

The Art of Casting the Jack

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CASTING OR rolling the jack to within a few inches of where a player wants it to go is an art in itself. Even the best can get it wrong, but do we as bowlers give this aspect of the game our full attention? In general I don't think we do.

How often do you see a bowler practising drawing to the jack at various lengths? Most of the time I would say.

How often does he or she practise controlled weight shots or driving? Maybe less, but it's still a reasonably common sight.

However, how often do you see a player with a number of jacks, practising rolling them to predetermined lengths? I would suggest it is a rare sight at any club.

JACK LENGTH DETERMINES RESULTS

The importance of placing a jack exactly where a player wants it, or to where their skip may indicate he or she wants it, is vital. So many matches are lost due to this mostly overlooked skill. Specialist leads get the opportunity to exploit this aspect of their repertoire to perfection, often against players that rarely play lead. The ability to dictate a length to play to is a massive advantage.

We often see it in televised matches. Some well-known stars of the sport favour certain lengths. Some short, some long, but it is their skill in ensuring they cast the jack to the required length that sets up the opportunity to get their first two bowls close.

MAKE SURE YOUR JACK THROW COUNTS

Top players minimise the risk of losing the jack so that it becomes part of the tactics they incorporate into their game plan. For years I have watched players place the mat at the minimum distance from the ditch and aim for 23 metres, only to see the jack drop short and be returned to their opponent.

JACK LENGTHS CHANGING THE LINE

It is important to understand the intricate details of how a 'rink' can change its characteristics at various jack lengths. The line a bowl takes going up a rink can be quantifiably different at short and long jack lengths.

On occasions, particularly in the outdoor game, the jack being placed within two metres from the ditch can have a major effect on play as these areas of the rink are often firmer and the bowl can react differently. The potential for 'run offs' close to the ditch are also a feature of some outdoor greens, hence more chance of some players losing their bowls in the ditch if they have a more attacking style of play, but only an opportunity for exploitation if you can deliver the jack correctly and consistently to the required distance.



This is a cardinal sin, as the whole advantage of having the jack becomes void. I understand the need for the jack to be as short as possible, but at what cost?

Some players deliberately roll the jack a couple of metres further because they want to play safe, but in doing so they have effectively taken away the real advantage of a minimum jack length. This is not as bad as losing the jack due to the fact that it is still a relatively short jack length, but it's not what was really required.

Of course the underlying solution is to become very proficient and practise this skill until it becomes second nature, but also it's an opportunity to give yourself permission to be a little further than the exact minimum distance by building in a small margin of error of maybe one metre.

It is better to be a little beyond the minimum distance, e.g. 23.5 or 24 metres, rather than ten centimetres short which enables your opponent to choose their favourite length when the jack is returned to them.

Alternatively, you could think about bringing the mat up to the maximum

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allowable distance. By doing this you will give an additional two metres of margin of error before the jack goes into the ditch. This is usually more than enough to ensure the correct distance you are seeking.

In televised World Bowls Tour events this is extended to three metres, so there is really no reason for a mistake. Of course this also applies when trying for a full length jack.

TEAM PLAY

In team play the lead is often not the architect of their own destiny. The lead may have been very successful at a particular length, but the others on the team may be struggling at that length and a change is needed.

In this case it is imperative that a lead has the ability to 'put away' their own personal choice and play to a length that suits the others to ensure a better chance of success. They must concentrate on delivering the jack to the new length and continue to do so even at the potential cost to their own performance.

This can become rather difficult, particularly at representative level where their overall performance is being assessed after every bowl. Having said that, a lead at international level should be able to play well at all jack lengths, but being realistic it can, on occasions, put the best players off their game for a few ends.

However, the overall effect of a change of length can be extremely effective, in particular if the others on the rink suddenly start to play well or the opponents fail to adjust quickly enough.

The lead has, under instruction, carried out exactly what was required, but at what cost to them as a player on that particular day? The rink may win the match, but the lead has struggled to get close to the new jack length, but at the same time cast it to perfection to allow the rest of his or her team-mates to play better and win.

In this case the exact delivery of the jack has become a vital part of the success of the rink and as such should always be recognised and not just dismissed as a lesser function of the lead's role.

JACK LENGTH IS VITAL

In writing this I am reminded of a very experienced international bowler who played lead for me many times at representative level. He often changed the length of jack at the most unexpected times during a match, even when we were in control of the game.

For example, and this is not a one-off anecdote, in one international match the scoreline was ten shots in our favour playing a three-quarter jack length. As I was walking away from the mat my lead suddenly played a short jack length. His reasoning? He was getting bored playing the same jack length.

Maybe I didn't take sufficient care at the time or it was a lapse of concentration. I have also watched a lot of matches won and lost because of the same problem.

It is essential that any lead should be able to cast the jack to the required length. In doing so they are effectively setting up a positive opportunity for success. I only wish I witnessed more players practising this aspect of the game, particularly younger players who have a hunger for success.

As a coach it is one of the exercises I would encourage as it really can and often is the difference between success and failure.



Corky's Top Tips:

1. Jack length is essential in determining the result of a game.
2. Concentrate fully every time you deliver the jack.
3. In a team game, play the length the team are playing best at, not necessarily what you are.



Infuriating and completely random to say the least, the dramatic change suited the opposition and it took many ends to get the jack back into our possession. As the skip it was a lesson learned. For the rest of the match I asked him to wait for an indicated length to cast the jack to.

Rolling the jack is an important element of the sport of bowls at any level. I have lost matches by making mistakes with the jack length and to be truthful they should never have happened.

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