

## Skip skills: A View

Below is Danny's email content followed by various squad members' reactions to his point, then, my take/input on all the views.

### Danny initial email 2021

Hi Everyone.

As always, after every pennant game, I reflect upon my teams and my own performance, what we do well and what we need to do differently. I have been skipping this season and despite having taken over a slightly underperforming rink of players mid-season, and not bowling all that well myself (13/42 and 10/42 in the past two games), the rink I have played in has won every game.

The team has not won every game unfortunately (but that's not what we are exploring here).

With the new lockdown upon us I thought it was an opportune time to try and understand what it is we are doing that allows my rink to not only win but, more importantly, make a contribution to our teams overall result.

As my approach for the year, and all other years, is to build strong, proactive teams who are committed to a common goal. I have found it a bit difficult to focus on individual performance and the impact that may have on the overall result. But I think this is an exercise worth pursuing as what we are seeing goes completely against the common practice of having the strongest player as skip, the second best player as third, and so on.

This week I had the opportunity to sit with one of the rinks who (despite being good individual players) had been struggling a bit over the past few games. In particular we spoke about and demonstrated shot selection, building heads, attack or defend, big board or rink score (CDs with sticky tape on the back stuck to a window in the clubrooms become very good shot selection tools).

The one thing that became obvious to me was the players' focus on getting shot; some awareness of the risk, some awareness of the big board, but mainly just focussing on the result. No fault of their own, it's what they have been surrounded by for their whole career.

## Skip skills: a view

Recently I had the opportunity to chat with an international snooker player. I asked him how many balls a head does he see each shot. As a beginner the only shot I'm thinking about is how to get the closest ball into the pocket. As an elite sports person (every time he steps up) he is thinking about clearing the table.

I know when I stand at a head I see value and danger with every bowl. Value in our bowls, danger in theirs (except when our two lead bowls are behind and our opponents lead bowls are short. I then start thinking about how to pick up a multiple as we are now playing our eight bowls against their six). Every bowl provides me with a chance to re-evaluate the best possible outcome for my team. An opposition front toucher when we only have one bowl in the head and no back bowls tell me the best outcome is a close second. When the opposition only has one bowl in the head then we have an opportunity to pick up a number (1 in 8 on a quick green, 1 in 4 on a slow green).

So, just like our snooker player, is one of the things that makes one skip different to another is how many bowls ahead they are thinking? And their ability to evaluate risk vs reward. And if so, how do we go about teaching that to our players? Excited to hear your thoughts.

Danny Simmons

**Simon 2021**

Hi Danny:

One of our skips (premier league and former state player, UBC etc.) had a session on reading heads and was assisted by another skip (although this year he has elected to play three to mentor a younger skip...even though he is only 25 himself).

They worked through four head set ups in the scenario. You are the skip and this is the head with your last two bowls. Allowing us to have input into shot selection why etc., which could then be discussed and batted around for input. They actually used actual heads from recent games as examples.

The outstanding take away point for me is it is about risk evaluation and playing the percentages.

## Skip skills: a view

Much like any professional it is about eliminating the bad shots / outcomes and increasing your chance of good outcomes. Seizing the chance to attack when you can, but also knowing when it isn't the best option. And realising it is about building heads and creating options not about trying to get shot all the time.

One other point raised was when an opposition lead puts one right on the jack with his first bowl. They said so often the lead will try and 'chase' that bowl and sit it out or move it. But doing this will rarely ever fatten the target for the coming players and will usually lead to a long bowl not in the head. The smarter play, the percentage play, is to just get one or two close so the target goes from one bowl wide to maybe one foot wide due to other bowls now in the head. I guess this is just like your snooker player thinking shots ahead rather than simply the bowl in hand.

Cheers

Simon

### **Gavin from WA 2021**

Interesting discussion. For mine it's not whether you get 10 or 20 out of 42 as a skip, but when you get the 10 or 20 out of 42. For me the skip is really important in terms of can you cut the numbers down if they have an attacking lead or spot and can you take advantage of a conversion when required. How many shots did you add or save? The rest of the time it is about, as Simon said, reading the percentages and inspiring your team to play their best and sticking to the plan and adjusting where needed.

Gav

### **Ken 2021**

Hi:

Every player in the team needs to understand and own the role they play. This is the same for pairs, triples or fours.

As for the person playing last (skip), they are key to communicating the situation and understanding the risk and reward plays.

I agree with the snooker comment, when I played comp pool (right balls for those outside Aus) many years ago, the key thing it not the shot you are playing or even the next shot, you need to be thinking 3 shots ahead as

## Skip skills: a view

you need to place the white ball in the correct spot to have the ability to finish the game, but you don't want to leave your opposition an easy shot that will allow them to finish first.

AbBowls head is like a pool table, you need to know the risk and rewards of each shot.

The knowledge I have learned from this group helped me recently when I played skip.

We set a front end plan and everyone in the team knew their role. We played each game in 5 sections, 6,6,3,3,3 with objectives for each and after each game we would do a rink debrief.

I found the team was open and honest in the debrief, but the key comment (mainly front end) is they felt part of the team and enjoyed the game.

During one game, the front end noticed that a few players on the other side were struggling with stepping off the green. So we changed our mat plan and moved the mat to the tee and bowled short. This small change put the opposition off and we won the next few ends. As skip and standing at the head, I may have missed this if we did not communicate within the team.  
Cheers

### **Gavin from Victoria 2021**

Hi all:

Love Danny's analogy with snooker and pocketing the next ball (getting shot) as opposed to clearing the table (building the head).

Deno's comments about the Front End "landing the mat" rather than necessarily getting shot also rings true.

Since our club introduced recording, whether the Front End Game Plan is achieved or not, there is less emphasis on "getting shot". Rather, players know their role, play their role and gain satisfaction from delivering their role. I've also found that, as a Skip, my role is more of encouragement and acknowledgement because the Lead knows exactly what to do .

Likewise the Second.

It has also diminished the urge to "have a ping" at the opponent's resting toucher! A Lead / Second who gets a close 2nd (& 3rd), widens the head and provides insurance enables the Second / Third to play into the head. And understanding that going down one shot is not a tragedy! Trying to pick off the shot bowl and continually missing (1 in 8 chance says Danny)

## Skip skills: a view

and going down a fistful of shots is a disaster (which should've been avoided!)

The Front End now see themselves as vital to the outcome of the End because they realise how important their four bowls are in building the head. After they've bowled, the Lead and Second discuss whether they achieved the Game Plan and record accordingly. In Division 1, the benchmark is 15/21 Ends. A few weeks ago our Front End was on fire and achieved the Game Plan on all 21 Ends so we won by heaps! Last week it was only 11/21 - and we lost!

On a different matter, recently one of our rinks had a really bad loss by over 30 shots. By their own admission, they didn't play to capacity, plus the opposition had a "day out".

After the game, upon reflection, they realised they had a Plan B, but this was dependent on them winning the mat - which they couldn't do!

As a team we pondered this dilemma at training this week knowing that it could / does happen to any rink. We want to be prepared with a Plan C!

The main tactic put forward was to "slow the game down." Other suggestions included the Lead changing hands and the Second / Third playing more aggressively.

Also when should the Skip / Rink identify alarm bells? After losing three ends in a row, four ends out of five etc?

An interesting question to pose to you reading this.

Cheers, Gavin

### **Robbie 2021**

Hi All:

Great comments from everyone. Really enjoying the topic.

The question I have is - as a club coach how would you conduct coaching for this that engages your players?

Sime's example of his bowls club workshop with skips is fantastic, however I've run coaching at multiple clubs before on this subject and feedback is varied. Where I have an engaged audience feedback has been positive, but when conducting this on a regular team training night feedback from players has been "not playing enough bowls" and "too much talk".

**Skip skills: a view**

While I could go on about the practice habits of club bowlers I'd instead like to challenge our group and ask a question:

How could you run a coaching session that focuses on building a head, shot selection etc., etc. that still has participants "playing enough bowls"?

Cheers,  
Robbie

**Dave 2021**

Hi all;

One basic exercise is what I call "The Value of Bowls" - you play 6-8 ends during which the leads, seconds and thirds have 3 bowls and the skip has 2 [ two teams].

When the leads have played their 3 bowls each, the team as a whole have to decide which bowl they should remove and nominate that bowl to a mediator equally the opposition does the same. The discussion needs to be about why that bowl is of less value to the team.

The same process occurs with the seconds and the thirds. The objective is to give all players, but particularly the front end, an understanding of the value of the bowls they are putting down.

Cheers

David

**Simon 2021**

Hi Robbie:

The first thought that came to me based on your concerns would be to simulate the head and ask for options as to how to play from the assembled.

Then have them have to go and play the suggested shots while the others watch.

I see that achieving the goal of engaging them by playing bowls, but also having the others watching similarly engaged and no doubt with some heckling and jeering of the mate playing the shot.

An additive to this is it puts further perceived pressure on the shot maker, which is a good thing for practice purposes.

I think the ability to be a peanut gallery watching others will negate the concern about not bowling enough bowls, but you might need to be

**Skip skills: a view**

cautious about numbers. Maybe limit to four people so each does get a go within reasonable turnaround time.

Or alternately have one play the other with the simulated head as another idea. Feeds the competitive desire.

Cheers

Sime

**Danny replies 2021**

Hi all:

Good input everyone, and obviously a very passionate subject for some (Deno!!!)

In response to Gavin's question about how to implement your plan when you don't own the mat. My rink includes this scenario as part of its plan.

After three ends we kick into action, attacking early worked for us three weeks back, changing the leads hand worked just last week. The good part is the team knows it's coming and therefore no surprise and have trained for it on Thursday night.

For Rob's question on training club bowlers.

Sometimes this can be our biggest challenge of all; how do we get players to do stuff they don't really want to do and make themselves feel good about it at the end?

On the green its needs to be part of a competition, if the lead and second get two in the head and one behind the team automatically gets two extra shots, dropping a two automatically doubles to dropping a four, a \$1 scratchy for the first front end to achieve the front end game plan, dropping short with your first bowl means your team gets to play with one less bowl the next end.

Head building exercises that include lots of discussion works really well on a very hot day. Too hot to play, everyone inside, get yourself a drink, CDs and a plastic yellow disc with sticky tape on the back can be stuck to the club house window to simulate bowls and jack. I have found that simply telling the players that this week we are going to be measuring something in particular changes their focus during the game; we were dropping too many threes, let's measure and report on it, the next week the number of losing multiples dropped from 13 to 5.

Keep the thoughts going

**Skip skills: a view**

Danny

**Graham 2021**

I am sure you have tried the following .... we continue to find it worthwhile.

In preparation for our NZ national intercentre event in March we prepare as below when the focus is on building a head , developing a game plan and ensuring our players get to play in challenging scenarios with every bowl.

We have seven players , 1 x singles ,1 x pairs ,1 x fours in an intercentre team.

We have three selectors, one of which is a head coach and two assistants.

As a coach I play my bowls by positioning / placing them on the head while our team plays their bowls.

I have the teams skip at my end on the head exactly as in a game and they call the shots based on the way the head is built.

If it's pairs, I play six bowls / fours eight bowls etc.

We have a coach with each of the singles players, and one each with the pairs and fours squads (we have a head coach and two assistants for our team of seven).

Discussions are held with every bowl as the coaches try scenarios all the time that test our players with every shot and build heads that might require a conversion, kill, draw, save or add.

It also gives coaches an opportunity to ensure the players individual work ons are challenged in a game format as each of our squad has at least one shot that continually needs to be sharpened in a game situation.

We find this worthwhile and the players love it.

Finally, I seldom lose a game!

It's not rocket science, but it is effective.

As a coaching unit we plan the scenarios in advance of the training session and then monitor the outcomes.

Cheers

**Lach reacting 16/2/2022**

My input to what I read and think needs happen further:

## **Skip skills: a view**

First I am going to refer you to a great powerpoint effort done by Lloyd & Max, maybe 2019, which I hope to be able to get up on the website as it is the genesis of a description of a truly good skip. But we know that stuff. As do many others out there in bowls.

What we need to see in the sport of bowls is practical training in skipping and tactical awareness.

Of the 41 of us in this squad we have about 20 head / club coaches and you should be at the forefront of such training for the rest of the sport to view role model coaches.

We have numerous champions at all levels from club to international among us in the squad as well and with all your knowledge, skill and experience you also can and should be guiding more bowlers toward a better approach to skipping and use of tactics.

With so few reactions from within the squad on this valid topic from Danny for the development of our sport which, if we are seeing ourselves as a different / unique / pace setting, allows us to set a path for others in bowls. How about more of you act out the words of no limits and allow yourselves the confidence to express views from which we can all benefit.

I leave that challenge with you colleagues.

Now me reacting to comments from above:

### 1. Danny

Jim Yates was a dual world champion and later state men's bowls coach. He used to say to me there is no value getting the shot too early and he lamented the state players approach to always be chasing shot - too much male ego, too little game plan if there was one.

The pool player reinforces what we can learn from others in elite sport, but like Alison saying she now plays chess on the bowls green; your perfect head concept, which we know is on YouTube, is as good a session to have players made aware of setting out the plan with the 8 deliveries; we can guide and inform players about how to think only of course if they are willing and that is your drawback at club level, anywhere.

And I LOVE your use of the word 'excited' to hear the thoughts of fellow squad members.

Wonder if some lack excitement !!!

### 2. Sime

## Skip skills: a view

A few comments - widen the head was a skill in my early version of a technical skill audit table for you all and only this year have I foregone it though any of you can simulate a head so as to practice widening a head as a tool

One problem with leads is their own mindset of wanting to hold shot (and a selection anxiety to boot).

Question their ego, their nous about team sport and your role and even the skip reaction to them not then getting shot.

Again citing Ali, she sees bowls competition more now as a chess game and that all comes back to the game plan.

### 3. Deno

As always I endorse your, land the mat, concept and application.

What I pose to you and every squad member is to detail, and train, the strategy for the back end, their game plan.

Are all front end deliveries “live” for us to have a full spectrum of options with deliveries 5.6.7.8.

can we attack now or defend our position;

Do we have to secure bowls in the head and behind with remaining deliveries

Is there an opportunity to disrupt opposition getting access for shot.

Is our fallback position second shot and do we start seeking that from delivery 5.

Are we in need of two bowls in the head and again use of deliveries 5.6.7.8 for that.

Front ends win games, back ends determine by how much and we need to explore back end game plans as a squad, with input on this from others, too.

### 4 . Ken

Again endorse that mantra of know your role (in the team); and again that pool analogy be aware of what’s going on beyond your own two deliveries

That anecdote about the exchange among the players and you as skip was a ripper; too many skips walk right past their team often in a gruff mood besotted by their own delivery not anything else.

The very best skip I have encountered in all my years in bowls was the Malaysian fours skip for the 2002 Games as he was nigh on the perfect

**Skip skills: a view**

model of who and what is a skip. He led, he planned, he trained, he embraced, he cajoled, he confronted without being nasty, he rejoiced and he laughed and still he is my best model.

5. Gavin from Victoria

Laugh at this one - plan A yuk, plan B yuk, plan C help!!!!!!! might have been the call.

At this stage or even during plan B one two three or even four players have to change and that means a skip realizing what we are doing (unsuccessfully) which implies a game plan as the base to compare with and objectives for each player.

Gav asked the question about when do alarm bells ring. I think if we lose consecutive ends by large amounts that is the time in that situation. Otherwise use the rink meeting, which we scheduled as either every 3 or 4 or 5 ends to quickly rejig the strategy as the score is an outcome of the application of the strategy.

6. Robbie

Over these past 18 months I have circulated about +20 training programs (go and check your files for fodder) and within you could set up heads to have players attempt and discuss as part of your evening club training. The big difficulty is that players all want games. You as a head coach have to insert fun and skill into the session to enable them to remain interested

7. Dave

And his 'value of bowls' training session.

I found this example of training interesting and familiar as we did something like it at MCC a few years back.

I encourage all of us to have a go at Dave's suggestion and see the variety it gives to your session(s).

Now can I modify Dave's contributions with 3 variations.

At the front end, lead & second deliver their 3 bowls and the team decide which delivery of the lead and of the second are removed and then have the third and skip play their 2 deliveries.

B. As above now the third can have 3 deliveries and the team agree which is to be removed and then skip deliveries their two.

**Skip skills: a view**

C front end deliver their 2 bowls each with third now delivering 3 and one can be removed after the team talk. Skip only has the 2 as usual. All worth a try and see if they are practicable / useful. If not, discard.

8. Graham

Head simulations as Graham says are imperative in any training you are conducting as head coach at your club, and more so at elite level bowls sessions.

Again refer to my numerous diagrams and see how I suggest you see a head a variety of ways and attempt deliveries accordingly.

Now .....

As a fraternity we bowlers pick up our knowledge of bowls by playing, and observing good, experienced players and usually that is limited to our club environment in our formative year(s).

But what are we observing?

With regards to skipping 4s teams, the player in that role must have a kitbag of skills to include technical competence, tactical nous, people management and communication skills.

Too often the skip has an abundance of the technical stuff, a reasonable amount of the tactical, some degree of people management, and for some skips a limited grasp on communication skill.

The medium is the message.

The message comes via body and verbal language.

What if there are conflicting messages?

Most Skips do not prepare their team to play to a plan.

They get to Skip simply because they push for it as that role, of the four team positions available, has them continuously involved in the game.

It is about time our sport elevated the skills of skips, certainly at a higher level of competition.

Thanks everyone

**Lachlan Tighe, 17/2/2022**