

// TRAINING TIPS FROM JON

Playing without a plan is planning to fail

Use the Free Guard Zone to your advantage

By Jon Mielke, USCA Level III instructor and Level III coach

Most curlers know what the free guard zone (FGZ) rule says, but far fewer know how to use it to their advantage. Related tactics are the focus of this article.

First, let's review the rule. The FGZ is the area between the hog line and the tee line, but not in the house. The rule says that a team may not remove an opponent's stone in the FGZ with either of its first two rocks of the end. You may remove your own stones, but not those belonging to the other team. Also, you can move an opponent's stones that are in the FGZ, but you cannot remove them until you get to your third stone in the end. If an opponent's stone is removed, everything goes back to where it was before the shot and the offending stone is taken out of play.

It is important to remember that curling is often just a fight over controlling the path leading to the four-foot – one team typically wants to block it with its own stones and the other team wants to keep it open. The team that wants to block the path is the team without the hammer – they are trying to steal. With the path to the four-foot cut off, a draw behind or a tap puts them in a good position to steal.

Conversely, the team with the hammer is trying to keep the path open and is hoping to score two or more. They typically try to force play to the outside of the house and want clear access to the four-foot, just in case all else fails and they need to draw to the center of the house to avoid a steal.

The following diagram illustrates when you want to force play to the middle and when you want to keep the middle open, if possible, and force play to the outside. Without the hammer – plug up the middle. With the hammer – keep the middle open and force play to the outside.

The diagram also indicates when you want to throw guards and when you want to avoid them. Throw guards when you're behind and, if you're ahead, consider going into the house with your first stones. Here are some examples:

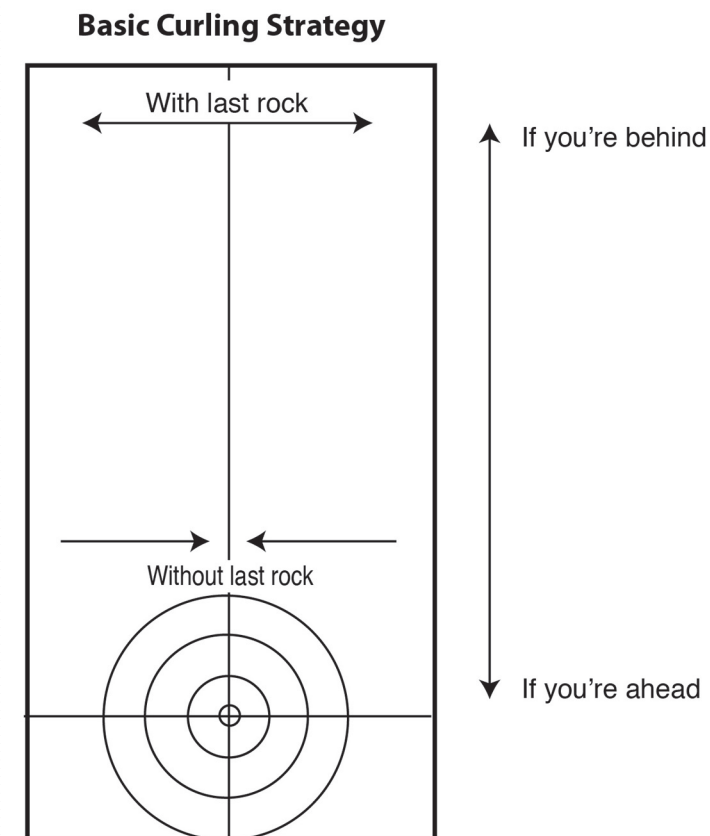
Remember the saying, “When you're up, guards are not.” If you are ahead by three with a few ends to play and the other team has the hammer, you don't need offense; you need defense. If you put up guards, the other team can use them, too. That will help them generate offense, something that you are trying to avoid.



When you are ahead, regardless of whether you have the hammer or not, consider throwing your first stones into the house. If you don't have the hammer, throw to the top of the four-foot. You hope that they decide to hit you. All the play will then be in the house with no guards to hide behind. Even if you give them a miss and they score two, you will still be up by one and you will have the hammer.

On the other hand, if you have the hammer and they throw a center guard, throw a tight come-around draw and either get behind their guard or chip them to the side and open up the middle. Try to avoid a junk end with lots of rocks up front. Protect your lead by forcing play into the house with no guards up front. All this is, of course, dependent on your team's ability to throw open hits.

Conversely, if you are behind and have the hammer and they throw into



the rings, the diagram says that you should ignore the lead's stone that is in the house and throw a corner guard. Sometimes it is okay, or even necessary, to ignore your opponent's rocks that are in the rings in order to start building an end. If you hit their stones early in the end, you will not be taking advantage of the "free guard" rule and you will never be in a position to generate the offense that you need to get back in the game (unless they miss lots of open hits).

When you have the hammer, don't panic just because they have a rock or two in the house, especially if they are behind the tee line. Get some corner guards and then look for an opportunity to hit the rocks that they threw into the top of the house and hopefully roll your shooter behind one of your corner guards. Now you have the middle open and some corner guards to work with. If they have rocks well behind the tee line, you may want to leave them there. They may be good backers that you can use later in the end.

Also, think about how you want to play the first end. Do you want to get into a junk game right away? If you are an aggressive team with a good draw game, maybe you do. But, if you don't have the hammer, you may want to encourage a clean end by throwing your first stone into the four-foot and hoping to play more of a hit end and getting a feel for the ice.

If you have the hammer in the first end and they throw up a center guard, consider playing a tight come-around draw and try to tick them off to the side, or just get by and hide behind them. Then watch for an opportunity to clear guards. Either approach will encourage more of a hit game. Your team can get loosened up and you can learn the ice. Hopefully you can avoid having to make a game-saving draw with your first draw of the game.

What about the last end when you absolutely have to steal one? Keep throwing guards until late in the end, maybe even until your last shot. If you do get a center guard and it is your turn to throw, put up another center guard that is directly in line with the other guard and keep some distance between them. Well placed center guards are tough to double out, or at least the other team's shooter will stay in play somewhere in the middle of the sheet. Whatever the case, you will have a guard and something to hide behind with your last shot.

Knowing when to attack and when to play defensively is ultimately dictated by your team's mentality, skill levels, and other SHEETZ (Score, Hammer, End, Environment, Team, and FGZ) factors. Before you start an end, have a goal in mind (score two or more, blank, or steal) and know what kinds of tactics you can use to impose your will on the other team. Playing without a plan is planning to fail.

The FGZ rule has made curling a far more complicated game than is used to be and it demands more of every position. Learning related strategy takes time. Don't be afraid to ask questions and make use of opportunities to watch how others play – both live and on TV. This is the stuff that makes curling really fun.

Also remember that sound strategy is not a substitute for good shooting. If your team is not shooting at least 50 percent, it probably doesn't matter how good your strategy is. Get out there and practice, and make sure you are using proper delivery techniques. If you've forgotten what they are, go back and read some of my previous articles on the ABCs of a good delivery. The articles are on USA Curling's website (USA Curling – Inside the USCA – CNews Columnists – Columns by Jon Mielke).

Until next time – play smart and good curling! ■

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