

It's Good to Talk

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COMMUNICATION IS a vital tool to build a happy and effective rink and something which a skip will need to exercise in order to get the very best out of supporting players.

Communication means on and off the rink and not just restricted to match play, but it is always worthwhile for a skip to reveal something about any intended tactical move he/she may contemplate introducing.

For example, on a very fast green, the skip might feel his side is better able to cope with the pace and that short jacks may be sought as a positive step towards a match-winning strategy. The big mistake is when the skip fails to share this reasoning with the team, as often a change in tactics creates confusion amongst his or her players which can, as a consequence, be the foundation of self-destruction.

THE LEAD

Many experienced advocates of this sport support the view that it is an essential duty of a skip to inform the lead of the length of jack for trial ends and then constantly utilise a form of referral thereafter. I would go a stage further and involve the entire rink.

That said, in respect of leads, I firmly believe that it is good practice for them to follow their own preferred hand, providing the side of the rink chosen is the easiest hand. This hand, also known as the 'kind' hand, is the hand upon which leads should attempt to dominate throughout the match. Skips should at least give their leads a fair amount of time to 'master' a hand, and should never change a lead's hand without discussing it first with the individual concerned.

Gone are the days when skips just took charge, told leads what to do and they would then just follow like sheep, but at the same time wonder why the request for a change was made? A useful tip when playing on away greens is to initially follow the 'home' lead – they will, more often than not, be playing on the 'kind' hand and attempting to dominate it and you while you are still deliberating!

Having spoken about the rarity of specialist leads today, I have no doubt in my mind that it was serving an

apprenticeship for six years as lead which laid the foundation for my success at singles. Whilst the lead position may not provide the variation of shots available to all other members of a rink, it is usually the performance of this first player which influences the end result.

I fully acknowledge that clubs and counties may be required to pursue talented players to play down the batting order in a rink, but those players must never forget to occasionally touch base with the simplest and most trusted path to success – the fundamental requirement of all leads – to simply draw effectively to the jack.

THE NUMBER TWO

The second position is sometimes described as the 'mystery' position as the player has to fulfil a number of roles, usually at the discretion of a skip. Once again, communication utilised by the skip is key; the second needs to know exactly whether they are going to be a substitute lead or will be required to play a variety of shots, including a yard-on or the occasional drive.

From my own perspective as the skip, I always found it comfortable to talk to my second player to explain that my expectations were that they would be a lead first and foremost, although (because of my own individual style), I would always want them to reach the head when the shot was against us.

The success of Scotland international team events on grass greens can be attributed to the manner in which all players are taught from the very beginning that when the shot is against, bowls need to have sufficient weight in order to reach the head and beyond.

Talking of style, David Bryant always advocated that the second player was the most important player in the rink. They had to fulfil two roles; to make up any void left by the lead when trying to build the head and secondly, to provide the positional bowls whenever the head was sufficiently laid.

THE NUMBER THREE

Without adequate communication, the relationship between a skip and the third will fall short of any expected success. I advocate that the third player and the skip should have a solid working relationship with a full understanding

of each other's technical ability and psychological needs. In simple terms, this means knowing exactly the strengths and weaknesses of each other's play and when to call on them to the greatest effect.

The skip should never really be approached by the lead and second directly during a match, but encouraged to utilise the third player as the communication link. It is quite clear that the skip has a number of roles to undertake and the third player undertaking this link often works well.

THE SKIP

Playing skip is not just an opportunity to give out instruction and to regurgitate exactly what is happening. I have observed skips fulfilling this role for the first time feeling it necessary. The great England team manager Bobbie Stenhouse once said to me: "Tony, if you can't say anything helpful, then say nothing." I have always remembered this and reminded myself of this advice when instructing players.

By the same token, the leader of the rink should not praise bowls which quite simply were incorrectly delivered and will inevitably be little or no use. Skips should ask themselves what information they can impart that will be of assistance to their player, particularly if they have another bowl to deliver. This follows on from the need to know a little about the player you are instructing.

For example, some really appreciate being told how far they are short or through the head and would welcome the instruction. Others, including myself, would despair at being given such information. In my own case, this was not because I did not want to be reminded of my mistake, but because I could see it and my thought process had already started to make the appropriate adjustment without the need for the intervention of instruction from my skip.

These issues, if addressed appropriately before they happen, will assist in producing the winning card. With respect to management, every skip will bring their own individual style. It does not necessarily follow that the best skips are the most demonstrative. I hold an opinion, however, that the very quiet, reserved skips, usually rely on technical ability to contribute. The rink then most definitely requires someone who can provide vocal support and encouragement to the team.



Communicating effectively in a rink is an essential tool to create harmony and understanding.

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Those that play with relatively quiet skips learn to understand that this is their way, but I would always question that when facing adversity; the team needs more and vocal and physical encouragement will assist to take on this challenge.

KNOW YOUR SKIP'S STRENGTHS

With regards to skips' technical ability, this is something which players need to acknowledge and be aware of. For example, a skip that prefers to rely on the draw shot will often revert to this when facing a difficult situation. On the other hand, a skip that likes to attack will not hesitate to either drive or to play the running bowl whenever the opportunity is available. Some will have a great command of both, but it is a useful exercise for a skip to discuss this with their team so they have a greater understanding of the style of the skip and this is not left to their own perception. For my own part, I have often found that the skip that I thought had a particular preference of shot did not at all.

KNOWING HOW YOUR OTHER PLAYERS WORK

In a recent training session for international bowlers, I stated that as I have not been playing for a number of years, the intimate knowledge I once had of the behaviour patterns of various makes of bowls is now somewhat limited. Notwithstanding this, in one of the workshops I asked the various

rinks (who were working together in their rinked fours), to find out exactly why each player chose to play with particular bowls. It was quite surprising that a number of players revealed a fascinating account of their choice and why. The opportunity to discuss this allowed the skip and the other members of the team to appreciate another dimension of the player with whom they were playing with.

Also in this workshop I specifically asked each rink to find out from each other how they wished to be approached when they were playing badly. For example, did they require the skip to be more vocal with instruction or did they feel they require to be left alone? What was interesting to find with these players, some of whom had played together in a number of international matches, was how little they knew about each other and some information they thought they knew was incorrect!

This very simple chat should not just be reserved for international players. It makes perfect sense for club skips to adopt a rather diluted and informal approach, but nevertheless with the purpose of attaining a similar outcome among these predominantly social bowlers participating in a friendly match. I am sure that all players would find it quite refreshing, if not reassuring, to have a short, but informal chat prior to any match with their skip so there was a little more understanding between them.

The feedback I have been given from club skips who have adopted this approach is that they have found the response to be most positive. They felt that it greatly enabled these players involved in fairly relaxed competitive matches to enjoy their experience to the full, especially if they won.

Prior to my very first international trial in 1973, my skip, the renowned Peter Brimble, came to speak to me on the day of my trial to tell me that as far as he was concerned I would never deliver a bad bowl, and if I did, no-one would know about it unless they were watching. This very simple statement really helped a very raw 18-year-old to shed some of those pre-match nerves.

COMMUNICATION IS ESSENTIAL

In general terms, skips must appreciate that communication is one of those pre-trial end requisites. It then continues when the match commences and should remain constant throughout. Post mortems happen and can assist, providing that there is a positive outcome identified and that an unsuccessful experience can, for example, be directed and transformed into a learning exercise.

As we further identify and uncover the vast requirements of playing as a skip, it will become very clear there is a lot more to this role other than playing last and, of course, in accordance with the new Laws of the Sport outdoors, keeping the scorecard into the bargain!