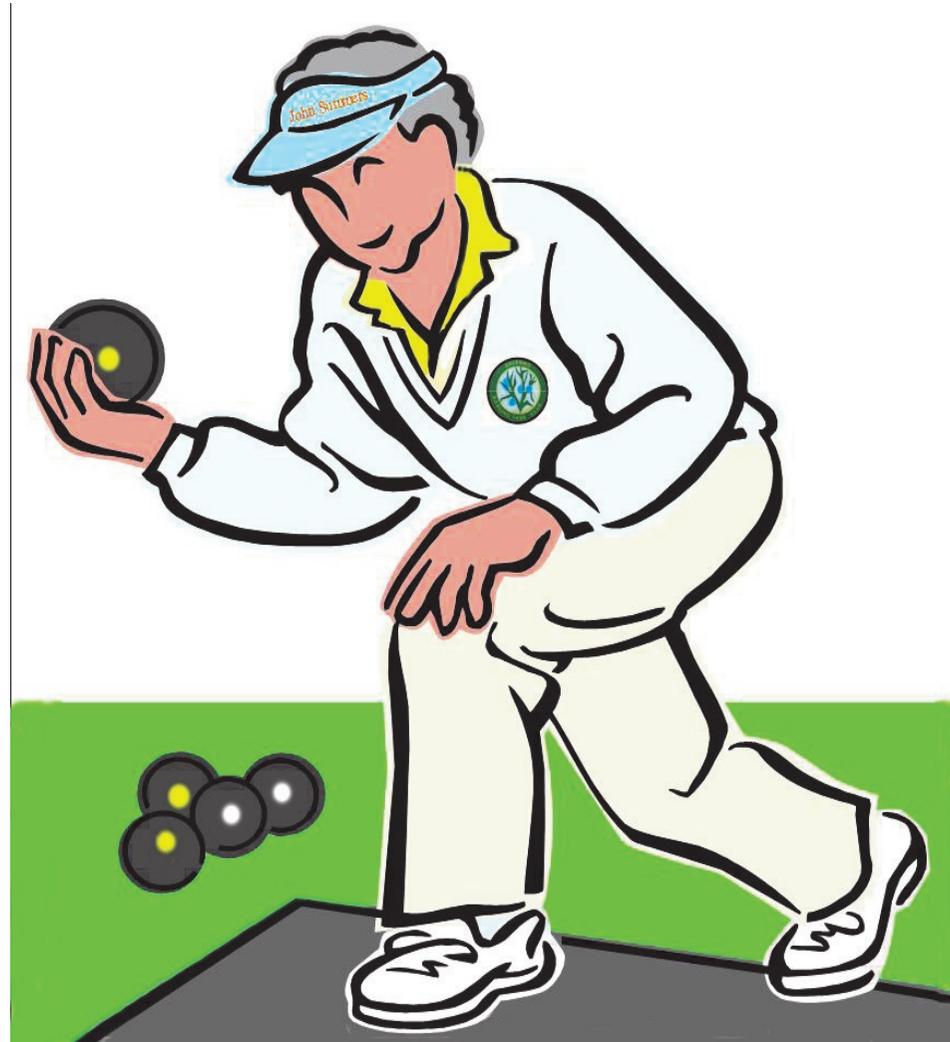


Thinking about Bowls



*John Summers
2014*

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INTRODUCTION

Probably the first question many people will ask when – or if – they read this will be: “Who’s John Summers?” The name has not been made familiar by many appearances in televised bowling events. In fact the name does not readily spring to mind when recalling the achievements of the best bowlers over the last decade or so.

Questions ought to be asked, therefore, regarding the credentials of the author who is daring to put pen to paper on this subject. I use the word “daring”, for the common assertion is that all the best bowlers are the spectators standing on the bank, then the readers – probably armchair reclined – will even more so prove to be ideal critics of what I write – and quite rightly so! Well, the simple answer is I can lay claim to a few qualifications in the bowling world if the “bowls measure” used – and a flexible one at that – is the number of successes at top national level.

I have played at International level both indoor and outdoor on several occasions and represented Scotland in 1980 at the World Bowls Championship in Australia. I was appointed East of Scotland Regional coach in 1988 by the Scottish Outdoor and Indoor Bowling Associations. I relinquished this position on being assigned to the post in 1989 as manager of the Scottish Indoor International Team, a position I held for eleven years before resigning in the year 2000. I was fortunate in having excellent teams over these years and with their skill and tremendous competitive spirit success came in winning the International Home Series on nine occasions.

I first became a member of a bowling club when I moved house in 1967 along with my wife and daughter from Strathaven in Lanarkshire to the village of Balerno near Edinburgh where I was persuaded by a neighbour to join the local bowling club. Becoming a member of the Balerno club was the foundation and beginning of any successes and honours that have come my way over the years. The standard of bowling at that time was extremely high and competition exceptionally keen. Several members were playing at county, national and international level and I received considerable encouragement to compete with them in a number of prestigious events. I was fortunate: I just landed at the right place at the right time.

These credentials and experiences in themselves, however, do not necessarily give licence to express views on how to play the game of bowls. I have purposely named this booklet “Thinking” about the game as

its main purpose is not really intended to instruct (although it may not seem like that in some things I write) but merely to express some ideas and evoke thought.

I make no mention of the names of the many players I have partnered and played against at club and international events to whom I owe much for my knowledge of the game and, even more so, for the enjoyable times spent in their company both on and off the bowling greens. I must also pay tribute to those Scottish International team players and S.I.B.A. officials for their support and respect over the years I was team manager. Such personal associations are mainly responsible for giving me the motivation to think and write about the game. So, these bowling acquaintances can take most of the credit – or share some of the blame – for what I write.

Very often I have had to review my performances after bowls games and more so as years go by. Through my experiences and observations I hope what I say will be of interest and assistance to readers by adding something to their own thoughts. The vast majority of bowlers never win prestigious events and a few may treat the game purely as a social pastime, but nevertheless enjoy playing. However, I am sure most bowlers wish to improve their standard of play and certainly it is not out of reach if they are able to reassess their own performance or perhaps, as a last resort, seek some advice.

Frequently it is thought the highest achievers in sport are such “naturals” they neither need to be aware nor make self-analysis of how they perform and react in certain situations. This is seldom so: everyone participating in top class sport must have sufficient dedication to keep themselves in the right frame of mind and to train and practise – in a proper fashion - to improve form. The time will come when most of them will lose their normal high level of performance and require to investigate what has gone wrong, particularly as age advances.

Guidance in the technique of playing bowls has not been readily available in the past, probably because there has been little demand for tuition. Although, some progress has been made to improve coaching facilities, a strong opinion tends to prevail that beginners are best left to find their own natural method of delivery. This conception sounds fine, but unfortunately some newcomers to the sport might acquire ill-adapted movements either by chance or endeavouring to copy other players. During younger years suppleness of body and limbs and good balance enable them to perform rather complicated body, leg and arm movements yet obtain good results, but as age progresses and agility decreases there is likely to be a gradual loss of form. Confidence will also suffer and many of the players affected cannot understand the reason for the setback, particularly those with a

proven past record of success and gifted with a good measure of natural talent. Just think how much longer those inherent skills would flourish and continue fruitful if grafted to a more simple and productive method of delivery.

My main purpose in writing is to encourage those who are getting on in years and who consider their standard of play to be on the downturn to attempt something different. I also try to illustrate and emphasise the considerable effect temperament has on performance. Much of what I say, therefore, assumes the reader knows the rudiments of the game of bowls. In instances there are some very basic aspects of play included which may be helpful to beginners but may seem a bit boring to the "initiated". A good deal of space is given to the technique of "the delivery" despite the fact I consider the action should be a simple and economic movement.

Simplicity, however, is not always easily attained after ill-adapted habits and complicated procedures have become deep-rooted over many years. It requires in-depth thinking about basic principles and hours of practice to change and achieve the desired results. Unfortunately, in many instances, we fail to recognise any faults in our technique and often find difficulty in accepting the fact that they really exist.

An accusation is sometimes made that influencing players to use a particular delivery method could lead to monotonous uniformity, but I doubt that. Certainly, my intention in the views I express is not to promote uniformity and stifle natural flair and expression. On the contrary, it is an endeavour to remove certain obstacles stemming the flow of natural talent. No matter which method of delivery is adopted, each player will exhibit a particular style. In most things in life there are many laborious ways of doing a specific task and normally only a few which are simple and efficient. If it so happens I suggest some methods that are easier to perform but contain less movement and variety than ones more complicated, I make no apology for that.

Considerable tact is required by anyone giving advice to those who have had a long and successful practical experience. Suggesting to someone to do a task differently – though it is simpler than the method used for many years – or any inference that their way is not a good way - naturally and understandably meets with varying degrees of resentment. What is worse: there is a risk of the player losing confidence, and confidence is of prime importance.

A propelling implement does not need to be mastered in playing bowls: no racquet, bat, cue or club is used. There is no "scapegoat" to share the blame for any poor delivery. Delivering the bowl directly from the hand might well be regarded as a form of personal expression rather than

merely movement technique. Therefore, any criticism of the act, though intended to be helpful, is likely to be unwelcome.

A coach, or any “well intended adviser”, even when invited to comment or recommend, may find it very wise to tactfully proffer suggestions only - as I am attempting to do - and these should be open to in-depth questioning by the recipient. Clear and logical answers are essential when responding to any points that arise. Otherwise, confidence and credibility are lost and the advice proffered is deemed useless.

In any case there really is no great mystique surrounding the delivery action in playing bowls that requires the detailed diagnosis and remedial incantation of a bowls guru. Delivery faults generally come about through the lack of a relaxed, well-balanced, and befitting simple movement and not through ignorance of any complex technical know-how. Nevertheless, it is important that the receiver of any advice has absolute faith in the ability of the person giving it – for difficulties, most certainly, will be encountered.

It so happens I write in an era when I see some younger bowlers with immaculate styles and superb instinctive skills. What I say is not intended for them: not yet! I see others who despite looking rather clumsy in their delivery action still producing excellent results. So why attempt to change! It makes it all rather difficult to be emphatic on the correctness or otherwise of any particular delivery action or style. Bowlers at, or near, international standard of play are chosen for the skills as they are, and any suggestion they require coaching or instruction on how to play would be totally inappropriate.

Provided there is a real desire and dedication to play the game and play it well, four main ingredients make a good bowler: talent, technique, tactics and temperament. All are essential, and undoubtedly the most important is to have a good temperament. But by far foremost of all, and associated with temperament, is the ability to enjoy the game and the company irrespective of the standard of play.

I should emphasise that what I say in the following will be well known to most bowlers but I hope some of it may stimulate thought and add to their own reasoning. What I write is by no means sacrosanct and is very open to critical comment.

CHAPTER ONE: How are problems tackled?

CHAPTER TWO: Problems to be tackled.

CHAPTER THREE: Aspects of delivery.

CHAPTER FOUR: The problem of oneself.

CHAPTER FIVE: Tactics

CHAPTER SIX: Practice and Experience

CHAPTER ONE

HOW ARE PROBLEMS TACKLED?

Every job or movement often presents problems; the same applies in sport. In an endeavour to meet these challenges and achieve our aims we put to use our experience and natural talents: intelligence, coordination, deftness of touch, a good eye etc.

Despite possessing a fair measure of these talents, we may copy or develop physical movements that are not always best suited for the task in hand. It seems some people just naturally fall into a good and uncomplicated way of doing certain things, which enable them to make the best use of their instinctive skills: they make it look so easy. Probably most of us are not so lucky to be gifted to such an extent. And as age progresses certain movements become more difficult to perform.

In sport, as in every other activity, a properly experienced “trained eye” along with sound advice can be of significant assistance. But probably, and preferably, as much can be achieved by ourselves with a rethink and insight on how we do things.

Aptitudes and Abilities.

Occasionally I may refer to the following underlined words and phrases. I have attempted to put a brief meaning to them.

A good eye: The ability to accurately judge distances and angles.

Coordination: Orderly interlinked activity of brain, nervous system and body.

Deftness of touch: Sensitivity of touch – including the instinctive ability to apply the required strength of stroke, throw, swing etc.

Rhythm and balance: Being able whilst moving to have all parts of the body in the right place at the right time in full accord with the action required.

Agility and fitness: Supple joints and muscles with the body in good working order – always suffer as age progresses.

Technique: The application of body movements to give best effect in achieving one’s purpose.

Anticipation: The ability to assess by some means or other the opponent’s next move and take the appropriate action.

Intelligence: Common sense; good experience; good tactics.

Good concentration: The ability to focus thoughts on a single task and shut out other distractions.

Temperament: The way a person feels, thinks and acts under a variety of situations.

All natural skills are mainly “gifted”. The extent to which these exist in each person will depend on how much is inborn to provide a foundation and what has been built upon that from experience. The learning of skills is much faster and more deeply imprinted in the mind in younger formative years.

Most of these aptitudes and abilities work in conjunction with one another: a shortcoming in one is likely to have an adverse effect on the others. Although all are called upon to play a part during ball games and certain other types of sport, the weight of importance of each and the speed each is required to function varies according to the sport. The subject is complex; it is suffice to say most skills will improve with the correct practice, experience and the proper application of our minds to the task in hand.

The extent and speed of improvement will largely depend upon the quality of technique used and the age, dedication and temperament of the person. Where technique is poor, skills will find difficulty in developing. Cultivating good and simple technique prepares fertile ground for all basic skills to blossom.

And remember! Temperament provides, prepares and supports the entire working environment in which we ask our skills to produce the goods. The better the temperament the more efficiently skills perform and stand up to the heat of competition.

A word of warning: Doing something in the same repetitive fashion over a lengthy period of years becomes so habitual and deeply engraved in the mind that any endeavour to change, or the mere thought of it, conflicts with feelings of security: “Old methods die hard!” So, try not to be discouraged or frustrated by initial poor performance in anything new attempted. It is natural to experience difficulty at first even though the new unaccustomed movement may be simpler.

A word of advice: Grant any new action a number of practice sessions over a period of weeks before passing judgement. Don’t just change for the sake of change without feeling the need to and appreciating the possible benefits. If a convincing reason has been given, or thought up by oneself, that a change would be rewarding why not give it a try. A change presents a fresh and interesting challenge. A breakthrough may be found to improve your game, or perhaps rediscover some previous good form.

CHAPTER TWO

PROBLEMS TO BE TACKLED

To make a comprehensive study of the game all factors affecting play require assessment:

1. The bowling green.
2. Weather conditions.
3. The jack.
4. The mat.
5. The bowls.
6. The delivery.
7. The opposition.
8. Oneself.
9. Tactics.

1. The Bowling Green

The condition of the green is accepted as it is found. An attempt is made during play to overcome any unevenness, or being of a texture causing the surface to be slower or faster than accustomed playing surfaces. (See attached poem "tricky rink" on page 43)

2. Weather Conditions

No change can be made to what nature provides when playing outdoors, Good quality weatherproof clothing is often required. Whatever the weather conditions, clothing should always be of a size and texture to allow unrestricted movement. In cold weather sufficient loose fitting garments should be worn to keep the body comfortable and warm. Cold hands should be avoided at all cost and a suitable hand warmer can be helpful.

3. The Jack.

The only real problem arising is rolling the jack to the required and preferred distance from the mat. It is easily held, but if there is a fundamental flaw in the delivery action difficulty may be experienced in casting the jack up the middle of the rink.

4. The Mat.

The mat in flat green bowls measures 24 inches by 14 inches and is placed lengthwise on the centre line of the rink. The position of the mat itself presents no problem but, if care is not taken, the rectangular shape of it can unwittingly induce an incorrect stance resulting in difficulty in properly "grassing" the bowl and may create complications in the delivery action itself.

5. The Bowls

All bowlers know there is a large selection of bowls available from various manufactures and there are a variety of sizes, weights and biases to choose from – all within official limits – but the choice of size is probably most important: if they are too large to handle properly, many unnecessary and insurmountable problems arise.

Bowls are shaped to make them take a curving path if rolled from the hand on their true running surface and the slower the bowl runs over a distance the more of a curve it will take. On firm surfaced keen greens or fast indoor carpets little force requires to be imparted to a bowl to make it travel the required distance and it travels slower. Therefore the bias will make it curve considerably on its travel up the green and it may take about 15 seconds or more to reach a medium length jack. Whereas, on soft slow surfaces more force has to be applied to the bowl and it travels faster, curves less, and can reach the jack in about 10 seconds or less. There has been a tendency for a number of bowlers to favour the use of less curving bowls on firm surfaces so that the delivery line may be more easily found – less “grass” is required. Of course, depending on circumstances, a less curving bowl can be a disadvantage on slower greens. It is worthwhile trying out a few sets of bowls on various surface speeds to see the extent of draw before making a purchase.

6. The Delivery.

The aim of the game is to try and roll the bowls from a stance on the mat as near to the jack as possible or to some other strategic point. If the performance is good and the tactics sound the bowls, or at least one of them, will probably finish up scoring.

7. The opposition.

Sometimes there is a choice of opponent; more often not. In any case little can be done to diminish the potential skills of the opposition in the contest ahead.

8. Oneself.

How do we react when faced with pressing problems and how do they affect our performance on the green?

9. Tactics.

What are tactics – and how are they best employed to achieve our aims?

CHAPTER THREE

ASPECTS OF THE DELIVERY

1. GRIPPING THE BOWL

As previously mentioned the size of the bowl must be suitable. If a bowl is too big it creates a number of difficulties during the delivery action.

Gripping a bowl too tightly to prevent it slipping results in the loss of finger sensitivity, tenses the muscles in the arm and consequently a breakdown occurs in the messages passing to and from the brain. A tense hand makes the whole body tense and affects deftness of touch, coordination and freedom of movement.

It is good practice for the arm to move in a free pendulum fashion from the shoulder and during the back swing the bowl should be held easily without any fear of it slipping from the hand. The pendulum action cannot be properly achieved if the bowl is too big and, often as a poor substitute, a forced backward and forward shoulder motion is used to provide the power.

This awkward movement requires pivoting the body at the hips, and the circular motion on delivery makes it very difficult to release the bowl along the line intended. Linked with this fault, the player usually requires to turn up the forearm at the wrist, and then form the hand in a cup shape in which to rest the bowl instead of it being held by the fingers.

The delivery method used by most players gives impetus to the bowl by a combination of the forward stepping motion of the body and the swing of the bowling arm. Unfortunately, if no back-swing is made, the forward thrust of the body by leg movements is left to provide most of the force required, accompanied by arm pushing and sometimes unwanted shoulder action.

A bowl can be held in several ways but there are two acknowledged basic grips: the "claw" and the "cradle". When using the claw grip the bowl is gently held by the fingers spread evenly along, and in line with, the bottom running surface and the thumb placed well above the bowl disc. Only the forward part of the hand just below the fingers should be in contact with the bowl. Sometimes trying to hold too large a bowl in this fashion creates a tendency to grip too tightly and a "squeezing" action occurs between fingers and thumb. As a result, control is lost during the delivery and the bowl is likely to skid on the green at the point of release. Wet and cold weather conditions make the problem worse.

As the cradle grip suggests, the bowl lies along the fingers and in

full contact with the palm of the hand with the thumb placed just underneath the bowl disc.

A guide to the way someone would naturally grip a bowl is usually found from the manner the jack is held. Most people hold the jack on delivery with the fingers underneath and the thumb on top.

In other sports where a grip is required, the thumb, forefinger and middle finger are the parts of the hand providing “touch” sensitivity. In everyday activities these are the fingers put to use in: writing with a pen or pencil, feeling the quality of material etc., and pass more precise information to the brain. The claw grip makes more use of these fingers, gives more control and naturally allows a better back swing – and I am inclined to favour it. But I hesitate to make a strong recommendation on which grip to use; it is up to each person to find out what is comfortable and gives better results. I have seen excellent bowlers using a cradle grip.

Many methods are used to try and determine if the size of a bowl is suitable. The most common is to ensure the player’s middle fingers and thumbs meet comfortably when both hands are encircled round the bowl’s running surface. Also, there are devices for measuring the span of the hand to help indicate the size that should be used. Although spanning the hand over a measuring device or around the circumference of a bowl may show the extent of finger stretch, it might not always be the best means to assess the ability of obtaining a comfortable hold of the bowl.

Hands and fingers become less flexible as age progresses and lose some of their elasticity and ability to grip. It is wise to consider trying a bowl of at least one size smaller than the span of the fingers indicates. But don’t play with bowls far too small and light in weight. A prudent choice is the largest size that can be held securely and comfortably in cold wet weather conditions. Better still, if two sets can be afforded it gives greater scope: the larger and heavier for indoor play and keen outdoor surfaces; the smaller and lighter for outdoor cold wet weather conditions and slower greens.

Special brands of polish type substances when applied to bowls will probably provide a more secure grip for the fingers. A small amount of suitable cream or wax should be applied before play spreading it with the bowling hand. Allow the bowls to dry for a minute or two before polishing with a cloth. Some people prefer a wet chamois cloth to moisten the fingers to provide a grip which is more hygienic than licking them – and much less dangerous too if fertilizer or other treatment has been recently applied to the green. A wet chamois cloth is fine in warm weather conditions but many players find it makes the hands too cold when temperatures are low; I know I do.

2. THE STANCE

Positioning the Feet and Body.

The stance is the posture adopted by the player in positioning feet and body prior to triggering the delivery action. It determines how the movement will begin and influences how it will continue. It also provides a starting-off point from which sufficient power can be generated by a sequence of movements to dispatch the bowl to finish at the distance and direction intended. The line of delivery is crucial but even more important is the weight imparted to the bowl. The stance should be set up with feet properly aligned to facilitate a simple and unrestricted movement of body and arm in the desired direction along the delivery line.

Many delivery defects arise through taking up a stance that is ill adapted for the action to follow. The fault is often improper placement and alignment of the feet.

Several levels of stances can be taken up, ranging from a low “fixed stance” position through various less stooped positions to a fully upright or “athletic” stance. The difference in the configuration of each stance is mainly related to the extent of knee and/or body bend. Even if an upright position is chosen a slight knee bend has benefits by unlocking the knee joints before the movement begins and gives a better sense of body weight and balance.

Whichever level of stance is adopted it is essential it feels comfortably balanced and befits the action to follow: enabling a simple and relaxed movement throughout the delivery. Greater power can be generated from an upright stance than from a stooped one since a more erect position provides a greater arc for arm swing when combined with the scope for forward and downward body movement and leg action.

Most bowlers take a step forward in the delivery movement. This step should be nearly parallel to the delivery line so that the direction of it allows the arm to swing freely and naturally along the line of aim without loss of balance. If the step is misdirected, the bowling arm will swing at an unnatural angle to the body in order to deliver the bowl along the correct line – and faults may occur.

So, when taking up a stance, the more accurately the stepping-foot is placed and pointed in line toward its intended step, the more precise the step will be. Besides, a balanced delivery movement will be achieved allowing the arm to swing naturally in the correct direction.

Difficulty is usually experienced in obtaining a free and natural straight backward and forward arm swing when standing with feet together on the mat and facing the direction of delivery. This problem can be overcome by:

For right handed players: - (converse for left handed players)

(1) Place the left foot just in front of the mat in line with and pointing in the direction of the step to be taken. This will ensure and make easy “a step in the right direction”.

(2) Place the right foot on the mat comfortably angled to the left foot to give maximum balance

(3) The combined effect of these foot placements will turn the shoulders to face a bit to the right of the line of delivery. From this position a less restricted and more natural arm swing toward the delivery line will be obtained.

(4) It is often argued that the shoulders should be squarely facing the line of delivery at all times. I do not think this allows the free backward and forward arm swing along the delivery line.

Earlier I mentioned the mat creating complications due to its shape. Being rectangular and placed lengthwise up the centre of the rink, it is inclined to induce the player to take a stance facing straight up the rink centre. It is a common fault and unless rectified may be a continuing source of delivery errors. Facing too straight in the stance requires the player to turn feet and body to adjust to the line of aim when stepping forward during delivery. The result of this movement is often made evident by the mat being knocked askew by the turning action of the rear foot. Insufficient turning of the body to the right of the line of delivery in the stance is a frequent cause of “hooking” on the forehand. This fault occurs more often when players get older and cannot get down and through the delivery action as easily as they could when younger. Turning the body a bit further to the right in the stance may help to overcome this problem.

Holding the Bowl

In the upright stance the bowl should be held in front just below the waist level and to the side of the body in line with the intended swing of the arm along the delivery line. In more stooped stances it can be held at a lower point – sometimes at ground level – before the swing commences.

Where is the best place for the non-bowling arm to rest? If placed on the knee or thigh it should remain flexible at the elbow and neither restrict the bending of the body nor hinder the follow-through action. Some bowlers tuck the left arm and hand along the waistline; others let it hang loose down the side, which keeps it out of the way of the follow-through movement. The answer is to position the hand wherever it feels comfortable and gives good balance without restricting any movement.

3. THE DELIVERY.

The word “delivery” in bowls is generally accepted to depict putting into action the plan made to dispatch the bowl up the green to its intended destination. It is the only physical movement directly contributing to the game and it is important the delivery is properly executed and so well rehearsed it becomes virtually instinctive. In preparing for action a clear picture of exactly what is required is thought out and imprinted in the mind. The imaginary line of travel the bowl will take over the first few yards to reach a predetermined point requires to be conceived and any change in delivery weight considered.

Once the mental plan is clear the physical action follows to endeavour to trace over the picture viewed in the mind’s eye. The problem then is to transfer the mental picture of line and pace of delivery into an action copy. How can this task be tackled to make it more easily accomplished?

- (1) Visualise the successful outcome to anything about to be attempted.
- (2) Concentrate in the proper fashion. Think about each task in correct sequence and exclude everything else from the mind.
- (3) Develop a well-grooved and efficient delivery.

The less movement made in the course of delivering a jack or bowl, the fewer errors will arise. Naturally, whatever action is applied should be unrestricted and impart sufficient momentum to the bowl to roll it to the desired length. Any movements not directly contributing to this objective are, in theory, not required. I shall come to this point again.

The Normal Delivery Movements.

The delivery action generally adopted is one where the momentum required to roll the bowl up the green comes from a combination of leg, body and arm movements. It is accomplished by taking a step and transferring the body weight to the forward foot, at the same time swinging the bowling arm in a pendulum fashion and bending the body and knees sufficiently to roll the bowl from the hand.

Just at the commencement, and during the course of these movements, entire concentration should be given to smoothly grounding the bowl with the correct strength of delivery. The line of aim should have already been decided and the feet and body properly aligned in the stance. The first movement will depend upon the stance; if a fully upright one is adopted several movements are involved:

First: the knees and body slowly bend to stoop to the required height to obtain a smooth grounding of the bowl.

Second: the bowling arm starts its backward swing simultaneous to the

step forward in the desired direction.

Third: when the heel of the stepping foot touches the ground the bowling arm commences its forward swing to the level of the playing surface and rolls the bowl smoothly from the hand along the line of delivery.

During this action the body weight is mainly placed on the foot stepping forward into the delivery. This movement coincides with the forward arm swing and may cause the back foot to rise from the mat and, in fact, it may require a step or two forward to naturally finish the movement. This is part of the follow-through action and is not bad practice provided there is no infringement of the foot-faulting rule.

The head should be kept low and moving along an even plane during the latter part of the delivery and into the follow-through movement along the line of aim. The whole action should be carried out freely, slowly and smoothly, with all movements coordinated and well balanced. Any slight pivoting of the body at the waist or at the shoulders should come naturally and not be forced. A simple rhythmical swing without frills will lead to a well-grooved delivery action.

Lessening the Delivery Movement.

The last contact with the bowl in the delivery is when the bowler is in a stooped position with one foot forward pointing towards the line of aim. The hand releasing the bowl is probably a few inches in front of the leading foot. The toe of the back foot is either on or above the confines of the mat. This is the “point of release” position.

Why bother then to make all these movements from an upright position to get down to the point of release? Why not just start the delivery action from a stooped position with both feet already accurately placed: one on the mat and the other placed comfortably forward and aligned in the desired position. The body is already balanced and all that is required is a swing of the arm and off the bowl goes. Delivering from this “fixed stance” position virtually cuts out all foot, leg and body action and avoids possible mistakes arising from such movements. It makes the coordination of movement simple to achieve.

The fixed stance has not been adopted by many bowlers, but it sounds a good idea provided sufficient momentum can be imparted to the bowl by arm movement alone. Sometimes I hear it said that such a delivery action, with nothing but arm movement, gives no real enjoyment or feeling of satisfaction. It might appear the possibility of a better outcome is somehow outweighed by the enjoyment obtained by body and leg movement. This might be difficult to appreciate but it is important to obtain a sense of pleasure from what is done, otherwise it will not be done well.

On heavier greens the fixed stance may not be conducive to a controlled delivery as it lacks the power provided by body and leg movement. It is apparent amongst bowlers who learned to play the game on heavier greens that they have an inherent tendency to move more during the delivery and follow-through action. This, however, has not seemingly been to their disadvantage when playing on faster surfaces, as past performances and results have proved their ability to adapt. Nevertheless, any unnecessary movements should be avoided. The height of stance is up to the individual to choose, but when playing on fast surfaces it is better to be positioned as near the point of release as possible. Whatever movements are adopted it is important there is relaxation and balance throughout the whole body. Any tenseness, or a feeling of requiring to force, inhibits freedom of movement and affects the ability to control and attain consistent deliveries.

“Backhand” and “Forehand”.

There is no difference in the movements in executing backhand and forehand deliveries and the angle of the arm swing in relation to the body is exactly the same.

The delivery action is simply to roll the bowl from the hand along the line of aim and the bowl curves in accordance with its bias. Other than turning the bowl over in the hand to adjust for bias and facing along a different line of aim, all movements are exactly the same. As previously mentioned the rectangular shape of the mat, and perhaps the fear of foot-faulting, often unwittingly induces a stance facing too straight instead of at an angle to suit the line of delivery. Adopting a stance facing up the centre of the rink requires different delivery movements for “backhand” and “forehand” play and this should be avoided.

In other sports, “backhand” indicates a stroke made from the opposite side of the body with the back of the hand facing a forward direction. “Forehand” means a stroke from the same side and made with the palm of the hand facing a forward direction. All deliveries of bowls are made from the same side as the delivery arm with the palm of the hand facing a forward direction, including the jack. No thought is given as to whether casting the jack is a forehand or backhand delivery. Therefore, the term “backhand” in bowls is possibly a bit of a misnomer. “Backhand”, in most cases except for left-hand players, simply means that viewed from the delivery mat the bowl’s bias will make it curve to the right on its path up the green after delivery. “Forehand” means it will curve to the left – and that is all. The bowl itself affects the curve and there is no difference whatever in the delivery action and the swing of the arm should be at the same angle to the body no matter which bias is used. It is important to get

beginners to think this way and perhaps left-handers also require encouragement to appreciate this view.

Whilst on this subject, I would suggest it is good practice and exercise to advise a newcomer to the game to stand on the mat and deliver in turn several jacks, not just up the centre of the rink, but also at various fairly acute angles to the left and right across the green without moving the mat. This teaches the player to turn feet and body on the mat and severs the inclination to stand too straight. Furthermore, it helps to avoid the possibility of any misconception arising over backhand and forehand play, as no question arises in this regard when delivering the jack. Every delivery action will be the same no matter the angle of stance on the mat, and this is good preparatory work for bowl delivery. The jack presents no problem in holding it during the back swing and promotes a good delivery action.

Line of Delivery

Sometimes I refer to: “line of delivery”, “line of aim”, “angle of delivery” and “amount of grass”. These all relate to the direction the bowl is dispatched at an angle from the centre of the rink and, having allowed for bias, will travel up the green and increasingly curve as its speed slows to finish on the centre of the rink, or wherever the desired spot may be. Naturally, a bowl delivered with extra speed to disturb the head, or for other reasons, is likely to require a different line.

Finding the Line of Delivery

How is the correct line of delivery found and where is the aiming point to select the line? I have put this question to many excellent players and the answers vary considerably: some pick a point on the bank to aim at; some a mark on the green and many just seem to bowl along an imaginary line using a kind of “instinctive compass” to guide them without selecting any particular mark to aim at. How much grass a delivery will require will depend on the speed of the bowling surface and can only be found through trial and error. Normally the faster the surface the more grass will be required as the bowl travels slower and is therefore more affected by its bias.

Once the line has been ascertained the actual spot on which the eyes are focused when the bowl leaves the hand at the point of release also varies amongst players. Much seems to depend on the type of delivery adopted and the angle of the body in relation to the ground when the bowl is released. Several points are worth remembering:

(1) Decide which “hand” is to be played before taking up a stance.

It is beneficial to approach the mat from the rear along the direction of the intended line of delivery; a better view is formed in the mind's eye of the line required.

(2) Feeling comfortable and relaxed is important, with feet and body turned at the correct angle to allow a natural arm-swing and delivery along the line of aim.

(3) Once the right line has been ascertained, by whichever method, the eyes should not be over-active during the delivery action and should be casually focused along the line of aim, so that full concentration is given to the strength of delivery.

A bowl on its travel, in a normal draw shot, will be affected to some extent by its bias shortly after delivery and will reach the crest of the curve (the point furthest from the centre of the rink) at about two-thirds of its journey up the green. The crest is often called the "shoulder" and a theory is sometimes expressed that the shoulder ought to be the aiming point from the mat. I disagree! The bowl takes some curve before reaching this point and therefore the aiming point is somewhat further out than the "shoulder". Such a misunderstanding is often the cause of bowls ending up tight of the jack and this is particularly noticeable when playing on fast surfaces. It is worthwhile emphasising again the importance of having the feet and body correctly aligned during the stance so that the delivery movement, including the arm-swing, is automatically projected along the delivery line.

It is unwise to use the rectangular shape of the mat as a guide for correct foot positioning when taking up a stance. Although care may be taken to ensure the mat is straight in placement at the beginning of the end, it can be twisted during subsequent deliveries. If it is out of straight alignment from rear to front by only one half of an inch – often it is much more without being noticed – the error will project itself to 2 feet over a distance of 32 yards. So, try to think of the mat as being circular in shape and allow the feet and body to turn naturally toward the direction of delivery. Of course, take care not to foot-fault.

In addition to allowing for the curve of the bowl in its way up the green, windy weather and peculiarities about the running surface are taken into account in trying to find the right line of aim. Normally winds come in gusts and if combined with wet conditions and an uneven green the number of inconsistencies might be beyond reasonable prediction. Despite the level of experience and skill luck may often prevail.

The power dispatching the bowl on its way up the green comes from leg and body movements in stepping forward combined with the pendulum swing of the arm. The proportion of momentum supplied from each source

varies from one bowler to another resulting in the different kinds of delivery actions and styles we see from players.

A tall bowler will require a relatively short step and swing to those of a smaller person to propel the bowl a similar distance. Normally the longer the step and the greater the arc of arm-swing, the further the bowl will travel. The quicker the action given to these movements results in greater power to the delivery.

During the delivery a medium length step is taken from the mat. Too big a step may lead to a loss of balance in a lateral direction, caused by the forward foot acting as a brake to the follow-through movement of the body. This can produce a “hooking” action in the arm swing and the bowl is dispatched in the wrong direction. Younger people with supple joints can take a longer step without unduly affecting balance and follow-through action. As age progresses more difficulty is encountered. Whatever age, avoid taking too long a step which restricts the completion of the follow-through action. (Having said that I have seen one or two younger bowlers taking gigantic steps and they perform exceptionally well). The accuracy of direction of foot placement in the forward step however is crucial and, if wrongly placed, difficulty will be found in achieving proper body balance to send the bowl along the correct line.

The extent of the arm swing will depend on the speed of the green: a “heavy” surface will require a long, and possibly quick, arm swing. A shorter slower swing will be sufficient on a “fast” surface to send the bowl the required distance. On fast greens, when taking up a stance, consider placing the “stepping” foot further forward off the front edge of the mat – about nine inches or so. This is often referred to as a semi-fixed stance, and it will shorten and make more precise the step taken for the normal draw delivery. On very fast surfaces the “fixed-stance” ought to be given serious consideration, as it requires an arm swing only – and possibly a slight movement in a rocking foot and body action.

The timing of the backward arm swing in conjunction with the step forward varies among bowlers: some players are well into their step before starting the arm swing; conversely, others start the back-swing before taking a step, and there are variations in between.

If the step forward is taken before any arm swing starts then probably most of the potential delivery power produced by leg and body movement has already been spent, so more effort is required from the arm swing to compensate. Such action is not necessarily a bad thing when playing on fast surfaces, but taking up a fixed-stance in the first instance would give better foot alignment and balance and have exactly the same power potential for the delivery. Playing on heavier surfaces might require

forcing if too much is left to do from the arm swing only. I am convinced better rhythm, control and balance are obtained by starting both movements together, and it allows the heel of the forward foot to make contact with the bowling surface just before the forward swing of the arm commences. However, this is up to the individual as to which method provides the best balance to execute the delivery.

Many bowlers appear to add a push to the pendulum motion of the arm swing. Possibly it is merely a conscious speeding up of the swinging motion just before releasing the bowl. However, what I would describe as a push only with virtually no back-swing is occasionally seen, and sometimes with considerable effect. Of course, others may define the movement as a short swing executed with speed. Whichever, I believe on average the arm action works better in a pendulum fashion, allowing the ultimate speed of swing to provide most of the arm force. Some bowlers may disagree and think a push alone gives more “feel”.

Undoubtedly, in that second before releasing the bowl, a final tuning is made through the nerves and muscles to activate what the brain has instructed to be done so that the bowl will travel the required distance. Most of the heavy work will have been provided by body movement and arm-swing, but the sensation of requiring just a little bit extra (fine tuning), may manifest itself in a slight pushing action by the forearm at the point of release. Therefore, it might be argued: if more leg, body and arm movements are applied in the heavy work than what is actually needed, the fine tuning mechanism cannot reduce the power already flowing, and it will result in the bowl travelling further than desired.

So, why not purposely just under-provide in the heavy work and then the little extra needed can be applied, probably with a slight push, or by speeding up the arm swing just before releasing the bowl?

Watch the curlers! The lengthy delivery provides ample time to examine their action closely. The power is generated by the action of a slight arm back-swing and then stepping forward and down from the hack with the weight of body and stone moving into a sliding action. At the end of the slide, near the point of release, the curler will give the stone an extra little push to send it on its way to the desired spot. The push is made gently with the forearm and fingers, which also impart a turn or curl to the stone. Certainly, if the player’s initial slide up the ice is speedier than the draw shot requires it will end up in the stone travelling beyond the distance required.

We can neither slide on the green not impart any curl to the bowl, and I’m not suggesting any accurate comparison can be made, but there are similarities.

The push is much more pronounced in the action of some bowlers than others. It is often coupled with an inclination to nurse and cautiously hand steer the bowl in its direction up the green, instead of granting the bowl its own life by committing it toward the line of aim by means of a free arm swing and follow-through.

A bowl wobbling on its way up the green is often the outcome of the grip being incorrect, or the bowl not properly aligned in the hand. However, I notice the “wobble” is more prevalent among players who mainly push than those who possess more of a smooth arm swing in the delivery. Perhaps, in fact, the pushing action also adds a curl to the bowl which makes it wobble. It can also be caused by the bowl being too big to handle properly. Whatever the cause, instead of making the bowl curl or draw more, perhaps the pushing action makes it run straighter than what it would when delivered on its true running surface.

What is worse, a faulty hand “twisting-push” type action can develop immediately before the point of release and result in wayward deliveries. The trouble often highlights itself in the inability to deliver the jack up the centre of the rink. Like most faults, as time goes by and the player gets older, the condition becomes worse. Shedding some of the force of the dubious hand-pushing activity and granting more sway to the dependable arm-swing movement can cure it. But, as happens even in the best planned power changes, there is a dour reluctance: it takes time, patience and manipulation to replace the old established with something new.

It is rather an unnatural movement to stand feet together facing the delivery line and, from this position, swing the arm straight backwards and forwards keeping the palm of the hand always facing in a forward direction – it causes strain. One of my suggestions earlier about feet placement was to help alleviate this difficulty. There are other ways: some bowlers rotate the forearm inwardly during the backward swing, so that the palm of the hand at one point is facing the body, and then rotate it in the forward swing to face the delivery line at the point of release; others, grip the bowl more on its outward side keeping the palm of the hand facing the body throughout the entire swing. There are other variations and, whichever is used, the intention is to try and relieve tension in the arm by making the action as natural as possible.

Everything I write applies equally to men and women. However, women on average are smaller and lighter than men and cannot generate as much power into the delivery without forcing. Unlike golf, there are no “ladies tees” so the “course” is exactly the same for both. On heavy greens women have an unfair and undeserving disadvantage if competing against men, as it is necessary for them to apply more relative force to deliveries.

When the amount of power to dispatch a bowl up a heavy green requires to be increased beyond a critical point, there is a progressive loss of deftness of touch. The importance of that skill is overtaken by the requirement to use muscle to heave, with the result that all feelings of control, precision and consistency are lost. The lesser the height and natural strength of the person the sooner this critical point is reached: the point where the sense of touch play becomes considerably less. Women, therefore usually find it more difficult to retain skills where strength becomes more important than natural skills. Men also, as they become older, suffer in the same way.

But, adding more troubles – wet weather makes it even worse – I notice that many women and men use bowls too big for them to hold easily. In recent years there has been some improvement in this situation and smaller bowls are now on the increase. Too large a bowl not only impairs the ability to swing back the arm from the shoulder, through fear of the bowl slipping from the hand, it results in too tight a grip which tenses the fingers, arm and body. As stated earlier this results in the loss of control, coordination and rhythm in the delivery.

Relaxation is the key to freedom of movement. Without relaxation, awkward, stiff, forcing type movements prevail and bad delivery habits quickly form. It is extremely important that bowls are of suitable size and can be held comfortably and securely, allowing a natural back swing without any tendency for the bowl to slip. Otherwise, any attempts either to develop or reconstruct the foundations of a sound delivery are undermined.

I recommended earlier that a beginner should learn the delivery action with the jack. It is easily held, so there is no tension to inhibit free arm swing; no problem arises about bias and there is no confusion over “backhand” and “forehand deliveries. It may be wise, therefore, to deliver the bowl similar to the action developed in the jack delivery. The inability to deliver the jack up the centre of the rink is indicative of a basic flaw in the bowler’s delivery action.

One fairly common problem is adjusting deliveries to cope with different speeds of playing surfaces. Most experienced and skilled bowlers adapt themselves reasonably quickly to fast surfaces after having played for some time on heavier ones, whereas the changeover to heavy greens from keener ones seems to take a longer time to master. It would appear the main difficulty encountered is injecting sufficient controlled power and “feel” into deliveries. A self “post mortem” often makes a player reach the conclusion that bad performance on a heavy green has come about through lack of arm back-swing from the shoulder.

Many skilled bowlers are eliminated from first round ties when coming from indoor fast surfaces to heavy outdoor surfaces in the spring of the year. Observation convinces me that, in the main, those players with reasonable back swings tend to adapt quicker to heavier greens to those who have a restricted swing.

Finding the Right Delivery Weight

What method can be devised to help any ball player judge the strength of throw, swing, stroke, delivery or whatever, to propel an object the desired distance. The brain takes in the information on our wants – there will be miscalculations – and accordingly sends signals to activate our nerves and muscles. Remember: the lesser the action required the simpler and efficient the whole transmission system will be.

Even so, finding the right weight of delivery is a complicated exercise and the experience of each result acts as a guide to the next endeavour. Much of it is instinctive and if all the complexities involved could be mastered and we could calculate precisely, and then do exactly what we plan in our mind, then we would be machines. It is often said that fast outdoor green and indoor carpet conditions often separate the better bowlers from the less naturally talented and, on average, I would agree with this view. But, if anyone feels that natural talent is lacking, don't despair! – Probably more exists than is realised. A very significant proportion of success comes from exploiting inherent skills to the full by firmly implanting a good technique in the delivery action. And, a good temperament helps to offset any shortcoming there may be in inherent skills.

Other than possibly listening to the sound of instructions from a skip, the only two senses associated with the delivery are those of sight and touch. Eyes are put to use to assess the distance of the jack from the mat and to fix the point or line of aim. The sense of touch probably has aspects related to the delivery: the feel and weight of the bowl in the hand and the instinctive application of strength of delivery. Therefore, the objective is to use our senses of sight and touch to send the bowl along the right line charged with the correct velocity to reach a predetermined point.

The brain works more efficiently when dealing with the functioning of one sense at a time. Eyes that are showing interest and actively engaged in absorbing some exciting incident, dull the sense of hearing and other senses. Closing the eyes intensifies any one of the other senses, including touch. I'm not suggesting it would be better bowling blindfold. Nevertheless, if the eyes are over-active in seeking out the aiming point during the delivery movement, judgment of weight is likely to suffer. There ought to be a logical sequence of concentrating on one thing at a time. What often

happens during play when there is real difficulty in finding a line to the jack? Judging the right weight becomes a problem as concentration is taken up on looking for the right line.

Once the line of aim has been fixed with the feet and body correctly aligned and the distance of the jack determined, have trust in the ability to bowl along the line without the eyes becoming over-active. Full concentration can then be put to applying the correct strength of delivery and smoothly grounding the bowl.

A similarly confused situation may arise when a decision is made to play a “running” type delivery that requires adjustment to line and weight. Sometimes the line is found correctly but the weight is wrong, or vice versa. Try to envisage the intended line and then focus concentration on the weight required to match that line.

Have I answered all the questions in your mind about how to find the correct weight and impart it to the bowl? No, but I wish I could. It is mainly an instinctive action and instincts work better and make full use of natural talent where there is good technique and a proper method of concentration.

In “firing”, “driving”, “striking” – whichever name is put to the action – weight estimation really does not enter the equation so much. Concentration can be mainly devoted to finding the right line. I mentioned earlier that the “upright” stance provides the best starting point to impart maximum speed to the bowl. This does not mean that an accurate speedy bowl cannot be launched from other stances. It is up to each player to find which position provides most accuracy.

The Follow -Through

As already stated, the follow-through is not just a physical action; a mental follow-up is required to verify the correctness of the action taken. The mental aspect retains the feeling of the bowl being within the power of the player until it stops rolling. A variety of body contortions are displayed on the green endeavoring to persuade the bowl to go to the desired spot. This is not necessarily a bad thing provided the bowl is viewed from a position where a true assessment can be made as to what adjustment, if any, is required to the line or weight of the next delivery. The best viewing point is probably a yard or two in front of the mat along the delivery line.

However, frequently we see a player with perspiration pouring from the brow, chasing the bowl with great gusto up the green; sometimes veering to the side, pulling in one going wide of target or pulling out a narrow one; then pursuing stealthily as the bowl approaches the head; vying with the best breed of strong-eyed Border Collies – and finally pouncing upon the

insurgent sphere with great hullabaloo, commanding it to trickle on and stop at its allotted spot. It's all great fun: extremely entertaining to watch and tempting for many players to fully express their feelings – and who would deny any natural extrovert the stage! But really, any follow-through is better viewed along the line of delivery. Also, care should always be taken to avoid infringing the laws of the game regarding rink possession. Having said that - the game is all about enjoyment.

Excitement may add pleasure to the game, but over-excitement can lead to feelings of anxiety. Observe intently, and don't get too hot and bothered. Never fuse the lights of skill and learning with an overload of heated anxiety!

Of course, the other extreme can often be seen: as soon as the delivery action is completed the player immediately steps back and retreats behind the mat, giving the bowl an occasional disdainful glance as if trying to disown it entirely; possibly fretting about the ultimate result at the head. There is a reticence to show any real personal expression or emotion, and the fear of embarrassment in "looking a bit stupid" about a bowl running up the green may induce the player to show little interest. Or, sometimes, could it be to convey a look of nonchalance to disguise a real competitive spirit? Whichever the reason, this rather tense inhibited style stifles relaxation in movement that is the very essence of a free flowing delivery action. Moreover, it subdues the mental approach, which ought to have, and convey, an enthusiastic and reasonably positive attitude. Look interested and follow-through. Take up an assertive stance just in front of the mat to observe the path of the bowl till it nearly stops its run. Don't turn away in disgust at a misdirected bowl. It may provide a very useful guide for a future delivery.

The Necessity for the Follow-Through

Why is a physical follow-through necessary on delivery? After all once the bowl leaves the hand what else can be done? In some sports where the ball is moving at speed towards a player, the pace of the ball can be used to return it or send it on its way in the desired direction by means of a rebounding blocking action with a bat, racquet, foot, head or whatever, without requiring to impart any further force by means of a swing or follow-through. But a swing is needed to impart momentum to a stationary ball and a proper follow-through action is essential as it is in some other sports. As previously stated, the delivery action in bowls consists of two forces: the swing of the arm and the movement of the body when a forward step is taken. The delivery movements are activated by messages from the brain telling the body what to do in order to achieve what is required. To ensure

these messages are fully transmitted and put into action it is necessary to somewhat overrun the physical movements to ensure the completion of the action. How often it happens, just as a bowl leaves the hand, the player instinctively knows it will be short of the distance intended. The cause might be occasionally poor coordination of the swing and forward step, but it is more likely to come about as a result of the body not fully carrying out the completion of the delivery action. A familiar phrase is: "Oh, I forgot to send that one". Either the full weight of body movement or arm swing has not been imparted to the bowl. Where there is a swinging motion, the follow-through is a form of insurance to ensure the completion of the action required. The follow-through helps prevent cutting the action short and gives a feeling of "staying with it" rather than "quitting" on the delivery. It encourages a relaxed and unrestricted forward movement throughout the entire action and helps to decrease tension. Earlier I suggested the head be kept in an even plane throughout the latter part of the delivery. It should remain at this lower level for a second or two after releasing the bowl. This assists completing the follow-through action and prevents "coming up off" the delivery. Watch the snooker players keeping their heads down for a second or so after cueing.

Remember - The delivery action, where a step forward is taken, is DOWN, FORWARD and a long (time-wise) T-H-R-O-U-G-H, and not: down, up quick and back on the mat.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE PROBLEM OF ONESELF

“No man is demolished but by himself” - Thomas Bentley 1693 – 1742)

“I hold it as certain that no man was ever written out of reputation but by himself” - Richard Bentley 1662 – 1742)

The first quotation above is for the benefit of me and the readers of this booklet and the second most likely only for me

People possess different temperaments but probably the majority react in fashions that are somewhat similar, although the extent of reaction can vary between one person and another. Powers of concentration also differ significantly.

Temperament is the way a person feels, thinks and acts under a variety of situations. It provides the working environment in which natural skills are employed in competition. The better the temperament, the more efficiently these skills function.

Experts on the subject of “the mind” can write volumes to do justice to its complexities. My knowledge in this field somewhat limits me (in truth, leaves but little option) to telling a short and simple bowling story to provide a background and introduction to illustrate and consider the subject of temperament.

And it is just a story: the characters themselves are entirely fictitious and any resemblance by name, occupation or otherwise to any person is purely coincidental. But, any similarity in their actions and thoughts many of us have who play the game of bowls is, of course, entirely intentional.

Story begins:

Harry is a mechanic working in a garage. He has been fraught with problems all day: his right-hand man off with flu; main dealers sending wrong parts – nothing has gone right. To add to his frustration a customer calls late in the afternoon to collect a car, and Harry has to work much longer on it than expected because of unforeseen problems. Eventually Harry dashes home. A very hot bath is required to remove grease and dirt and this leaves him feeling a bit bereft of energy. He grabs a quick bite to eat, then rushes off to the bowling green at 6.30pm to play an important championship tie. He wishes it had been arranged for some other evening.

The weather doesn't look too promising either.

Dick is a computer equipment salesman in his mid thirties (slightly younger than Harry) and has returned home early after a very satisfactory business meeting with an important new customer. He has worked very hard and has secured a much larger order than expected for his firm after many weeks of extremely difficult negotiations – and in face of keen competition. He phones his office and passes on the good news. His boss is delighted and relieved; he has been more than a bit hot under the collar of late because of the slow progress – not Dick's fault – in securing even a small order from this company.

Tonight, Dick has a bowls singles tie to play. After a refreshing shower and a well-digested meal he has ample time to sit down, put his feet up, and turn over in his mind all the benefits of today's success. Naturally, he is quite elated and feels in fine fettle for the quarter-final championship tie against Harry.

Now, Harry and Dick are good sportsmen: both normally pleasant natured, and really nothing to choose between their bowling abilities and temperaments. However, for a number of years there has been a well-known keen rivalry between them to gain recognition within the club as one of the top-notch bowlers. Therefore, this quarter-final encounter has attracted a bit more attention from club members than usual. A fair number of spectators are watching from the comfort of the clubhouse – no doubt to add to the evening's entertainment with the usual learned comments – possibly lubricated by refreshments from the bar - on the bowling and tactical abilities of each player.

The game starts:

Things are going well for Dick: he is in sparkling form and has quickly romped to a lead of 15-2 and is enjoying the game. "This is truly my lucky day!" he thinks to himself. "Although it took ages to pull off that business deal it nevertheless required hard work, clever negotiation and a bit of luck – and think of the commission!" One or two, or more, kindly rubs of the green also had profited him a good deal and enhanced his score.

Harry is struggling: he is nervous, tense and somewhat exhausted. Despite expending his best efforts, nothing had paid off – many of his bowls are landing short and a few attempts to play with weight have ended in disaster and cost him dearly. "A bit like that car today" – and the harder he tries the worse it gets. "Alright for Dick with his cushy job", he thinks. However, with the score now at 2-15, he soon comes to terms with the fact that failing to reach the semi-final is not the end of the world. This thought seems to relax his mind and body – but he still maintains interest

and marshals his thoughts and determination to at least put up a fight against Dick. Although, not quite going for broke, he begins to play with much more assertion and confidence. He now feels a spring in his step.

Dick had been sailing along in buoyant mood, thinking of the merits of reaching the semi-final of the club championship for the first time. But, a more relaxed Harry has now responded with one or two telling bowls and that, added to a large slice of good fortune at one end, brings the score to 15-9. Dick is becoming a bit worried.

At the next end Dick has four shots against him with his last bowl to play. Unfortunately, he had taken out his own second-shot bowl with his previous delivery in a rather reckless effort to try and win the end and keep a good lead.

What thoughts are going through Dick's head as he hurries up the green to the mat, urgently wanting to rectify this serious situation and quickly restore his peace of mind – but a bit unsure of what exactly to do about it?

Dick's train of thoughts whilst standing on the mat:

"I've got a yard to draw the third shot and two feet to draw the second.

Earlier in the game all my deliveries were within a yard of the jack."

"I'll look a bit stupid if I fail to kill some shots."

"I can't be short; I'll need to be sure I'm up."

"But there are too many holes in the head, so I'd better draw."

"I was unlucky with the last bowl I played to take out my second-shot."

"I'll need to be very careful with this delivery."

"Should I play the backhand or forehand?"

Dick finally plays his last bowl on the backhand after tense deliberation; falls two yards short and loses a four. The score now stands at 15-13 – still in Dick's favour.

What are the corresponding thoughts of the players at this critical stage of the game?

Harry's Thoughts:

- (a) *"Things are looking better. I feel more relaxed and happier."*
- (b) *"Lucky to get that four; not like Dick to be short!"*
- (c) *"Only two down now! What a fight back I'm making even though I may still lose."*
- (d) *"That was a silly third bowl Dick played". There was always a chance he would take out his own bowl."*

Dick's Thoughts:

- "I've lost the place a bit! Must pull myself together and concentrate more."*
- "Silly: fancy losing four! Should have fired – not drawn."*
- "Just two up now! What will they say in the clubhouse if I lose after being so far ahead?"*
- "How unlucky I was to take out my second shot! That result looked impossible."*

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|---|--|
| (e) <i>"I seem to have found my touch at last."</i> | <i>"Made a mess of that last delivery. I'll need to be more cautious."</i> |
| (f) <i>"Dick looks a bit worried now. I might be in with a chance."</i> | <i>"Harry's chirped up a bit! I've let him off the hook."</i> |
| (g) <i>"Think I'll take the mat up a bit. I've been struggling to find a road up this direction."</i> | <i>"What's all this? Harry's taking the mat up the green to try and put me off."</i> |
| (h) <i>"Pity it's started to rain. Ah well, it'll do the garden good."</i> | <i>"Oh no! Don't tell me that's the rain on next; that's the last thing I need!"</i> |

That is the end of the story. Who won? – I don't know and it doesn't really matter. They are probably still out there battling away like you and me and thousands more – most of us experiencing similar feelings to Harry and Dick at some time or other.

So, let us stop this simple scenario at this stage and examine Harry and Dick's train of thoughts. There has been a complete reversal in their outlook, mood and attitude over the last end or two.

Harry is beginning to see the glimmer of a "silver lining" for the first time today; his work problems have been forgotten – at least in the meantime. His outlook has become entirely positive. He feels relaxed and is beginning to enjoy the challenge and sees that Dick is losing his confidence and looks worried.

The cloud of possible defeat and indignity is darkening Dick's flawless "blue-sky" day – born initially by his work success – after being so far ahead in shots. He is becoming anxious, downhearted, a bit disgruntled that things are not now quite going his way and somewhat irrational in some of his thoughts. His sweet dreams of success are possibly heading toward what he sees as a nightmare.

Harry's first thought: "Things are looking better and I feel more relaxed", is the foundation for the rest of his positive thoughts, feelings and actions – despite still being two down in shots.

Dick's first thought: "I've lost the place a bit; must pull myself together and concentrate more!" is followed immediately by self-criticisms which cause more tension and confusion despite still being two ahead. Instead of properly concentrating on his play his mind gets muddled and wanders off into an assortment of negative thoughts.

Yet, had it been suggested to Harry before the start of the game he might be trailing 13-15 during play, he would not have been too pleased with that state of affairs. On the other hand, Dick would have been delighted to accept a two shot lead at that stage of the game. The story shows the extent that very recent happenings – even at a game of bowls – can, in

the short term, change the thoughts and feelings of people of similar temperament: the dejected one becoming elated and the elated one becoming dejected.

It is often said that some people perform better in competitive sport when under “stress” or “pressure”. I find that difficult to accept. Probably it depends on how these words are interpreted. I believe that if anyone suffers real stress or pressure it builds up tension, confuses thought and reduces the ability to absorb and properly analyse information. It is usually accompanied by a dread of failure and, in fact, this very fear may be the root cause.

Now, I would agree that the majority of people respond and compete better when faced with a challenge. A certain degree of stress may be created which gives a feeling of excitement and stimulates and conditions the mind and body to perform at peak level. A challenge does not appear to carry any real threat or fear of failure. The risk element is looked upon as part of the excitement. When successful it is a feather in the cap; when unsuccessful, it will result in some disappointment, but the thrill of participation is considered to be a reward in itself.

The conception of a particular situation is in the mind’s eye of the participant: if it is seen as a worry, it causes anxious feelings; if perceived as a challenge, it sharpens the desire to compete.

Much therefore depends on the nature of each person’s temperament as to the weight of “stress” that can be carried without it turning into a worry. There will be variations from time to time depending on the state of mind brought by recent incidents or by other factors. However, underlying these fluctuations in mood, some people’s ability to cope in difficult and awkward situations is better than others; they seem to have a better “nerve”.

Normal causes of stress whilst competing:

Self-esteem suffering a set-back.

A fear of failure.

The opposition playing much better than expected.

Over-conscious of what others may think.

Occasionally, the sudden realisation of being on the point of winning and the inability to come to terms and cope with the situation.

Underestimating our own abilities, including some forms of self-criticism.

Poor technique in delivery (although not a primary cause factor).

Common effects of stress:

A loss of confidence.

Confused thoughts, indecision and sometimes frustration and apathy.

A tenseness of body and mind that affects performance particularly when technique is poor.

The loss of concentration and any attempts to apply more are usually dispersed on too many things, most of them inappropriate to the immediate task in hand. The mind is easily sidetracked.

Sometimes becoming resigned to the consequences of defeat (may be a better foundation for a new start, provided endeavour is maintained).

A Challenge:

A challenge is relished and envisaged as an interesting problem set to test our skills.

Although there is likely to be some stress involved, the enjoyment and excitement outweigh any fears of failure

The Effects of a Challenge:

(a) A challenge encourages powers of concentration to focus naturally on the correct things in proper sequence. The mind is not easily side-tracked.

(b) We feel enthusiastic, reasonably keyed-up yet physically relaxed.

(c) It inspires us to perform better than normal.

For example: there are a number of bowlers who treat the sport as somewhat of a social pastime – and why not! But some of them have considerable talent and, on occasions, can muster up a keen appetite for competition. Their favourite menu is having last year's champion "on toast", or at least dishing out a good "roasting". They feel no stress, threat or fear: the whole exercise is relished as a challenge – everything to win and nothing to lose. If successful, a defeat is sometimes forthcoming in the next round by a less skilled player. Whereas, last year's champion is usually expected to win games and this often puts the player under stress.

So, what can we do to avoid worry and anxiety whilst competing? Anxiety is a notorious sneak thief whose loot comprises calmness, composure and confidence. Even a slight incursion can cause the victim to feel flustered, frustrated and despondent. What alarm can be set to give warning of this culprit's approach and what "long arm" can be deployed in the precincts of our minds to make an arrest?

If our capacity to absorb stress is shallow, can we do anything to give it more depth? Is it possible when "really up against it" to change our perception of events and simply transpose our feelings of anxiety to the pleasant fervour of a challenge? Can we really steer clear of stress by keeping completely cucumber cool without risking a headlong collision

with the consequences of becoming quite cold and complacent?

Other than being treated with a quick fix of gene therapy, probably only little can be done to change our basic inherited and acquired temperament. We must recognise and accept our feelings of stress and pressure and learn to live with these. They are part of our make-up. However, having someone to provide reassurance and bolster confidence may help to overcome stress. A good skip will probably help just as much as a sports psychologist. Many bowlers who might not be considered to be good in singles competitions perform much better in games with partners: in fours, triples and pairs play because some of the stress is shared. In a team event support should also come from the other players. At no time should disapproval be shown at the attempts of a player. Encouragement! Encouragement!

Being nervous is natural. A little bundle of nerves, if properly tethered, can be a useful nosebag to provide a source of energy during a competition. However, if allowed to overgrow it will slip loose and spill and present a grateful flow of fodder for the opposition.

What can we actually do by proper concentration to help overcome stress during competitive play?

Remember: concentration does not mean thinking more deeply about all things. It means gathering together all mental resources to think about one thing only. Problems should be tackled one by one in a logical sequence and an endeavour made to treat each as a challenge. This is not easily accomplished in a stressful situation: it requires considerable effort. It is most important when standing on the mat and about to deliver a bowl; thoughts are devoted entirely to the weight of delivery required once the line has been determined. All other considerations on the type of shot to be played must be completed before approaching the mat.

Try relaxing the next time you are bowling. Ensure that when standing on the mat there is no tenseness in the hands, arms and shoulders and allow this feeling of relaxation to flow throughout the delivery and the follow-through action. It is, perhaps, a good idea - so some people say - to initially grip the bowl firmly to tense the hands and arms and then consciously relax them just before delivery. This routine will help to ensure relaxation. Much of what is done in the act of bowling is instinctive - "automatic functioning". But tension makes us feel we need to be more mindful of our delivery movements and we resort to "manual". In this mode we require to think more about our delivery movements. Instinctive reactions work much better and quicker than those where thought has to be given to the movement required. It is important, therefore, to have the method of delivery so firmly implanted that even under pressure it

operates instinctively, and the simpler the movement the more easily this can be achieved.

Changes in form affect every player – some to a greater extent than others particularly as age progresses. During “off” spells we feel a need to concentrate on too many things to see where we are going wrong. As a result, the harder we try the worse we get. Our “self-critic” looms and glowers over our shoulder to gloat upon our bumbles and misfortunes and often by itself brings about defeat. During our very best spells we perform instinctively. Most things go right without thinking too much and we feel inspired . . . and

Inspiration is creative and kind but in choosing companions it is cautious. It never visits a vacant mind and shuns the over-anxious. It befriends us only when our thoughts are calmly concentrated On a single plan we have in hand then skills are near perfected

So get with it and get the right vibes going!

CHAPTER 5

TACTICS

Tactics are procedures thought out and put into effect to achieve an objective. They are the application of common sense to the circumstances that are prevalent during a competition in an endeavour to achieve the best results.

The aim in bowls is to score more shots than the opposition. Therefore, the criterion in implementing tactics must be associated with either gaining shots or reducing the chance of losing shots. The circumstances where the use of tactics is required are too numerous to mention. Much will depend on the type of play the opposition adopts. However, if you are scoring less than the opposition it is a good idea, if the chance arises, to change the game unless it is by sheer luck your opponent is winning. Changing the length of the jack, or moving the mat up the green to find a different line and lessen the strength of deliveries required, may suit you better than the opposition.

Make the best of your strong points and take advantage of any weaknesses you see in your opposition. It is also worth studying the type of shots your opposition prefers and try to anticipate their reaction to the position of the bowls in the head.

If you are holding shot/shots with you having the last bowl to play don't necessarily be satisfied with that: try hard to add another one unless the head is so situated it would be dangerous to attempt. Often when the head is already won less care is taken with the last bowl to be played.

CHAPTER 6

PRACTICE AND EXPERIENCE

“Practice makes perfect” – Who said that? Seemingly the saying goes back to the sixteenth century but there is doubt about who first said it.

A famous golfer once said “The more I practise the luckier I get”

All this sounds fine and would apply if practice consisted entirely of making the movement technique better. However, in bowls the main aim in practising is most often seen as merely trying to get near the jack without giving any consideration to the movement involved in delivery.

If there is deterioration in standard of play over a period of time then practice should be trying out different movements and assessing what action in delivery gives the best results. This takes up considerable time and effort. However, there is sometimes a misbelief that repeating the usual delivery over and over again will lead to improvement. Doing so will merely reinforce the fault that may be the cause of the problem.

The modern theory of “muscle memory”, if done properly, is implanting in the brain by repetition and practice a movement which results in better performance and becomes virtually instinctive. If, however, it is not done in the right manner it merely underpins faults that exist and makes correction more difficult. In many sports coaches or instructors play an important part in improving performance.

If the bowler is happy with performance and getting good results then practising may help to improve play and imprint more deeply the action that is proving successful. But if the reason for practising is to try and improve performance then more thought should be devoted to the method of delivery. I have said enough about this earlier.

It is considered that experience should play a large part in how a player performs. It is the belief that experience comes about by the number of times the job, or whatever, is repeated or by the length of time doing it over the years. I am of the opinion experience is entirely what is actually learned, whether over a long period or a short one. Just think how quickly the younger generation learn the new communication technologies and become so adept at using them. Experience is a learning process and some people can become quite expert in a short time; others take longer.

TRICKY RINK

*When bowling on a tricky rink
That makes us groan and think,
And wonder how in heaven's name
We'll find a road to win the game.*

*It surely is the Devil's curse
That tries us hard yet makes us worse
Whate're we do to make things better,
Some help, I hope, is in this letter.*

*To play with skill we seek so much
We utilise our sight and touch,
But these two senses get confused
Save one by one are orderly used.*

*Eyes lit full-beam on line intent
Dazzle the mind for touch, scent and sound,
Unless, perchance, a lady skip comes near
To whisper tactics in one's ear.*

*But rinks with tricks are quite abusive,
Frustrating those chasers of lines elusive,
Like rabbits, each caged in a separate hutch:
Besotted by sight; bereft of touch.*

*Now here's my tip – don't leave it late,
Use logical sequence to concentrate.
Step out from the mat on the road aligned,
Then laden your mind so it's weight-inclined.*

*Seize sight a slim-line breakfast snack,
Deft touch, well lunched, will find the jack,
And you'll feast forever on the best bowls' diet.
(Well – now I've told you, I'd better try it!)*

John Summers.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I would like to express my thanks and acknowledge the help received from Charles Husband OBE and Bill Stark, both very active members of Balerno Bowling Club, for the encouragement shown to me which has resulted in this production. They have been particularly helpful and patient in proof-reading and very skilfully, with a good deal of hard work, formatting my writings to suit them being put in a booklet form. It has been prepared and designed in a way beyond my expectations when writing it, and I hope what I have written justifies the work they have put in.

John Summers