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PRESENTS THE COACHING SERIES...

“A PANE IN THE GLASS”

## TWO WEEKS TO GO

By Bill Tschirhart

Curling teams work hard to prepare for the competitive season. In the past, the distant past, teams might have prepared for playdowns by simply playing more league games or attending more bonspiels. Some even did the unthinkable and scheduled actual practices (imagine that). Of course, all of this was done in an atmosphere of total athlete participation and/or administration. In other words, virtually no team had a coach.

Thankfully, the high performance teams of today understand the importance of preparing thoroughly and the advantages of having someone or a group of people who can assist in various areas. Teams not only understand the obvious but aspects of performance like mental preparation, nutrition, physical preparation and team dynamics fill their agendas. And rightly so because the teams they will see "on the trail" will prepare in most or all of these areas.

One of the most awkward times of the curling season to plan for is when playdowns loom on the horizon. That's usually a few weeks prior to the event. I have seen so many teams not only fail to prepare well in those last days, but actually sabotage their efforts in the weeks and months leading to that point.

I usually don't pass on advice in a negative fashion but now just might be one of those times. That being said, here are some no-no's.

I cringe when I see teams concentrating on the technical aspects of their deliveries. Don't misunderstand, every athlete wants to feel on top of his/her technical game but to be obsessed by the detailed mechanics of delivery will only be a distraction in the "heat of battle". From a technical perspective, simply confirm the strong points for each athlete and build confidence and trust. It's much too late for changes to occur and last through the rigors of playdowns. More harm than good will be the result.

Also, don't mess with your game plan. That's something else that simply needs re-enforcing not a complete overall. This too is a confidence issue. When team discussions revolve

around the "what-do-we-do-now" question, it will only serve to add confusion and chaos to the situation. If beads of cold sweat are in evidence on the brows of your team or you, I hate to be the bearer of bad news but this is an issue which required attention some time ago.

On the positive side of the ledger, the best way to prepare for competition has nothing to do with a visit to your curling club. As you might expect, it's a "warm side of the glass" issue.

The object of the exercise at this point is to put your players into a position so they can "perform". Performance is what this portion of the season is all about. The definition of performance that we use at high performance camps is "...*the ability to do what you know you can do, anytime you have to do it*". The "...*anytime you have to do it*" part is the kicker of course. So, how do you put your players into that "performance mode"? Strange as it might seem, they should take care of their "real self" so that the "performer self" can perform.

According to Jim Loehr, every athlete is somewhat schizophrenic. There are two athletes in one body. One, the performer self, is the one that shows up for practices. It's the one you "see" play in competitions. It's the one with whom we relate most often. But, even though as a coach, I might see my athletes only as curlers, they do have other lives. They have a "real self". Although they clearly are curlers, they have a host of other persona. They will be sons, daughters, students, friends, employees, wives, husbands etc. All these roles impact on the performers self's ability to perform. The athlete can have all his/her "ducks in a row" on the curling ice but events in the "real world" will definitely affect on ice performance. Issues ignored in the athlete's real world can become huge distractions when that athlete needs to concentrate and focus on curling related tasks.

Therefore, in the few weeks leading to that all-important competition, the athlete needs to make sure that there are no "loose ends" in the real world. For the student it may mean making sure that all assignments have been submitted. For the employee it may mean that superiors and/or co-workers have been made aware of the situation regarding absence from the workplace. For the son or daughter it could mean making sure that parents are clear regarding the logistics of the competition (i.e. travel, accommodation, food etc.). I could go on for many pages listing those issues which may require attention but there are as many different ones as there are curlers. In some cases, it could mean a discussion with a friend whose feelings were inadvertently hurt or a misunderstanding which needed clarification. It may mean agreeing to disagree with someone but the key is to feel that the issue has been addressed and that you have done as much as you could.

In short, spend time in your real world, address items which might be a distraction to you. Let your performer self perform!

The second advice that I will give sounds much more practical. It deals with on ice practice and at the risk of sounding preachy make sure that you practise the tactics (shots) that your team will be using to execute the game plan that you have chosen. As the lead, if the tight-to-the-house guard is the shot you play a significant portion of the time, then practise that shot. If one of the tactics that you employ to execute your game plan at the second position is coming around corner guards on the "short side", then practise that type of shot. If you are an "offense

first team" and play a lot of taps, and down weight hits, then practise those types of shots. In short, practise they way you play. BUT, that being said, all teams need to sharpen the most important team skill, WEIGHT CONTROL.

I could go on and on in this essay about the priority this skill has but trust me on this one, **it is the most important team skill!** When two teams take to the ice, if all the other factors are equal (physical conditioning, mental preparedness, game plan ...) the team with superior weight control has a distinct advantage and will win the vast majority of the time.

Choose drills which have a distinct weight control focus. If you are familiar with "**Drills To Die For**", the weight control drills include *Crazy Eights*, *Progressive Hog Line*, *Climb the Ladder* and *Line Dancing*. All these drills are "team drills" in that they reflect the competitive environment. But make up your own drills that serve the purpose. Just make sure that the focus is weight control.

It's difficult to conclude this essay at this point as there are so many areas (again mostly "warm side of the glass" areas) which have a direct affect on your team's performance. These two are the most important!

Please don't allow your team to be obsessed with the draw schedule especially in terms of who it plays and when they play them. I hope by this time the attitude your team has regarding the playing of a game is that each is an opportunity to perform. It really doesn't matter who you play or when you play them. You need the opposition to deliver the other coloured stones from end to end so the game can be played.

Coach, if I may, allow me to give you the best advice I'm able and again, it's a negative. **Don't over-coach!** In your attempt to give it your all, you just may be the biggest distraction of them all. Hopefully your reason for being was to "empower your athletes". If that's the case, and I hope it was, then now is the time to sit back and let them play! Actually the coaching is done! Your roles now are much more warm side of the glass than x's & o's. But, in those two weeks when your athletes are looking after their real selves, there is something you can do. Call a meeting of all the stakeholders\* of the team who will be in attendance at the event. Make sure they know clearly how they can appropriately support you. If you fail to do this, you may have to accomplish this task at the venue. Good luck with that!

I will pass along to you the advice I give every team about to step onto the ice surface to play. ***Hit the brush. Deliver the stones with the right weight. Play very carefully without last rock!***

Enjoy watching your athletes play and I'll see you soon behind "a pane in the glass"!

\*This is the group of onlookers/spectators (friends, relatives, club members etc.) who take an enthusiastic interest in the success of the team.