

# The Vice-Skip

Part 1

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

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**T**EAM GAMES are the most common form of bowls, with fours play being the most popular, possibly due to the pressure on green availability, but it can be said that in club play it is so naturally suited to the convivial atmosphere of a club; it fulfils the need for social interaction and provides a competitive edge.

## THE NUMBER THREE

Whilst much has been written about the specific roles of the lead and skip, it is often taken for granted that the other two positions, although equally contributory, are not so clearly identified for the purpose of having a specific role, other than that described in the Laws of the Sport.

I suppose we all know the fundamental role of a third player is to deliver the fifth and sixth bowls and to measure. However, the role of the third player is far more demanding than this and can be key to success in a rink, not just from a technical point of view but from a psychological one also.

## THE VICE-SKIP

When playing bowls in Canada and in the sport of curling, the third player is referred to as the vice-skip. This is a lovely title which gives another dimension to this position in the rink. It adequately describes what is, in essence, a 'hidden duty' of the third player but can also contribute to a disastrous outcome! The number three is the skip's right-hand man or woman, and should also be the watchman, utilising all senses to gather anything which may then be communicated to the skip. In that respect the role does need to be the strong communication channel between the remainder of the players and the skip. In many ways the three is the 'filter', who will disregard or regard certain signs appropriately in the interests of the whole team. Naturally, from a technical point of view, the third player should have a fair ability to execute all the required shots but there is, no doubt, a little more to this than would appear at face value. I would categorically say **that in selecting a third player for any rink, the compatibility between the skip and number three in respect of skill base and character must be considered as equally important.**

## DUTIES OF THE THIRD

Fundamental duties are to direct the head and to take charge in the skip's absence and it is 'expected' that he/she will measure the shots and agree with the other third. Interestingly, it is an unwritten rule that the person claiming shots will request that the opposing third concedes them. When a number of shots are involved it is good practice to put a duster down on the rink upon which to place the declared shots. This helps to avoid any misunderstanding about the count. Many disputes have been caused through the inability to count correctly amongst the excitement or dismay of deciding the total number of shots!

## RELATIONSHIP WITH THE SKIP

The third player must have faith and respect in the skip's judgement whilst also resisting the temptation just to conform to what the skip stipulates. The third player needs to do this but with a delicate air of caution for too much interaction may just be perceived as an interference which could in some instances lead to confrontation – something which must be avoided at all costs during a very competitive match!

The relationship with a skip must be based on honesty and this is something which will, at times, present a great challenge and sometimes it may be best not to give an opinion. It is true to say that an 'indifferent' relationship between the third player and skip is just the ingredient for total failure. We have often heard club members say 'I just cannot play with Sid but I love his company at the bar'. We have all witnessed that players 'change' on the green – some for the better and some for the worse. From my own perspective I certainly did and my passionate desire to win was not necessarily popular in domestic matches where part of the emphasis was on social enjoyment. The number three must respect the skip, and vice-versa – advice and suggestions and the communication of tactical strategy (and the implementation of the same) must be respected by the skip.

## SKIP HAS FINAL SAY

It has to be remembered that whilst such interaction should take place **the base line is that the skip must retain overall responsibility.** However, the third player must be mindful that if the skip is ultimately the decision maker then he/she must think very carefully when any intervention is considered during the decision making

process. It is a delicate time and if handled inappropriately can be the core reason for failure.

A simple case study here illustrates a skip that elects to play the draw shot with his last bowl to save a head, with the opposition holding six shots. The third believes that the shot is to play weight and to attempt to 'scatter' the fairly wide head in order to at least reduce the count and at best to get the shot. This is at a crucial time and the third player needs to ask him/herself:

- 1) Should I, on behalf of the rink suggest the alternative?
- 2) If so, how strongly?
- 3) Should the third player reveal any information filtered down from the other two players in the rink or not?

Whilst reflecting on these, it must be remembered that there is, I would advocate, an 'optimum' time limit for all of this (nothing to do with slow play), but from years of experience, **protracted discussions on the required shot to be played rarely achieves.** The longer the debate the greater the risk of self doubt and indecision. The answers to the three questions rest with the relationship between the skip and third, which is sometimes conveniently overlooked in the selection meeting and the match of technical skill takes priority. When I was involved solely in the selection of the successful England 2002 Commonwealth Games lawn bowls team in Manchester, my emphasis was geared to interpersonal relationships over skill base. Having revealed this, it would be a very reckless decision if technical ability did not form a major part of the decision making process as well. One third player perfectly suited to one skip will not be to another, primarily due to variance in personality. This is not 'rocket science' as any club captain will know not to select two lively outgoing extroverts as third and skip – or would they? Whilst each case is individual, a rule of thumb is that an extrovert and submissive player usually makes a healthy combination but this is dangerous ground to tread!

Differences in character of the two involved in the partnership forming the back positions of a rink are one aspect, the other has to be skill base. Some advocate that the 'drawing' skip will be best suited to the third player that has a high success rate at the drive shot. The philosophy behind this being that any 'cluttered head' of opposition bowls can be cleared in order for the drawing skip to execute the draw shot to which they are best suited.





The English 1984 world championships squad worked in harmony and had a deep understanding of each other, which was pivotal to England's success. John Bell played the vice-skip role very effectively with George Turley leading, Julian Haines at two and Tony Allcock skipping.

In one of my books I briefly wrote the 'stereotype' for my ideal number three. Fundamentally, they should:

- 1) Possess all the shots
- 2) Have a good command of the 'weighted shot'
- 3) Comprehensively be able to read the head
- 4) Be totally aware of the characteristics of the skip – and have an in-depth knowledge of them 'as a bowler'

Since the above was written some 25 years ago I would now certainly like to expand on the fourth requirement. This is, undoubtedly, the key to success in this sport and in all others involving partnerships/team work. As the appointed Commonwealth Games England Performance Director for bowls in 2002 I worked closely with Dr Ian Maynard, now Professor Maynard, of Sheffield Hallam University who, ultimately, played a huge part in the success enjoyed by the English bowls team. Ian had been involved in a number of sports and I remember during many of his team building sessions he emphasised the need for players competing in a team or partnership to essentially know as much about their playing partners as they could possibly find out in the hope that should a situation arise each would know the expectation of the other. He described a team exercise he had lead involving a sailing team who would spend weeks contained within the confines of the sailing vessel. They sat in the

boat and did a 'what happens if' scenario. This included the death of a family member back home and what each would expect to happen given such a tragedy and how they would expect the other to react. Interestingly, (and as an aside), the team voted unanimously to instruct their families that they would not wish to have such information sent to the ship.

Turning the attention back to bowls, it is important that all of these 'what happens if' scenarios are at least uncovered. To some degree, club bowlers playing fairly regularly together actually do find out what is likely to be the reaction of a player given a certain instance. However, this is usually learnt through time spent together, something which many competitive teams do not have the luxury of in order to explore and to build any relationship. What Professor Ian taught actually happens at club level but if we are to get maximum return from an international or county team, the number three should at least ascertain as much information about the skip and indeed the remainder of the rink. Four 'good' club players coming together for a county competition to play the following season can bring absolute disaster. A fundamental assessment of the quartet will reveal a very strong skill base which may just be able to sustain a successful campaign, but without a robust perception of each others' characteristics it is more likely to fail. During a match, moments of crises, dreadful starts, or a large deficit on the score board will need more than technical skill to

rectify. It will need the team to pull together, the example being set by the strong 'rear guard', with solidarity demonstrated by the third player and skip. In order to do so it is paramount that the third player understands the skip's strengths and weaknesses so any intervention required from the third can be directed accordingly and without the need for approval to act. What is for sure is that any disharmony felt between these players will spread rapidly to the front players without a word being spoken!

### THIRD/SKIP MUST CONSIDER THE FRONT END

Within the playing unit the third player spends a lot of time at the head with the skip and whilst I advocate that the strength lies in the partnership of these two, there are two other players to consider. One of the great difficulties with fours play is that there is a lot of standing around and waiting. The skip is mainly concentrating on all the bowls and from personal experience playing everyone's too! The third player is key in fostering communication between the two partnerships – front end and back end – and should be responsible for cementing the overall foundation, keeping them abreast of the current situation and imparting any psychological snippets concerning the opposition which may just boost confidence and enhance enthusiasm.

There will be more on the role of the number three in next month's issue.