

# Understanding the different roles

Playing with two or three team mates is very different from singles or pairs, and for many people it is the best way to enjoy bowls. Fours is the particular favourite, and is far and away the most common form of the sport. There are many reasons for this besides the obvious one of making the most efficient use of a club's facilities. The team game maximises the companionable feature of bowls, and this can be most welcome, even for the top players after the stress of singles. Nothing is more enjoyable than being a member of a really close-knit harmonious team.

Tactically, the team game is utterly fascinating. The harnessing of several individuals' talents and temperaments to the pursuit of a shared goal is immensely challenging, and to do it successfully is one of the most rewarding of human activities.. To examine how that is done it is best to analyse the various positions on the team, as they contribute to the team effort.

A top team must have team spirit like this!

## **The Lead**

We must emphasise the importance of the draw shot, it is therefore not surprising that we consider the "lead's" function utterly critical to team success. It is the natural starting point for the novice. It would be less than wise for the novice not to see that the lead position was his natural home. However there is a tendency to wish to progress down the team order, as though it were promotion. At club level this is widely encouraged, where a promising lead will not have to wait long for such a promotion '. Hence the attitude so often encountered that dismisses the lead as either a beginner or a bowler whose limitations prevent further progress.

After all, he only has to bowl the jack to the length his skipper dictates, and then draw a couple of shots. This is wrong! Setting the length and bowling these first woods is a matter of utmost importance, as any no 2 can vouch for. There is all the difference in the world between shaping up to play into a head with two well placed draws courtesy of your lead, and looking for a salvage shot to clear up a mess.

If you are a promising lead at club level, and see the wisdom of staying for some time in that position in order to hone your draw shot, what is your best course of action? Do not allow yourself to be rushed down the order. Instead try and become such a good lead that a stronger team snaps you up for the same position. Really good leads are like gold dust, and are likely to make good skips if that is where their ambition lies.

Because the lead only plays the draw shot it is a specialist position (uniquely) and some specialist leads are so good that they never show any interest in moving down the order.

In terms of his two vital deliveries, the lead has similar concerns to those of the singles player at the start of an end, but not identical. Both are trying to set up a favourable head, but in singles,

there is considerable pressure to emerge from the first two bowls holding shot. To do so does not always result in winning the end, but with only four bowls to come it is better to be one up than one down. It puts pressure on the opponent to change the situation. This is not the case for the lead in the 4's game. With 12 bowls to come there is no great merit in holding shot, at least for its own sake. There will be ample opportunity to convert the head later on at a time of maximum advantage. What the lead has to do is to get two good bowls into the head to make life for the opposition as difficult as possible and must never, repeat never be short. Nor should he be jack high to present a target for his opponent. He should guard against too tight a line as a bowl which hooks past in front of the jack will have very little further influence on the outcome of the end. If holding shot with his first delivery then do not put his second one alongside and present a target. If his opponent is holding shot he should try and come alongside to give his no 2 a target. Never try and remove an opponents bowl this is the task for a later player.

### **Number two**

Having stressed the importance of the 'lead' that is still the best position for the novice, not just for his sake but because the demands on the no.2 are too great. He is faced with the task of either consolidating a good position or salvaging a bad one. He comes to the mat to face a situation not of his own making. Either his lead has established a solid foundation for the head or he has not. If the former, the no.2 must build on that foundation, hoping to leave his no.3 in a really dominant position. If the latter he must do everything in his power to retrieve the situation, knowing that if he fails in this task his team-mates may be left chasing a forlorn cause. If the situation is favourable, his skip will either ask him to protect the shot bowl(s) or get his bowls into the head in such a way as to provide insurance for later developments.. Either way positional shots are called for, so the no.2 must not only be a good draw player but he must also be able to vary the line and length at will. This is particularly difficult during the early stages and the no.2 who is first in the groove will give his team a real boost.

If the head is unfavourable when the no.2 comes to the mat, his course of action is radically different. If his lead has not got a bowl close, then the skip will direct him to get right into the head, either to take shot or at least to get bowls into position for a conversion later on. Failure to do so can lead to disaster, because it may leave the opposition with a virtually impregnable head. The no.2 can be described as the anchor man of the side. Unlike the lead he is anything but a specialist position, calling upon the complete range of shots.

There is a particular practice routine that will give the no.2 insight into his task and is equally useful for singles. Make up a head of 4 bowls, haphazardly, two aside. Then study it, decide on the percentage shot and play it. Note the result. Repeat the exercise several times. You will develop your power to read any situation.

### **Number Three**

It is impossible to describe the role of the no.3 in purely bowling terms. As far as that aspect is concerned, it is enough to say that the no.3 must be an all round good bowler, since he will face every conceivable situation when he comes to the mat. In particular he will be called upon to play a wide variety of running shots, so he must be confident of weight. He should be a good singles player. The no. 3 is also tasked with measuring the head, marking his skips touchers and removing 'dead' bowls.

The real key to the position is the no.3's relationship with the skip. He is the skip's close partner, his right hand. So the blend of personalities is very important. He must have confidence in his skip and vice versa, always acknowledging that the skip takes precedence. At club level the more senior members tend to gravitate to the lower orders. Dissension in a team is ruinous, and even an undercurrent of resentment will surely damage performance and mar the pleasure of the game.

His tactical discussions with the skip should take place at the head, and never when the skip is on the mat. He must also provide the link between the skip and the other team members, with an easy rapport throughout the team with communication lines through the no.3.

Beyond that it is impossible to define a good no.3. An excellent no.3 for one skip may be no use to another, for entirely personal reasons. It may be lack of respect, either way, a clash of personalities or simply a lack of balance between personalities. For example if the skip is a reserved, quite type, it would seem desirable for the no.3 to be outgoing. Indeed if there is any generalisation worth making it is that the good no.3 is more likely to be an extrovert rather than an introvert, because of his role as a communicator. However if his outgoing personality is too boisterous for the skip's taste, or if he is too free with his advice (from the skip's point of view) what then?

In a sense the best no.3 is the no.3 the skip feels most comfortable and confident playing with. As in all team sports the personalities must balance.

### **The Skip**

As team leader, the skip is the most important role of the four. Whilst his two bowls may not be more important than anyone else's, coming when they do they can hardly be less important. On top of this is placed the burden of directing the team. Good leadership qualities are universal in their application, and widely understood -even if not so widely practiced. There is no need to dwell on such characteristics as vision, judgment, commitment, firmness, fairness and tact. The good skip will display all these, and any other favourable attributes that the circumstances demand.

His primary task is to provide his small band of warriors with purposeful direction. From opening bowl to final shot his must be the guiding intelligence behind every action. His relationship with each team member will be different, because their functions are different but in each case his aim must be to enable. He must get the best possible performance from each of

his crew, by whatever means. In every way connected with the enterprise the skip must have the unqualified respect of his teammates and to obtain that respect he must earn it.

We will examine the relationship of the skip with each team position in turn, but first with the whole team. High morale is the invaluable byproduct of team confidence. The skip must conduct himself in such a way as to inspire that confidence and communicate to others what it is he wants them to achieve making them believe they can achieve it. He must make them feel totally involved in the corporate activity. Even when they lose, the morale remains intact.

Therefore everything that has been said about the necessity of the no.3 to be a good communicator holds true for the skip. He must give advice where it is helpful, instruction where it is required, and encouragement at all times.

The lead knows what is required of him, so all the skip has to ensure is that the lead goes to the mat in a positive frame of mind. Generally the skip will select the length of jack he wants the lead to deliver, but not always. Sometimes he will allow the lead to choose his own length of jack. Thereafter the skip will want to make the choice because it is a tactical matter involving the team as a whole (bearing in mind the two objectives of suiting your team and frustrating the opposition). The same holds true for mat placement.

The no.2 now enters the fray. Unless it is too obvious to point out, the skip will make the choice of shot perhaps in consultation with his no. 3 and having taken into account his relevant knowledge of the no.2's bowling capacities, hand preference and so on. But it is his choice, since the tactical campaign is on, and the entire tactical responsibility is his. When he gives his instructions, here, and everywhere in the course of the match, the skip should do so with clarity, precision and with confidence.

There may be times when the skip may have practical advice for a team member which he should not be slow to give in an appropriate manner. The thoughtful skip will be unfailingly encouraging when a member of the team is struggling.

The no.3 and the skip are together for most of the match, they should know each others games inside out and should share a joint perception of the situation in which the no.3 must play his bowls. Most of the time they will reach a consensus on the shot the no.3 should play but in the event of there being a disparity of view the no.3 must defer to his skip whilst realising that it goes against his skip's instincts to ask a player to play a shot about which he is not entirely happy. In such a case the no.3 should always play the shot asked and with all his skill.

When the skip himself comes to bowl, the battle moves to its inevitable climax. The tactical considerations can be legion, and the skip will rely on his no.3 to help him clarify his thinking as

he weighs the possibilities. Here is where the relationship between the two is at its most critical, and where the no.3 requires a subtle as well as an astute mind.

He will want to provide the best possible advice, and he should not shirk from trying to persuade the skip of the correctness of his views. But, not only has the skip to make the final decision, as always, but this time he has to deliver the bowl himself. The no.3 therefore has to weigh the objective situation in the head against the subjective nature of the skip's own mind.

This is not so much a matter of tact, since the two of them discuss shot selection endlessly, and it would be a flawed partnership if the skip took any disagreement personally. It is more a question of enabling the skip to go to the mat certain that he has made the correct choice.

It is at this critical juncture that imperative outweighs fine distinctions between choices of shot, and so the no.3 must know when to desist, just as the skip must know when to insist.