

A Curling Primer – thoughts and musings about the Roaring Game!

If you don't watch curling, then you're making a huge mistake, because curling is the best sport ever invented. No, really.

Curling is simple to learn, yet intricate. It takes very little athleticism except a deft touch, strong vocal cords, and maid-like sweeping ability.

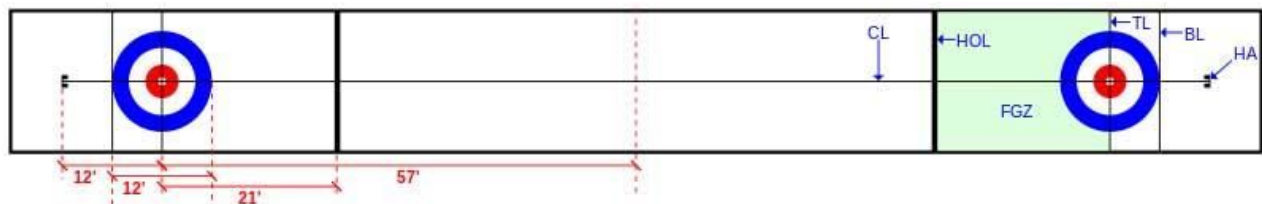
It's incredibly easy to imagine yourself being the best curler in the world while marveling at a perfectly executed raise-takeout. Most of all, there is little need for officials or umpires of any kind, a glorious and welcome respite from pretty much every other major sport, and it's not decided by judges, even at the Olympics.

If you haven't watched curling recently (or at all!), here's a quick refresher on how the game works, some basic strategies, and the lingo so you can sound like an expert, right away.

How It Looks

Curling has an insane amount of jargon, which is part of the reason why it's so awesome. Here come the basics, in context, hoping you will understand it.

Here's what a curling playing surface (called a sheet) looks like:



A curling sheet, via [Wikimedia Commons](#)

Teams are made up of four players. Each team alternates sliding 42-pound stones (also called rocks because they're made of granite) from one end of the sheet to the other, both shooting in the same direction.

The thing that looks like a dart board is called the "house" and the bullseye is the "button" (this game is so delightfully homey and non-threatening; the whole premise of the sport is sliding stones slowly). There are a bunch of lines to keep things organized. The line that runs down the center of the sheet from one end to the other is reasonably called the centre line (CL above). A stone must stop between the hog line (HOL – 21 feet in front of the centre of the house) and the back line (BL – you got this one) to remain in play. The tee line (TL) runs through the button perpendicular to the centre line. I imagined it was given this name because it makes a "T" with the centre line. That might not be true, but it makes sense. Oh, and each turn is called an "end".

The last technical thing you need to know is the free guard zone (FGZ). On the image above, this is the green-ish highlighted area from the hog line to the teeline, but doesn't include the house. This zone exists because the first four rocks thrown (the term is "thrown" even though nobody throws 42 pound stones at each other) cannot be removed from the free guard zone. If they are hit, the rock is replaced and the shot doesn't count, with no re-do.

How Scoring Works

There are 10 ends, which are like innings, where each team alternates throwing eight stones each. The object of this game is to have the closest stones to the button when an end finishes.

Scoring is very simple, even though it may sound a bit convoluted at first. You get a point for each stone closer to the button than any of the other team's stones. Only stones inside the house count. So if the Red team has two stones closer to the button than Yellow team's closest stone, Red scores two points. Some basic logic that follows from this: only one team can score per end, and if neither team has a stone in the house, neither team gets points in what is called a blank end.

Strategy

There are three main types of shots: guards, draws and takeouts. Guards block the house. Draws are designed to get around the guards and land in the house. Draws will often have really nifty curls, leading you to believe your high school physics teacher lied. Takeouts are hard shots that knock other stones out of play. There are a litany of terms for good throws that accomplish several things at once, such as: double roll-in split, double takeout, draw raise, raise takeout, etc. Just know that Olympic curlers are masters at using stones like billiard balls – the rest of us do our best to deliver what the skip calls.

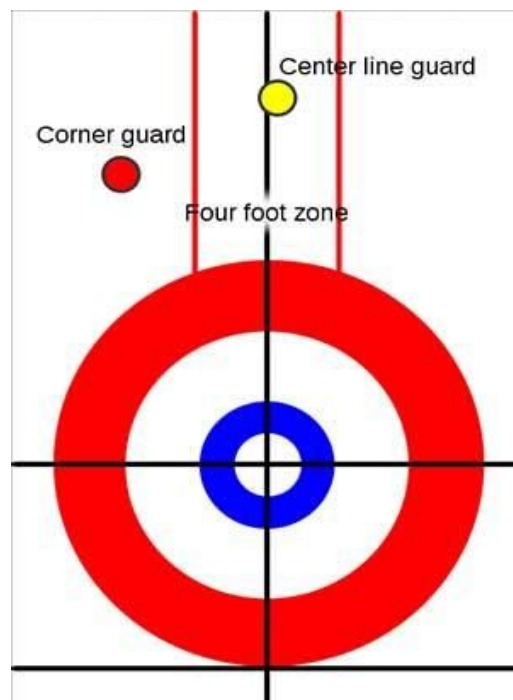
Many tutorials describe curling as a "game of strategy, tactics and skill". Strategy is curling's most interesting element. Teams have to plot how to get their stones into the house while still maintaining guards to prevent the other team from executing a takeout easily or shoot their stone even closer to the button. Tactics is what you do to respond to what the other team does. And skill is, well, what you're always trying to improve.

Because you're super-observant, you're probably thinking that the last shot of each end is incredibly valuable. You're right! That's why the last shot of each end is called the hammer, easily the most violent term used in curling. To keep things fair, the previous end's loser gets the hammer for the next end.

Although this isn't a perfect analogy, the team with the hammer is like the team in football with possession. In curling, either team can score (there are no interceptions in curling), but it's far more likely the team with the hammer will, mainly because they throw the last rock. They'll adjust their strategy by playing more aggressively, generally trying to keep the four-foot zone free (shown at right), shoot lots of draws towards the button, and/or set up corner guards so they have a way to get their last stone into the house with the hammer.

When a team has the hammer, they generally try to score more than one point. If it looks like they might only gain one point, they will often try to "blank the end" by ensuring no stones are in the house at the end of the end. This way, nobody gets any points and they retain the hammer and can try again the following end.

Most people think of curling as the sport with sweeping. Indeed, it is a unique experience to hear a skip shout instructions at sweepers 100-odd feet away in a perfectly quiet arena, but the strategy of sweeping is fairly obvious. The sweepers allow teams to have some influence over a stone's movement after the delivery, pulling the stone farther down the ice, and



changing its “curl” – the shape of the curve it is following. But suffice it to say, if the stone has too much weight, sweeping can't slow it down.

Although there's a lot more to learn, the most intriguing part of curling is how varied the strategies can be. There's rarely a "right" thing to do and ends evolve very differently. Some ends will be takeout after takeout, others will involve a crowded house with several guards, requiring elaborate draws or take outs.

Ultimately, curling is a game about the flawless execution of a plan. As far as sports go, there isn't a whole lot of room for luck.