



(a subsidiary of TRUE NORTH CURLING INC)

PRESENTS THE COACHING SERIES...

“A PANE IN THE GLASS”

THE AWKWARD TIME OF THE YEAR

Bill Tschirhart – True North Coaching

This essay is coming to you in mid- April. It's what I call, for competitive curling teams, the awkward time of the year. You will recall that an earlier essay in this series dealt with goal setting and if it was done well, your assessment of the success or failure of this past season should be quite evident. Done poorly and this will indeed be the awkward time of the year.

There is only one female and one male team that is going to win the world championship. I hate to break that news to you! Does that mean that every other team failed? Of course not! But so many teams, failing to reap the rewards so enthusiastically sought, will come to this time of the year very despondent. Some of those teams will break up but the many that stay together, and good for you if you do, will come to a screeching halt in their training only to look forward to happier days on the golf course. Those teams will not give curling a second thought until the leaves begin to change colour toward the end of August and early September.

If I've just described your team, I have good news and I have bad news. The bad news is that most of your competitors will make excellent use of the time between now and “leaf raking time” to move their performance yardsticks down the field (a sobering thought at best). And you wish to compete with them on a level playing field do you? Give your head a shake! There was a time when a team could have taken the summer off and competed successfully in the next season. Notice the tense of the verb in the previous sentence. It's the past tense. You can't do that any longer and expect to compete successfully!!! And now for the good news, it's not too late to begin making good use of what

most of you euphemistically call the off-season. But you have to do it now! And this is where a good coach will be invaluable because he or she will help you establish a training plan that is best suited to the needs and aspirations of your team. But, and a little more bad news, you can't do that unless you have goals, so clearly, that's a first step.

I'm not going to go into a detailed plan at this time, of the things that you might do in the off-season. This essay is designed for two purposes. First, to make you aware that you must do something and second, to provide the reasons why. I think I've already been successful in explaining why you have to make good use of this time. The reason that it's so valuable is its proximity to the previous season. Allow me to explain.

It's at this juncture in the curling year that you have the best opportunity to evaluate those things that you did well as an individual and as a team and to make sure that you continue to do them. On the other hand the opposite is also true. Again, along with an experienced coach, you should be able to identify those areas where improvement is necessary. In some cases you literally may have to stop doing some things that were a waste of time or are detrimental to your (sing. & pl.) performance. In terms of your technical delivery, to affect change that is going to be successful for you in the next curling season you not only need the help of a skilled delivery clinician but you also need time to wrap your head around the changes that you and your coach feel are necessary. You need time for that and the time that's available to you is the time about which this essay is written. You must feel that the changes are a better way! And that happens in the brain. If that never happens, neither will the alterations.

From a team perspective, take a good, hard look at the strategy and tactics your team employed during the past season. You will notice the two words "strategy" and "tactics". Certainly an upcoming essay will be devoted to both areas but for now, here's the difference. Strategy is the plan. Tactics are the way the plan is implemented. You may have weaknesses in both but for most teams the concern is more with tactics. Generally, teams make good plans. Many fewer teams implement those plans effectively and by that I mean the array of shots that are used and how they are executed. Many of the top teams have made adjustments in either or both areas that have resulted in improved performance in subsequent seasons.

Consider carefully whether you are physically able to execute your game plan. Is your brushing, both from a technique and physical perspective adequate? You can't do much about this team skill if you're going to wait until the beginning of the next season especially from the physical point of view.

You need to do something about it now! Are you literally fatiguing in the latter ends of games? Fatigue affects performance both from an execution and mental perspective. And perhaps the lapses in game plan are more tied to fatigue than the actual plan or the tactics employed. There are excellent physical training programmes available for curlers now. I can direct you to the best ones.

Perhaps the issues that prevented achieving the type of success for which you hoped at the beginning of the season, are team related. In the heat of battle during the curling season it's frequently difficult for a team to see the forest for the trees. But at this time of the year, with the pressure off, around a barbecue with a cool beverage in hand, your team can begin to make the changes in team dynamics that along with the technical changes will make you a better team next year. There is no better time for that to occur than in the next few months.

To aid in this "off season training", most provincial associations offer summer camps for both juniors and adults with many more junior camps for obvious reasons. Some are more fun-in-the-sun oriented than others but all are worthwhile. In fact, they are so popular, that by this time, most will be full but contact your provincial association anyway to learn where and when the camps are located, how much they cost (they're all very reasonably priced) and the camp curriculum. Internationally, my friend at the World Curling Federation, Keith Wendorf, conducts an extensive summer camp opportunity in Fuessen, Germany. It not only has the traditional summer camp activities of fun and learning, but usually includes officiating, ice technician and instructor training sessions as well. It's a great way for your family to enjoy some international travel and get some expert training as well. Check the WCF (www.worldcurling.org) or CCA (www.curling.ca) websites for links to various international curling associations and see if they are advertising camps that you might be able to attend.

While I was at the National Training Center in Calgary, AB, to both honour the memory of the late Ray Kingsmith and to provide a mini-camp for juniors, I along with the help of many others, started the ***Kingsmith Classic Series***. In the early years, it was Calgary based but now, "Kingsmiths" are offered in Atlantic Canada and in the Territories as well. As the term "mini" implies, it's a condensed version of the curriculum of a summer camp experience. The success of the Kingsmith is in its simplicity of organization. All it takes is a small local organizing committee to do some of the logistical, local tasks (arranging for a curling facility, accommodation, food and some local transportation). Leave the camp curriculum and staffing to me! If you're interested, contact me and we'll get the wheels turning for a Kingsmith in your area!

It is always my hope that teams stay together! We have a curious “problem” here in Canada. We have too many curlers with excellent technical skills. You’ll notice my diction. I did NOT say, we have too many good team mates. There’s a difference!

Even though we Canadians like to consider our country as the bastion of the game, there are some things we don’t do well in comparison to our international brethren and cistern (my favourite malapropism). We don’t assemble our teams well at all!

For most teams the selection process is in the hands of the wrong person, a player. I have always found it “interesting” that a curling team chooses the coach last, if at all. Why not choose a coach much earlier in the assembly process? I would postulate that if that were the case, teams would make much better selections. They tend to look for teammates who have excellent curling deliveries, full stop. They rarely assess the many characteristics the athletes with whom they are going to spend a good deal of competitive time need to complete the “competitive mosaic” of the team. Before you choose potential teammates, make a list of the needs of the team as you see them. And doing that with a coach can make the task not only easier, but much better as well. A coach will see the situation from a much different (and dare I say, better) perspective.

With all due respect, athletes in some other countries, have a very limited choice of potential future teammates. Instead of scouring their country to find better curlers, they “learn to play together”. Oh, what a novel idea, *learn to play together!* Don’t get me started here. I’ll devote the next essay to the subject of selecting the right teammates.

In closing, I hope you got the premise of this essay. Do something! Hopefully you now have both the incentive and some strategies to remove the adjective “awkward” and replace it with “preparation”!

And coaches, enjoy working with your athletes!