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PRESENTS THE COACHING SERIES...

## **“A PANE IN THE GLASS”**

### The Most Important Aspects of a Curling Delivery

#### I Can't Capture on Video Tape

Bill Tschirhart – True North Curling Inc.

Do I have your attention? If you're a coach or instructor I'm sure you're wondering if I've been hit on the head one too many times by the boom on my sailboat. And, to add to the mystery, I just completed an essay explaining how to video tape a curling delivery.

Be that as it may, this just might be the most important article I have composed, as it's not commonly held that the most important aspects of a curling delivery can't be captured visually. I have to be honest, not all my colleagues buy into this and you need to make your own assessment about the matter. What the title implies is this; ***if all you take onto a sheet of curling ice is a sound technical curling delivery, you don't have very much.*** Why? Sooner or later that delivery that you have worked so hard to develop will be attacked by "competitive breakdown". Some will prefer to call it "pressure". Call it what you will. ***If you don't protect and support that curling delivery, sooner or later it will begin to break down.*** Participant observation, countless hours listening to sports psychologists and reading mental toughness publications tells me so.

Before you read on, I'm going to suggest that you put this article down and read two, interesting, relevant, entertaining and easy-to-read publications and order a video from the Public Broadcasting System in the U.S. Obviously I can't force you to do this but trust me (wow, how many times have I said that?), you will be the richer for it and my words will make much more sense (it's always better for us both when I start to make sense).

"The Inner Game of Tennis (Revised Edition)" by W. Timothy Gallwey

ISBN 0-679-77831-4

"The New Toughness Training for Sport" by James Loehr ISBN 0-452-26998-9

"On the Ball" from the Science America Series (PBS)

Before we examine the aspects of a curling delivery that I can't capture on videotape, I want to be very clear that *a sound technical delivery is your most important weapon in the quest for peak performance*. The Canadian Curling Association is the best in the curling world at creating certified coaches/instructors to help you achieve that most valuable asset. There is much written about the curling delivery but this is my essay so I'll direct you at some point to some other articles authored by yours truly that are strictly technical in nature ([www.ntc.curling.ca](http://www.ntc.curling.ca)).

**"Straight, Simple, Silent"**

**"The Anatomy of the No Back Swing Delivery"**

**"You Have the Power"**

**"Prescription for the Wayward Trail Leg"**

**"Eye Dominance: Fact or Fiction"**

**"The Window of Velocity"**

The intent of this essay, as previously stated but worth repeating (and I'll make this point one more time in closing) is to ensure that your curling delivery is "bullet proof" in competition. What good is a sound technical delivery if it doesn't stand up to "competitive breakdown"?

## **ACTIVATION**

Each athlete in his/her own way, almost intuitively gets into "the ideal performance state" (those of you who did your homework will know precisely what that is). It's the one time, and there are others, when a good coach does not treat his/her athletes the same. Some athletes will need to be by themselves with their thoughts. Others may need to talk, some a lot and to various individuals (coach, friend, family member [watch out there] etc.). Still others may need an aid. Music is popular. I know teams that have played a particular song in the vehicle on the way to games (it's a "team thing" in this case) while another team with whom I worked played the same song on a multi-player personal listening device during its warm-up.

And even though two players may choose the same process, each might do it for exactly the opposite reason. You see our sport is like some others whereby you CAN get too pumped up. Again, if you read James Loehr's book, you know that peak performance comes from a relaxed, focused state of mind. That's an interesting combination of attributes as intense focus for most is anything but relaxed. I wish I could anoint you with the secret to "relaxed focus" but I can't but what I can do is make you aware of it. As previously stated, most athletes through trial and error find out pretty quickly what they need to do and how to do it. One athlete might need to get more "pumped" while another might need to bring him/herself "down". Each is seeking that ideal performance state!

And where do "emotions" fit into the equation? Activation certainly plays a role in controlling them. I'm watching the 2006 British Open Golf Championship this weekend as I write this. Former Open Champion, Nick Faldo pointed out in his colour analysis that in a round of golf, time spent in "motion", the action of striking the golf ball consumes somewhat less than two minutes but in the round, there are

about four hours of emotion time and it's what you do with that four hours that usually determines the quality of the motion time. I think we can draw a comparison to curling in that statement.

What is your ideal performance state and how do you achieve it?

## **CONFIDENCE**

I have dealt with this elusive topic before and I'll begin with my classic "confidence" question. It's rhetorical. There's no prescribed, correct answer.

*Do you perform well because you're confident or are you confident because you're performing well? Or is it something of a give-and-take situation. The better you perform, the more confident you become and with added confidence comes improved performance? For me it's neither. I'm confident when I know I've done everything to prepare.*

As mentioned above, I'm writing this essay on the British Open weekend. This year the event is being held at the Royal Liverpool Golf Club. It's the morning of the last round and in a pre-round interview, the tournament leader, Tiger Woods, was asked about his confidence going into the final 18 holes with five others within three shots. His reply, "Why wouldn't I be confident. I've done this 10 times before." The ten times to which he referred was the 10 times he's played the final round in a major golf tournament as the leader. I guess for Tiger, confidence comes from a history of performance.

Perhaps confidence is inherent with one's teammates. You play better with some athletes than others. They give you confidence.

Experience sometimes is required for confidence. As I write this, the average age at the Tim Horton's Brier and the Scott Tournament of Hearts (sorry Scott Paper Co., the "Scottie" just doesn't cut it) is over 30 years of age, the same as the professional golf tours. It's the one thing I can't coach. I can provide, promote and encourage it but I can't coach it.

But as with "activation", you need to know how to achieve and maintain it! It's that awareness thing again.

Oh yah, if you're afraid to fail, confidence is almost impossible! See the article, "[So You Want to be Perfect Eh?](#)" based upon the work of my friend Dr. John Dunn on the aforementioned web site. By the way, did you know that when Derek Jeter broke into major league baseball, in his first year with the Yankees he committed an unbelievably high number of errors? That certainly surprised me as Derek Jeter is the captain of the New York Yankees, gold glove winner, future Hall-of-Famer and multiple world champion. When asked what changed he said, "I stopped being afraid to fail." Hmm, is there a lesson there for us mere mortals?

## **TRUST**

And to continue with the Open Championship analogies, Paul Azinger, another colour analyst when asked what makes Tiger so mentally tough replied, he "trusts" his mechanics. And why wouldn't he?

Hmmm, trust, have you ever even thought about the level of trust you have in your curling delivery? I suspect for most of you, you have not! But, I'll ask the question anyway. How much do you really trust that delivery? And where does trust lie? Is it similar to "confidence"? You trust a delivery that produces results? Well, if that's the case, then we're back to that confidence "chicken-and-egg" thing

once again aren't we? Not much control of trust when you already have to perform well to have it. That's just not good enough!

For most, trust comes from someone else. In this age of the curling coach, usually trust comes from someone the athlete respects to look at the delivery, regardless of performance to say, "That delivery looks good!" Should there be a lack of performance, a delivery fault is not the cause. An athlete needs to know that! If it's not a technical issue, then why the lack of performance? Let's just say, you came to the right place.

So trust that delivery. If enough knowledgeable people tell you it's an excellent delivery, then why wouldn't you trust it? But, before we move on, also remember that you're not a robot. Despite your best efforts and with the knowledge of this essay, you will miss shots. Relax and enjoy your humanity! Don't be afraid to fail!

## **ATTITUDE**

Where do I begin with this one? It's EVERYTHING in life and life on the curling ice. As with physical and nutritional preparation, attitude can't make an average athlete great but without it, it certainly can make a great athlete average!

Forgive me for sounding "preachy" here but you can't control many of the things that happen in your life. But, the great news is that you are always in complete control over how you react to those events. I try always to remember that!

The reaction "you choose" is critical to performance. Choose the appropriate attitude and you turn a lemon into lemonade. Choose the wrong attitude and bad gets worse and worse becomes worst. It's always your choice!

In high performance camps, to illustrate the importance of attitude, I like to ask the following question. "When you're in the hack ready to set your delivery into motion, do you hope to make the shot?" Usually most people in the group will raise their hand. After all, it seems like a reasonable aspiration. But, I reply, "I don't. I expect to make the shot!" Think of the difference between hoping and expecting. I think it's huge! A positive attitude is worth its weight in gold. Sometimes on my team, the skip will ask me to select the rotation for a particular shot. I retort that it doesn't matter. I can miss either one. To which he replies, "Bill, be more positive!" Then it's my turn with, "OK, I'm positive I can miss either rotation!" It's just my feeble attempt at some team levity but I wonder how much truth might be contained therein.

I talk much about attitude both individually and team based. From a team perspective I'm huge believer in the psychological "inner game" that takes place between the two teams. A team constantly sends signals to its opposition. I don't believe that teams consider the message they're sending nearly enough. Some will call it momentum. Call it what you wish. A game is rarely played upon a level psychological playing field. One team has "it" and the other team is desperately trying to get "it".

Think about this for a moment. Let's say your team plays a great end. It executes the game plan to perfection and makes all the shots. The opposition doesn't play nearly as well but the skip draws to a shot position but wide open to a take-out by your skip for a multiple score, richly deserved, and that last stone picks. They score one, and an undeserved one in your estimation. What body language does your team exhibit? You can look like "someone shot your dog" or you can move the stone off the sheet, perhaps pat the skip on the appropriate body part and move on. Imagine the two distinctly different messages you send based upon the same incident (talk about either sucking a lemon or making

lemonade). But let's consider an entirely opposite situation? You call, and make, a very low percentage shot, one you and everyone watching knows "came out of left field". How do you react to that? Is it high fives for everyone, party time? Or do you again pat the shooter on the appropriate body part and move forward. Again, think about the two distinctly different messages you would send. It's all about the choice you (plural in this case) make. There's that choice thing again!

I get asked this question a lot. OK Bill, I'm sold on attitude as a critical component but what IS the right attitude? My answer is, "**I can't wait to play!**" That implies confidence, preparation, trust and most importantly a love for the playing of the game, not the winning or losing but performance! How would you answer that same question?

## **IMAGERY**

I don't personally know of any elite athlete, regardless of the sport, who doesn't use visualization and imagery. They may do it so unconsciously that they are not actually aware they are doing it. But they do!

First a distinction; visualization is what you see "in the mind's eye" whereas imagery is that plus any other sensory perceptions supplied by any or all of the other senses. Allow me to illustrate. Get someone else to read the next paragraph while you close your eyes.

I want you to picture your front door to your dwelling. What colour is it? Is it a single or double door? Does it have panes of glass? If so, how many are there? What shape are they? Where is the opening device (right or left side)? Are there any designs on the door? What is the opening device? Is it a knob or a handle?

Even from my computer here in Sidney-by-the-Sea, BC, I can see that you had no trouble answering any of those questions even though you may not even be in your dwelling place as you read this. You did it because you could "see" your front door in your mind's eye. That's visualization! Now try this. Close your eyes once again (come on, work with me on this).

Hear the sounds your footsteps make as you approach that door. When you arrive at the door, feel your muscles move your arm as you grasp the opening device. Feel your hand grasp it. Is it warm or cool? Is it circular in shape or some other shape? Open the door. Are you pushing it away from you or pulling it toward you? Hear the sound it makes as it opens. Now, step inside. Feel the temperature change. Is it from warm to cool or cool (or cold) to warm? Are there any aromas present? What are they? I had you employ some of your other senses. That's imagery!

I'm sure you have, from time-to-time, in an effort to understand something, asked for a "picture" to be drawn. After all, that's what a map does. It's a picture that can be used to locate a place or show you how to get to a place. Both could have been described in text but the picture makes more sense. You can "see" it!

Elite athletes use visualization regularly to "see" the flight of the golf ball, the pitch, the flight of the football etc. Combined with imagery, athletes can literally "practise" their sport effectively. That's mental rehearsal.

I get this from time-to-time. "I play at the (enter curling club's name here)". It's a very busy club. I can rarely get practice ice so I can't practise." Yikes! When I hear that it's a clear indication that the athlete hasn't discovered mental rehearsal. I have been known to ask that same athlete the following.

*You mean to tell me you can't imagine yourself going to your curling club? You can't feel yourself open the door and walk in? You can't "see" other club members already there? You can't feel yourself go to the locker room (and smell its distinctive aroma [yuk])? You can't feel yourself get into your curling attire? You can't feel yourself return to the club lounge and perhaps speak to other curlers and perhaps shake their hand? You can't feel the doorknob of the door to the ice surface and hear the sound it makes as you open it? You can't feel that ocean of cold air in the ice shed as you begin your stretching on the boardwalk? You can't feel the resistance of your soft tissues as you bend and stretch? You can't feel your gripper foot reach the ice surface followed by the slider foot as you step onto the playing surface? You can't feel your slider on the pebbled ice surface as you cool it down. You can't feel the push glide action as you make your way down the side of the sheet, behind the hack at the away end and return on the other side? You can't feel yourself bend into the hack position for the first time? You can't feel the pullback, park, bottom-out and slide portions of the delivery as you take your first practice slide? You can't feel the pebbled surface under your slider and hear the slight sound it makes? You can't feel the handle of the curling stone as you take it from the group at the corner of the sheet for your first practice shot? You can't feel your hand position the handle for the first rotation. You can't "see" the skip's brush as you get set for the first practice shot? You can't look up and see you teammates ready to brush for you? You can't feel yourself slide with the stone, and hear the "roar" it makes with the pebbled surface? You can't "see" the stone as it makes its way down the ice and make contact with the target stone or come to rest in exactly the right stop?*

The answer to all the questions is overwhelmingly **"Yes, of course I can!"** My reply is, **"Then why don't you do it?"** Because if you did, you'd find it takes just as much time as if you were actually at the curling club. It would take just as much "work" and "concentration". But the most positive effect is "attitude". You will not miss a shot in mental rehearsal. Why would you? Imagine the "attitude" you will have the next time you actually attempt those same shots. You can honestly say, "I expect to make this shot. I do it all the time in "practice!"

One of the advantages we have in curling, much like golf, is that we do not play what I call a "flow" sport. We play a "stop-and-start" sport. We have the luxury of time that an ice hockey or soccer player does not have. We can "see" ourselves make the shot. But do we have the discipline to do it? If you did, all you would have to do is follow the picture you have created in the mind's eye. Remember, the best athletes do this all the time, but some so automatically they have ceased to be aware. Try it! What do you have to lose?

## **BRAIN BALANCE**

I have a dilemma here. Do I give you all the background this topic requires or do I assume that you have done your "homework"? OK, let me see. I'll split the difference. I'm going to give you just enough so that if you were not able to secure those publications and see that cool tape, you will still be able to appreciate this section of the article.

It's now pretty much common knowledge among the populace that the brain has two sections or hemispheres. Although similar in appearance (grey matter) their function could not be more diverse.

The left hemisphere is in charge of "details". It's the "A" leads to "B", leads to "C" half of the brain. It likes things in order. It loves equations and formulas that have finite solutions and predictable outcomes. It's the side of the brain at work with scientists, mathematicians and engineers. Where would life be without them?

The right hemisphere on the other hand, sees "the big pictures" in life. It's the creative side of the brain. It's at work as a composer creates music, a dancer connects the steps into a rhythmic series of body motions and it's in charge when the athlete completes the move in a calm, confident manner devoid of the small details that were likely initially taught by an instructor or coach.

Obviously, with that knowledge, you can think of times when your left or right brain did most of the work in your daily tasks. Learning is either a left or right brain activity. As a retired professional educator, I tried to be constantly aware that in my class, I had students for whom the written word or numerical symbols were all that was required to understand the concept at hand. But I also had others for which those printed symbols might well have been in Greek or Latin as English. They learned in a very different manner, one in which diagrams or verbal explanations made greater sense. At exam time, a "left brain" thinker is quite comfortable answering written questions while a right brain thinker might be more successful if tested verbally. A left-brain student sees formulas in science class as a logical way to see the topic whereas the right brain student fully begins to comprehend the teaching point much better after he/she sees the results of the experiment through the manual manipulation of the chemicals involved.

W. Timothy Gallwey saw this difference as a key point to the way an athlete performs. He noted that not only did the hemispheres of the brain have totally different functions and style; an athlete performed better when there was a balance between the two.

His other ground-breaker concept was that the left and right side of the brain also have completely different "personalities" which make "brain balance" a skill to be developed. It's not something that most people do intuitively it appears.

The left side of the brain, what Gallwey chose to call "SELF ONE", is very bold and brash, almost arrogant. It likes to be totally in charge. It will take the simplest athletic movement and break it down into its most minute parts. It certainly helps us learn skills that are taught in that manner. If allowed, it will keep those details front and center as you attempt to hit that golf ball, swing that baseball bat or deliver that curling stone. On occasion, to be sure, Self One does its job well with more than pleasing results but if that were the case, you were truly "lucky" that Self One just happened to play a very appropriate role. When given its head, Self One wants the right side of the brain, tah dah, SELF TWO, to butt out! Self One would rather do the job alone and given Self Two's meek and mild personality, that happens most of the time in individuals who first don't understand the importance of balancing the brain and how to achieve that balance. For this type of individual, performance is very much a hit-or-miss proposition. The talent and skills are quite likely there but the balance between the left and right sides of the brain is not!

It explains why a golfer can play a great round of golf on a Tuesday and return to the golf course the very next day, brimming with confidence by the way under almost exactly the same atmospheric and course conditions with perhaps the pins in the same positions on the greens and "play like dirt". It has been one of sports great mysteries. Gallwey has given us a window into its understanding. On Tuesday, Self One just "happened" to play a very appropriate role, while on Wednesday, it played a very inappropriate one. But here's the point. That same golfer, after the Wednesday round, will quite likely go to the practice range and make some swing changes because, after all, he/she must be doing something technically incorrect. Well, that might have been the case but this is the symptom versus the disease issue to which I referred earlier. And, to make matters even worse, that same golfer, whose swing was just fine thank you very much, risks making a disastrous technical change that might truly lead to more difficulties. It's a slippery slope my friend!

I think I've "stick handled" around this long enough and I'm sure you know where this is headed given what I have said this far. The right side of the brain, the "Just Do It" side of the brain, the side where performance truly has a home, must be permitted the opportunity to do just that but if you don't know how to keep Self One busy, Self Two might never show its face.

One of the biggest mistakes that athletes make when they begin to understand and appreciate the whole brain balance idea is to take the position that they'll ignore Self One. Wrong, wrong, wrong! WRONG I say! You can't do it! You can certainly ignore Self Two because its personality is such that it will remain in the wings but given Self One's personality, it wants, no, DEMANDS to play a role each and every time. The trick is this. Self One needs to be given a role. It needs to be kept busy. It's like that precocious two-year old who demands parental attention but who for a few brief moments is content with a particular toy or television programme. You can just hear the momentary sigh of relief from Mom and Dad who can now be productive until the next demand comes from junior.

Goods news! It's not hard to keep Self One just busy enough for Self Two to perform. And there's more than one way to do it.

Method one (in no order of priority) is to use a mantra (a phrase or word that will help you recall a key technical point). Self one will focus on the mantra and that will keep it "just busy enough". Method two will surprise you I believe. It certainly did me (and if you saw the PBS videotape "On the Ball", it certainly surprised the series star, Alan Ada). It's reasonably intense, albeit short, exercise. Who knew that physical exertion would have a calming effect on the mind by keeping Self One busy? Obviously, you can combine the two methods. And, the really "neat" aspect of this type of brain balance is it's so suited to our stop-and-start sport. You have the time to do both.

There is a third way to balance the brain and that's to literally balance the body. Again, if you saw the videotape referred to above, you'll recall that Alan Alda was asked to balance himself on a balance board for a minute or so and then try putting. When he did, his putting scores improved.

I'm going to get on my soapbox for this next statement. For decades the skip, who stands around for about 15 min. with little or no physical exercise, watching all the shots "backward", is then asked to execute the last two critical shots of the end. Yuk from a brain balance perspective! Better if the person who is charged with the delivery of the last two stones to have had some physical exercise prior to shooting. So, the Ferbey connection is based in some pretty solid sport science.

Some skips, who play the traditional role, run to the shooting end to prepare to deliver (Kathy King and Sheri Anderson to name two). I've asked both why they do that and their reply was that they simply feel ready to shoot. Now we have a better answer for them don't we.

So there you have them, the six components of a curling delivery that I can't capture on videotape. But, there is a seventh and you can see it on video. If you focus on the eyes of the athlete you will see where he/she is focusing in the act of delivering the stone. Many, as we discovered under the direction of Dr. Joan Vickers of the University of Calgary, do NOT keep their eyes on the target (i.e. skip's brush). No, no! Many drop their eyes to the stone and back to the target in the process of delivery. Her study of where athletes actually look in their sport is groundbreaking and was the cover story of one of the golf's "bibles" ("Golf Digest") a few seasons ago. I'll not go into detail about "Quiet Eye" but suffice to say it was the genesis of this essay. The PBS videotape I encouraged you to watch has a section devoted to "Quiet Eye". It was when viewing that tape that the whole idea of "The Performance Cocktail" came to me.

As with a cocktail, consisting of many ingredients, some like a little more of this and a little less of that. So it is with curlers trying to support and protect their curling deliveries. Some might need more confidence and brain balance but already deal with activation and imagery really well. Someone else might need the "whole meal deal". Where are you on this scale?

If there are several ingredients of the performance cocktail that you need, only work on one at a time! Get that one into your shot-by-shot comfort zone before you move on to another. You don't have to master one to the point of "automation", just comfort.

As with any skills, these components need to be practised, some perhaps more than others. When you take the whole package onto the ice surface, you'll be "bullet proof"!

Oh yes, make that eleven in a row for Mr. Woods!

Author's Note: Now it's an even dozen. Tiger just won the 2006 PGA Championship by five strokes after going into the last round as the co-leader.

Enjoy working with your athletes!