an advantage to the top teams and returns us to step 2.

How to start with the strategy? (Conclusion)

So, you would like to improve your game and start using all the features of tactics and strategy. First of all, don't try to use it only in the end of the game. It's better to start with the simple situations like first end and first stone. There are a lot of ways to start, but all that stones will determine your next shots.

On the kids category it's better to come into the house with the draw shot, because the statistics of both teams shows us that take outs are not so effective. On the other hand, free guard zone rule can only make problems for the young team. Most players can't make good draw around and after some shots they will block the house by lots of guards. So, in different age categories teams should use different strategy and tactics.

Step 0.

Start with strategy on training with the first stone in the game. Don't be rush and if you need spend 5 minutes for 1 stone. Lot's of the teams starting with the board in classroom, but when you will come to the ice rink all will be looks different. That's why it's better to start with the real stones.

Step 1.

Determine what your teammates really can do. Base your strategy on that skills. Know your players and yourself, predict what they can easy do.

Step 2.

Determine what you exactly want in this particular end, this game, this tournament, this shot. Clearly say it to all the players in the team. You should be on the same side and look to the game from that exact angle of view. In this case communication and team dynamics are really important factor.

Step 3.

Start asking questions from this work like "Why I'm going to play that shot?". From time to time try to use more questions. Your don't need to start with all the questions. One is enough for the first time. But the secrete is that you do that in every game with every shot.

Step 4.

Try to fix the results in the diary after the training or game. If you have your statistics from any person also put it to the article.

Making that circle with the steps again and again will help you to improve the strategy skills and improve the game you play.

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