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PRESENTS THE COACHING SERIES...

## **“A PANE IN THE GLASS”**

### **Foreword by Bill Tschirhart**

It is a pleasure for True North Coaching to publish an essay by someone who very likely never dreamed he'd be the coach of an Olympic champion. Sometimes the best things in life happen when we least anticipate they might. Such is the case with Toby McDonald. Until the Torino Winter Olympic Games, his most notable curling achievement by far was a Brier title in 1976 as the mate for Jack MacDuff. It is still Newfoundland & Labrador's only Brier championship but when Brad Gushue needed a coach for his team's run at the Curling Trials leading to the Torino Winter Olympic Games, Toby was the one the team wanted and a great choice it was!

By now, several books have been written about Team Gushue's Gold Medal performance in Torino and I'm personally pleased that many of the authors have noted the contribution Toby made. All was not blue skies and roses for Team Canada during those Olympic Games and had it not been for the expertise of Toby, the result might have been very different!

Toby sent this essay to me several months ago re. the role of the fifth player and how to ultimately select someone for this most misunderstood position. I asked if he might allow me to publish it in the "A Pane in the Glass" series which he graciously has done.

Enjoy!

## **THE SELECTION AND ROLE OF THE FIFTH PLAYER**

by Toby McDonald

What do you want in a Fifth Player? What is the Role of 5<sup>th</sup> player to be? How a team goes about addressing these questions will influence the team's opportunity for success.

For the purpose of this essay I will assume that the team requiring the 5<sup>th</sup> person is playing at an elite level and that the 5<sup>th</sup> player is to be a permanent member of the team and not just a spare that a team calls up regularly to fill in. A permanent member of the team can be for an event, a series of events, or a season.

I cannot say that I have ever seen anything written down that addresses the selection and role of the 5<sup>th</sup> player but then again it would probably never be a best seller. This proved to be a pain in the derriere (“arse” in NL) when I started this essay as I couldn’t just quasi-plagiarize somebody else’s views on the topic. I’ll just approach the issue on the basis of my own experience in the past, having been the skip of a 5 man team, being a 5<sup>th</sup> myself at a couple of Briers, and more especially being coach of the Olympic Gold Medallists and participating in the process resulting in the selection of Russ Howard as 5<sup>th</sup> for the Curling Trials.

To come to a logical conclusion on the selection of a 5<sup>th</sup> the team must think and talk things through, which is a process in which the whole team must participate. To start the process, a team member should write down what they feel is involved. The team should then meet to fine-tune the issues. This should be done before there is any bantering about the potential candidates. In the case of the Brad Gushue team, the following was one of the items on the Agenda for a team meeting:

Selection of a 5<sup>th</sup> player - Discussion and clarification of the issue - What are we looking for in a 5<sup>th</sup> player and why? Requirements:

- To fit into the present team dynamic
- To be a good player
- To buy into the team’s training, practice and playing schedule
- To buy into the sports psychological element of the team
- To be able to deliver stones from 3<sup>rd</sup> position down
- To be mature
- Can’t be a distraction
- To have a personality that is not alarmist or pessimistic
- Will support team decisions
- Have experience in Trials-like setting
- Must add something to the team
- Will do whatever he can to help the team
- Will be happy with the 5<sup>th</sup> man position

This list of requirements was designed for the Olympic Trials setting. The majority of these items would likely apply in every instance, but a team having a different task in front of them, or having other specific requirements, could add or subtract from this list. In the case of the Gushue team, item #5 was, initially, specific, as we felt that, if Brad

couldn't play, Mark Nichols, who had just won the National Mixed as a skip, would fill that position. Little did we know what would ultimately transpire.

Having developed and fine-tuned the list of requirements, we then turned to the consideration of the people who could best fill the role. There were certainly a lot of laughs and smiles when we concluded that we could really give consideration to every male player in Canada who had not qualified for the Trials (or been picked up already as a 5<sup>th</sup> man). Wow, that could generate a long list of possibilities. We found that this was not really the case, as, when we considered the individual names and discussed how each potential 5<sup>th</sup> could meet most of our requirements, the list shortened fairly quickly. No, I'm not going to mention those names here, that will be for another time..... maybe.

Obviously most teams are not going to have an opportunity to select a Russ Howard. Did I mention that I got to pull Russ Howard out of a game? (The last time that probably happened was when he was playing street hockey and his mom called him in to finish his homework). Russ had no problem coming out of the game as it meant our 5<sup>th</sup> man, Mike Adam, could go in. We all wanted him in for a variety of reasons, not the least of which was to be familiar with the Trials ice and venue in a game situation.

You need to know what you're looking for in a 5<sup>th</sup> before you determine who it will be. Did I mention that Mike Adam is the epitome of what a 5<sup>th</sup> player can be?

Once the player has been selected, the team, as formerly constituted, has changed. Another personality has been added to the mix. It is important that the player and the team focus on a smooth transition. If the team has selected wisely, the transition period should proceed smoothly, but all team members have to be aware that some change is inevitable and they should not resist it. The first thing that the team should do is provide the 5<sup>th</sup> with a copy of the list of criteria that the team considered in making the selection. The 5<sup>th</sup> will thereby know that you gave the matter careful consideration and the 5<sup>th</sup> wasn't picked just to carry the broombags. Come to think of it ..... perhaps the criteria list can stand one more item .....

Once selected as a team member the 5th will need to prove the team made the right decision. He necessarily must ensure that he is fit and ready to play. He must try to get up to speed by practising with and actually playing in and viewing team games. He must try to learn/advise on the team's (and his own) strengths and weaknesses, and hopefully assist in adding to the former and reducing the latter. He must add as much value as he can.

In the case of the Gushue Trials Team, Russ Howard obviously brought a lot to the table with him. You don't get to 6 Canadian Finals without picking up a wee bit of game. His brushing....on the other hand was....hmm....shall we say his least strong suit. One immediate consideration the now-extended team had to address was what position

Russ would play if called upon. Brad is just great at delivering that last rock so it was ultimately decided that if Russ was to play he would hold the brush. We did not want him to hurt himself by using it much otherwise. Russ supporting himself with his brush resulted in Brad Gushue having to use his to brush, for the first time since he was 14 (a smooth transition that he has been given little credit for). Another immediate change that was made was that, as coach, I no longer held the brush for team practices. Russ needed to hold the brush to study everybody's release and delivery tendencies. As Russ's beard is almost as grey as mine, we also had to learn how to stay out of each other's way. In his initial role as 5<sup>th</sup> Russ brought everything we had planned on and then some.

I digress slightly from setting out the role of the 5<sup>th</sup> player, but give the above as examples of changes that can occur once a new player is added to the team. I mentioned Mike Adam briefly, but, in terms of setting out the roles that a 5<sup>th</sup> player can bring, I will use him as an example. There is no better!

Mike supported the team's decisions. He fit into the team's dynamics. He is a skilled player and proved so when he was called on to play, particularly in the last Olympic round robin game against the United States. He was fit and ready to play. He made everyone laugh and keep relaxed. He was also focused on the task at hand. He advised and assisted the coach on everything. He tracked and recorded all rocks. He attended to any item that could have been a distraction to the rest of the team. He "sucked it up" as our team performance mentor, Marnie McBean, suggested we would all have to do, and did. He accepted the role he was ultimately asked to play. He was an integral part of the team's ultimate success and he stands as a beacon for 5<sup>th</sup> players world wide.

Next time, instead of just picking up your buddy as 5<sup>th</sup>, spend some time figuring out what you are looking for first. If it worked for Brad and the boys.....