

“B” Is For Balance – Part I

By Jon Mielke

Remember the “ABCs of a good delivery” – alignment, balance, and curl (grip, turn, and release)? In my recent *Curling News* article, I talked about the most important line on a sheet of curling ice – the invisible line from your hack foot to the skip’s broom. That article was all about alignment. But, proper alignment and a good release cannot occur consistently if the shooter doesn’t have good balance. Good balance and alignment need to become second nature so the shooter can concentrate on things like weight control. So, how does a person develop good balance?

At the outset, I have to tell you that balance is so important that it is going to be the topic of this article plus one in the next *Curling News*. Balance – a good place to start is with a “dry land” exercise to develop and reinforce a good balanced delivery. If you can’t get into and hold a good, balanced position on a dry floor, how can you expect to do it on ice with a piece of Teflon on your foot?

Here the drill: in the privacy of your own home, stand with your feet shoulder width apart and then take a half-step forward with your slider foot, placing it directly centered in front of your chest. Next, lower your body by extending your non-slider foot directly behind your body, with the leg fully extended, the top of the back foot flat on the floor, and the sole of that foot facing skyward.

Pay special attention to the angles of various parts of the slider foot and leg. The foot should ideally be angled out with the heel under your sternum and the toe pointed slightly to the left (for a right-handed curler). If you can’t get to that position, at least point the toe straight, but definitely not to the right. The portion of your leg from the knee to your ankle should be angled back toward your hips. If it is vertical, it will raise your center of gravity and make it harder to balance. If it is angled forward, you’ll end up doing the splits because your slider will slide out away from your body. Also try to angle the hip-to-knee portion of your leg to the left so your knee moves toward your left armpit. Again, this will allow you to drop your center of gravity lower and make it easier to balance.

Make sure that you keep your right hand extended ahead of you – don’t use it for balance. Ideally, you shouldn’t use your left hand for balance, either, but it is a better alternative than using your right hand. After all, you don’t want to be leaning on the stone or you will get it moving from side to side and messing up your “invisible line” alignment.

Get into this position and hold yourself there for 15-20 seconds and then gradually try to raise yourself up. Go through this up and down cycle a few times every day prior to and even during the season. It helps beginning, intermediate, and even experienced curlers develop balance, coordination, flexibility, and leg strength.

Once you’re getting into and staying in the proper sliding position on dry land, you’ll be better prepared to take to the ice. Watch for the next issue of *Curling News* and more on developing

better balance. Ultimately, it will help you hit the broom more consistently, make more shots, win more games, and have more fun. Until next time, good curling!

(I had a pleasant e-mail exchange with Jim from St. Paul after my recent article concerning the most important line on a curling sheet. He wanted to know what adjustments could be made to help someone who shoots right-handed but is left-eye dominant. An excellent question – and the topic of a future article. Thanks, Jim!).

(Jon Mielke is a Level III instructor and a Level III coach. He is the immediate past chairman of the USCA's Training & Instruction Committee and a member of Bismarck's Capital Curling Club).

"B" Is For Balance – Part II

By Jon Mielke

In the last edition of *Curling News*, I described an exercise that both new and experienced curlers can do at home to help develop the coordination, balance, flexibility, and leg strength that are required for a balanced delivery. Do it - you can't shoot consistently well without it.

So, now you're ready to take to the ice. Start by stepping into the hack, with the ball of your hack foot centered about halfway up the incline of the hack. Stand with a stone in front of you, your feet about shoulder-width apart, and the heel of your slider foot about even with the toe of your hack foot. Square your shoulders and especially your hips with the invisible line that runs from your hack foot to the skip's broom. Next, squat down and relax. Your non-shooting arm should be on top of the broom. The broom's pad or bristles should be pointed up (not laying on the ice). Grip the broom about 18" from the head and point it at about the 10 o'clock position – not straight to the side and not straight ahead. Maintain positive pressure on the broom – better on the broom than on the stone. Now, here is a little cadence to help you with what comes next: Rock, foot, rock, foot, slide.

From the kneeling position (or you can start with your hips slightly elevated) and with the rock centered on the invisible line from your hack foot toward an imaginary broom at some point down the ice, slide the rock slightly forward toward the broom. This motion simply breaks the inertia between the stone and the ice. Next, elevate your hips slightly (if you're not starting in that position) and pull them back behind the hack, straight away from the imaginary broom (imagine that you are sitting in an invisible chair). This motion will pull the rock back, too. Make sure you pull it back with your body and not with your arm. The rock should move straight back to your hack foot, right along the invisible line that runs from your hack foot to the skip's broom. Your slider foot moves back, too, to a position where the toe is about even with the heel of your hack foot. Your weight transfers from being about 50-50 on both feet to being largely on your hack foot.

Now you're ready to start moving forward. It is very important to start moving the rock and the slider foot first, before you start pushing out of the hack. Start moving the rock toward the broom and move your slider foot gently forward and then angle it to get it centered under your chest, just like on the carpet at home. It should move in directly behind the stone. As it moves into position, drive out of the hack with your hack foot (slide). Remember, all the stone's momentum comes from the drive out of the hack – not with a push from your shooting arm. Also remember to keep the rock moving along your invisible line and be sure to keep your shoulders and hips square to the broom.

Repeat this practice slide 15 to 20 times or more until you get comfortable and things start to feel automatic. Try moving your invisible skip's broom and adjust your set-up in the hack accordingly – square to the broom. Be sure to reposition the stone so it is always centered on the invisible line from your hack foot to the broom. Also, watch to see where your slides are ending up. Are they directly on top of your invisible line? If not, try things like adjusting your body in

the hack, repositioning the stone during your set-up, and eliminating any unnecessary side-to-side motions in your delivery. Stay straight – you and the stone always move straight to the broom.

Now take several more slides without the stone. Everything else is the same but concentrate on sliding with your shooting hand on an invisible stone – not resting on the ice for balance. Learn to balance without a stone so you won't lean on the stone during your delivery and inevitably get things going side-to-side instead of straight to the broom.

Once you start feeling comfortable with your slide, you will be able to push harder out of the hack. This is important because the stone's momentum comes from your drive out of the hack and not from an arm extension and push at the point of release. Draw shot on keen ice – light kick out of the hack. Take outs – hips farther back and more leg drive.

Keep working at it. You will find yourself making more shots, your skip will love you, and you'll win more games. Good strategy only makes a difference if you're shooting over 50%. Do your part and have more fun in the process.

Until next time – good curling!

(Jon Mielke is a Level III instructor and a Level III coach. He is the immediate past chairman of the USCA's Training & Instruction Committee and a member of Bismarck's Capital Curling Club).