

The Vice-Skip Part 2

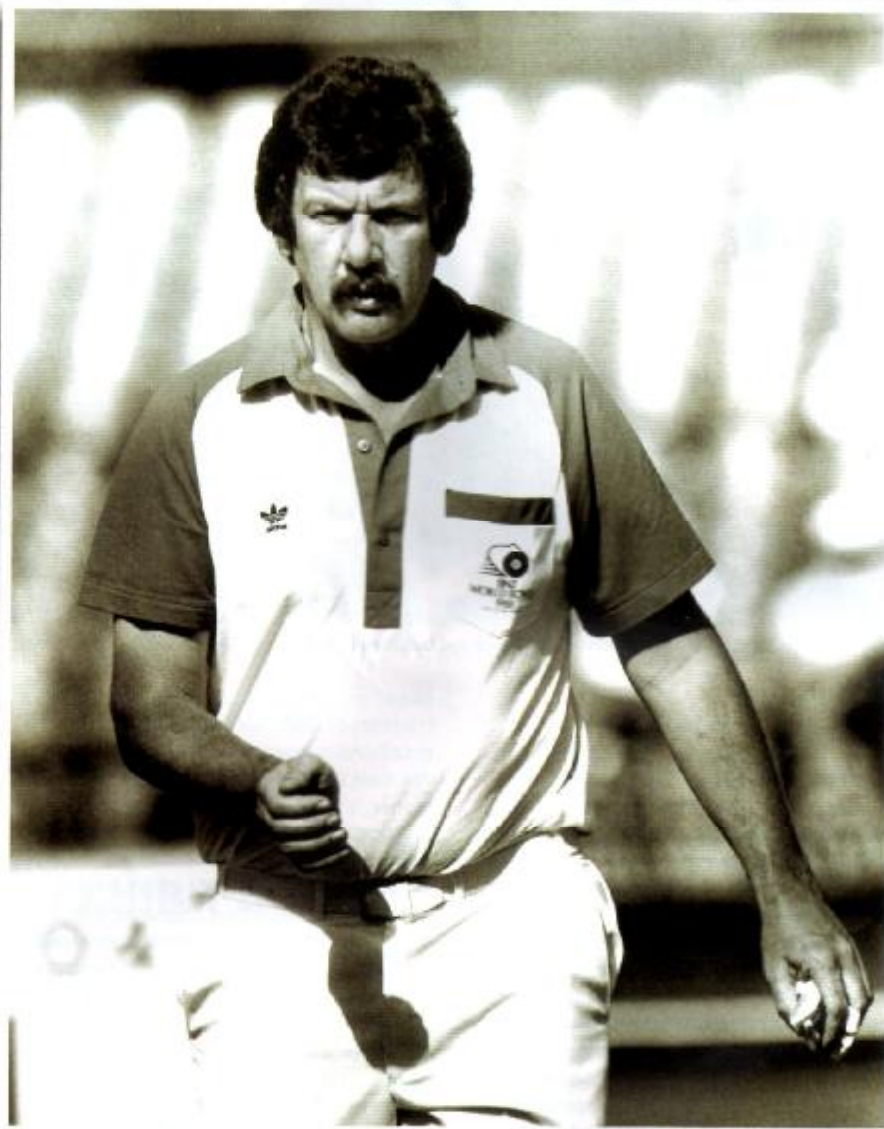
Tony Allcock continues to write about the third position in a rink – a role requiring a lot more than would first appear.

TONY ALLCOCK
From the 18 Times
World Champion



ALTHOUGH I played in every position in the rink during my playing career, I am aware that I rarely ever played number three in anything! However, my very first international cap for England was in 1976 at Rugby Thornfield Indoor BC when I was selected as a third. In those days players were, undoubtedly, selected on ability with a disregard for other attributes such as team play. For me, my first time playing for my country was not the greatest of experiences as for whatever reason our rink was not successful.

No thanks to the contribution of our rink, the England team had won the first two games prior to facing Scotland on the final day. The Scottish team were also unbeaten. The major problem for the England team manager was that the pre-event draw revealed that England's weakest rink, which included me, would play against Scotland's strongest on an end rink and therefore all indications were that the Hilton Trophy looked set to go north of the border. The team manager at the time, Peter Brimble, phoned my room on the eve of the final match and I suspected strongly that the call was to tell me I would be sitting out on the reserves' bench the next morning. I respected Peter for being one of England's most successful England indoor managers. He was meticulous in the deliverance of his man management skills, totally straightforward and honest. This, coupled with his own distinguished playing career fully qualified him to know how it felt to be part of a rink that was a high risk to the remaining 20 players and impart the bad news to players that they were to be dropped from the team. Having been invited to take a comfortable seat, to my utter amazement he informed me that at the ripe age of 20 years old I was to skip for England the next morning against Scotland's formidable skip Willie (The Machine) McQueen. The shock



John Bell played as an exceptionally effective number three to Tony Allcock at world championship events.

having sunken in he then told me to go and immediately speak to my new third, Jack Forster, who had been 'promoted' from second and '...talk to him in order to find out as much as possible about him'. As an aside, the next day we made a very creditable job of holding this phenomenal Scottish rink to a single shots victory and the the Hilton

Trophy stayed in England. It was the advice of Peter's which clearly identified the need to get to know the playing partner and to make the best of every opportunity of uncovering as much information about my new number three. Being a Leicestershire player and Jack being from Northamptonshire I knew him well but as an opponent. It was this very experience so early in my international career which has impressed upon me that in fours play there are two pairs which form the whole. The lead and second and the third and skip. The best units are those that work together in a pair and then have the ability to cement them together to form a rink conducive to playing well.

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THE NUMBER THREE

The number three has been described by some learned scholars as the 'shadow' member of the rink. David J Bryant CBE (DJB), in his book entitled 'Bryant on Bowls', talks about the minimal time playing actual bowls as a member of a fours team and identifies the third player as '...one who does not have a specific task to perform during these waiting periods'. DJB highlights the dangers in this player losing touch with the mechanics of the rink unless of course the number three is aware of any other duties he has to perform during any given match. This is sound advice and an important reason why the third and skip need to ascertain what these may be in addition to the 'expected' duties. According to the laws of the sport, these tell us that the third player 'can' measure and 'can' tell the skip the number of shots played in an end. That is it! The laws of the sport do allow any player to mark touchers (although there is an expectation that this is carried out by the skip). However, DJB is right; in order to keep the third player involved, such duties as marking touchers (apart from their own), enable the third player to remain active and motivated.

STRIKING A BALANCE

At the other end of the scale, over intervention by a third can lead to unrest amongst the rink, especially if the third and skip have not talked about this beforehand. There are many back-end combinations that have worked successfully when the third player has controlled the rink from the very beginning with the desired encouragement of the skip. It could be that the third player has an extrovert character and the skip is fairly quiet and laid back in temperament. There must, however, be a full understanding that the ultimate decision maker is the skip. Having identified that the skip's decision is final, to what extent does the third player impose their views and thoughts given a difficult decision? This is very difficult to determine and a great example of this was during one world championship when John Bell was my third and we were facing a crucial end which would result in us either going forward for the medal play-offs the following day or sitting in the spectator stand. It was the final bowl on the last end of the match and we needed the shot to win. There was a great debate about two shots available - simply the draw or the take out shot. Either was problematical, primarily due to the unreliability of the behaviour of the rink and bowls in front of the head which were to be avoided. John saw one shot (supported by Julian Haines and George Turley). Due to the behaviour of the rink I preferred the other option. A great debate took place and I decided on my choice of shot. However, on walking back to the mat I pondered about the views of my team, strongly presented by my third that the shot

was the draw. Before reaching the mat, I turned around and made my way back to the head. I knew I was 'in two minds' and the emotions of making a decision against the wishes of my number three had arrested my concentration and instead of thinking about success I was preparing for failure. We once again discussed at length the shot and through the benefit of years of experience, the Allcock and Bell partnership resolved once and for all that the shot to be executed would **not** be my first choice. Well, knowing this and that I needed all the encouragement to perform this shot, the rink, ably lead by John, harmoniously encouraged me once again just before I prepared this final delivery. The history books record that we won this match by one shot and then 24 hours later stood on the rostrum in Westburn Park in Aberdeen with four gold medals and all wearing Scottish kilts (a sight for sore eyes).

On reflection, it is easy to forget such incidents in the light of success but failure may just have questioned the third player's strength of intervention and whether or not it was appropriate. As a player, I am experienced enough to know that in these sort of situations there is only one choice. Once it has been made and the shot played a post mortem may console some individuals but it will never change the result.

RINK CONVENTIONS

The 'norm' for club play is that the rink does exactly what the skip says (including the number three). Unfortunately, this does nothing to strengthen the harmony of the rink. As I have previously mentioned, the number three player in a rink should carry a trowel as those playing in this position need to assist the skip in cementing the rink together, strengthening the team whilst safeguarding too much unnecessary interference which may result in the skip feeling threatened or challenged. It is a fine balance but when effectively addressed can produce a contented environment which, in the face of adversity, can culture that vital ingredient of team workmanship absolutely vital to successfully face and to overcome the given challenge.

COMPLIMENTING THE SKIP

Finally, when involved in competition, despite the limited skill base any individual player may have, always place great reliance on selecting a number three that will compliment the skip, not just restricting it to a skills matrix. The greatest winning rinks are not necessarily the best four bowlers available and I am of the strong opinion that success lies primarily on the strength of combination between the third and skip. This forms the essential foundation upon which the four individuals can work together as a whole, forming a most successful and contented team.

TONY'S TOP TIPS...

HAVING THE benefit of a library of literature written on the third player, prior to writing this column I was able to do some quiet reading at home one weekend and really enjoyed being surrounded by such literature whilst sitting on the sofa. The great bowls philosopher and coach Julius Sergay, who was so influential in the success of team South Africa (both past and present), compiled an ideal check list for the requirements of the third player. These are:

1. **To make the position easy for his skip.**
2. **He must be able to draw, play the running shot and when called upon the full drive.**
3. **He must be called upon to hit the head hard to clear the way in order for the skilful skip to maximise potential without the hindrances of short bowls in the way.**

For my part I could not disagree with the above from a skills set requirement. However, not all players fulfilling the third position will be able to execute accurately all the above shots. Some will be stronger in some regards than others and this needs to be acknowledged by both the player and the skip so that they are each aware.

In addition, I would add the following vital credentials. The third player must:

1. **Be the liaison between the three other players in the rink.**
2. **Have faith and trust in the skip as a player.**
3. **Understand the skip - the character - the bowler.**
4. **Know how much intervention and participation is required or expected by the skip.**
5. **Ascertain which 'other' duties the skip may require such as measuring, score board at the end of the rink or marking touchers (duties which are not specifically listed in the laws but one open to 'any' player given the skip's permission).**
6. **Never criticise the skip but gently impart information which may just enhance. (For example, '...our second prefers the forehand given a choice').**
7. **Know whether the skip requires information of changes to the head.**
8. **Never give instruction to the skip once he/she has left the head to play their bowls.**
9. **Know when to speak and only impart information if the skip requires it. (For example, I never wanted my third to tell me that my last bowl was too heavy by a metre - I knew this and so did everyone else in the rink and spectators alike!)**