

So You Want To Be A Curler.

Well, you've made a good choice. Curling is a sport that you can enjoy right through to old age, without the injury rate of that *other* Canadian winter pastime. Plus, many "professional" curlers play for prize money rather than salaries, so there's virtually no chance of a players strike.

What to bring

This is perhaps the most important section, so it's bumped up front, as the rest of this stuff can be drummed into your head in person if you stop reading here.

- **Clean shoes.** The cleanliness of the shoes cannot be stressed enough – the ice surface should be pristine, as even minor defects can affect a rock's trajectory. No dirt or salt should be dragged on by your shoes. Assuming that a dedicated pair of curling shoes is out of the question, then a brand new pair of sneakers is probably the next best solution. If you have indoor gym shoes, they're probably fine (though checking and wiping off the bottoms with a soapy towel ahead of time might not hurt). If you're planning on buying a new pair of running shoes in the near future, why not get them now and have your curling day be their first use? You can put them into rotation when the spring thaw hits and the curling season ends. Another option is to throw an old pair into the wash. Remember that the shoes should be clean on the top as well as the bottom, and avoid boots or hiking shoes that have metal hooks for lacing – when you slide out and point your toe, the top of your shoe drags on the ice, and those metal hooks can dig serious trenches.
- **Winter woollies.** Curling is played on ice. Ice is cold. It is in an arena, so there's no wind and most people don't find it too bad, but a sweater is definitely advised, as well as a pair of gloves with good grip and a hat. A pocket pack of Kleenex helps too.
- **That's it.** The rest of the equipment (sliders, brooms, rocks, ice) will be provided.

So, curling is supposed to be fun; really, it is. Ideally, everyone should have some basic idea of how to play when we get there so we can play an actual game, rather than having a crazy practice session with people falling all over each other. This guide has been written with the goal of giving you that basic knowledge. If at any point reading this seems like work, feel free to stop and leave it be, as long as you know about the clean shoes – and understand that while everyone who did read it is working on the finer aspects of their technique and trying to play a game, you'll still be asking which foot your slider goes on (or, worse yet, what your slider is...).

The Point of the Game

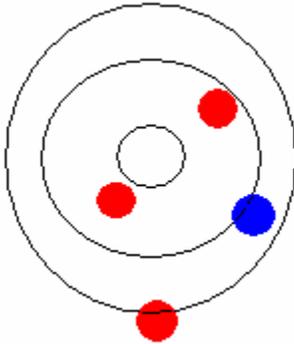
<Scottish>

Aye, curling's a *real* man's sport sonny-jim. You see, you carve yourself out a 44 pound hunk of granite, find a 45 metre long sheet of ice, and hurl that big stone all the way down and have it land within an inch of where you wanted it inside a set of painted rings. Now, tell me, where else will you find a sport that requires such brute strength combined with such exquisite sensitivity that just the act of *sweeping* the ice can drastically change the outcome of a shot?

</Scottish>

So, aside from fun, you want to land your rocks in the house, closer to the centre than the opponent's rocks. You get a point for every rock that's closer than your opponent's closest.

Sounds confusing, so let's go to the visual representation:



Here, red would get two points. They have 3 rocks in the house; however, blue's rock is closer than one of the red ones, nulling it out. And yes, in the real game, the circles are actually circular.

TO&E

Yes, the hated Table of Organization & Equipment. Don't worry, I won't put it in tabular form. Instead, I shall use bullets!

- Every game is divided into ends (usually 6, 8, or 10, depending on how much time you have for a game).
- Every team has 4 players (or, with minor modifications, 3 or 5 can work). They are called the lead, second, vice, and skip. Each team gets 8 rocks, for 16 thrown total in an end.
- Thus, every player throws two rocks. Teams alternate throwers, with whoever winning the last end throwing first (for the first end, a coin toss determines who throws first). Throwing last is more desirable, as all it takes is a single rock closer than all the others to win an end – doing this with the very last rock is easier said than done, please don't do that to your skip.

- So, the order of rocks is blue, red, blue, red, etc. The lead throws the first two rocks for his team, then the second throws the next two rocks, then the vice and finally the skip. (So red's lead, blue's lead, red's lead, blue's lead, red's second, blue's second...)
- One person (the skip) stands at the end of the ice where you are throwing to and directs the shots (more on how this is accomplished later). One person is throwing a rock. The other two serve as sweepers (more on that later as well). When the other team is throwing, all 4 members should stand out of the way (usually the skip off to the back at the end where the rocks are directed, and the other 3 players off to the side closer to where the throwers are).

How to Sweep

While undoubtedly throwing is the harder skill to learn, and perhaps the most fun aspect of curling, the structure of the game is such that you will sweep more than you throw, so it's what you should learn first.

First though, a brief introduction on *why* you sweep:

Why You Sweep

In curling, rocks are thrown (slid, actually) along the ice surface in an attempt to land them in the house. The ice surface is very important for the way the rock moves (hence the clean shoes discussion earlier). The rock is thrown with a bit of a spin (ideally, it will make about 3 full rotations as it goes down the ice), and somehow, the spin makes the rock curl (the physics are still poorly known). All shots follow a curved trajectory – a few people try to throw a straight shot without any spin, and they always find that the rock will then pick up a bit of a random turn and move the one way they didn't want to. Thus, you always put on a spin that you want.

The faster a rock moves, the less it will curl with a given spin.

Sweeping clears dust and hair, etc., out of the way that a rock might "pick" on, and also creates a thin layer of water due to friction. This gives the rock less traction, and it will curl less and travel faster (or rather, slow down less).

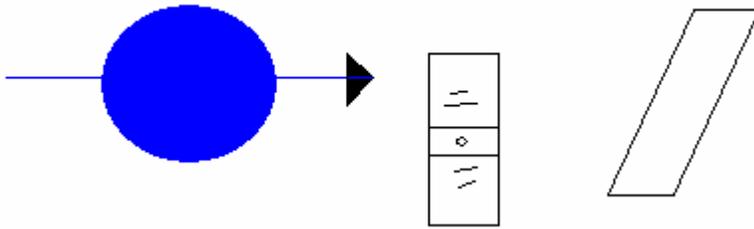
So, if you want a rock to travel further or go straighter, you sweep. Otherwise, you don't. Often, you'll sweep for a little bit and then let the rock do its own thing (this is somewhat ideal, as it lets the sweepers compensate in either direction for the thrower's shot).

But, the main reason you sweep is because *your skip tells you to*. Your skip (should) know how far a rock will move and where he/she wants the rock to end up in the house. If it doesn't look like the rock is on course, he/she may call for a sweep. This is a rather infamous aspect of curling, as the skip wants there to be no missed commands, and will

yell at you to sweep. Sweeping harder (that is, faster and with more weight on the broom) is more effective. The louder the skip yells, the harder you sweep.

How to Sweep (Redux)

When the skip yells, you sweep. To do that, you simply put a bit of weight on the broom (or lots of weight, depending on the relative volume of your skip's voice) and sweep all the way across the face of the rock, perpendicular to its movement. Again, a diagram:



The first swept area is nice and perpendicular, however, it is not fully covering the face of the rock; the sweeper needs to be sweeping a little higher. The second area does cover the full face of the rock, and is acceptable, however, they could cover the same area with shorter strokes if they swept perpendicular (thus allowing them to sweep faster).

For putting weight/pressure on the broom, note that the fabric pad on the brooms you will likely get at Thompson distort/flatten when you lean on them. You should see it distort at least a little bit when you sweep.

The closer to the rock you sweep, the more effective your sweeping will be. However, touching the rock disqualifies it ("burning the rock"), so make sure you leave a bit of room, especially if you don't have your ice legs yet. Since two people will have to coordinate sweeping together, make sure you discuss before hand who will sweep closest to the rock, and who will be further forward. Make sure to leave enough space between each other that a spastic fit of erratic sweeping won't cause the two of you to bump brooms and potentially hit the rock.

Throwing the Rock: Part 1; stick-man callisthenics

Before getting into the technique used for throwing the rock, you must first know where to throw it. Your skip will decide that for you based on their overall strategy for the end (or the whim of whatever twisted poltergeist has possessed them; either way, it's out of your hands). Since the sheet is long, and the rink is echoy and filled with other teams, shouting is not a viable means of communication. Instead, your skip will gesticulate wildly in an attempt to convey the goal of the shot.

In the case of a placed shot, the skip will tap his/her broom on the ice in the place where they want the rock to end up. That gives you an idea of how hard to throw it. The skip

will then place the broom and put up a hand. You aim at the *broom*, not where the skip tapped at first – remember, the rock always curls, so you have to aim to one side or the other of where you actually want things to end up; the skip will make this calculation for you, and that's why the broom won't be exactly where the shot is going. The skip will also hold up a hand to help you remember which way to turn the rock to get it going in the right direction. The way to read this is to turn the front of the handle of the rock towards the skip's outstretched hand, and then as you release the rock, turn the handle back towards the skip's body. This will put the correct spin on the rock.

The other common type of shot is a take-out. In this case, rather than tapping on a place on the ice, the skip will tap the opponent's rock, and then swish their broom backwards or to the side, indicating that the rock that was tapped is to be taken out. Then, just as with the placed shots, the skip will place the broom for you to aim at and give you a hand signal to indicate the turn to use. Remember that you have to throw slightly harder for a takeout (the rock has to get there and have enough momentum left over to kick the other rock out).

Throwing the Rock: Part 2; "Slide"

And so it all boils down to this: Slide.

Oh, and *don't push the rock*.

When the skip plants the broom for you to aim at, actually aim at the broom, right from the hack (the rubber part where you throw out of). Line your knees up with the broom, square your shoulders to it, and keep your eye on the skip.

To slide out, you move backwards just a bit (you may lift the stone up from the ice as you come back, but practically nobody does anymore – the ice is fast enough {that is, offers little enough resistance} that everyone can get sufficient force from a purely sliding throw) – and, while moving backwards, lift your hips and bum up into the air a bit. This is important, because people behind you will want a good look. *No*, sorry, I mean, this is important because all the force will come from that push off with your legs, and lifting your hips puts your muscles in a better position to push with more force, as well as adding to your momentum by sliding down from a higher position. Equally important, it's easier to get your front leg under you if you're starting from a bit higher up.

So, you push off from the hack, and you slide with most of your weight on your slider foot (more on that in a bit). Some of your weight will be on your back foot, and you'll hold your broom in one hand for additional support, but *no weight on the rock*. At some point you'll have to let go of the rock to send it on its merry way without you, and if you're leaning on the rock for support, you have to shift that weight away when you release, or you'll fall. In the process of shifting, you will send the rock off its original course and bung the shot. A good idea is to practice your sliding a few times without a rock before the game begins. This is also a good way to stretch out. In your sliding position, you'll lean forward a bit so that your centre of mass is over your sliding foot,

and your nose will be out in front of your leg, right overtop of the rock. This helps since if the rock is right below your eyes, it's easier to steer it by keeping your eyes locked on the skip's broom.

Right from the push off from the hack, remember to head directly for the skip's broom. You'd be surprised how many new curlers are afraid of heading off to one side or the other, and will just come straight out at the middle every time and try to correct wildly right at the end of the slide for that mistake. Just relax, there are no curling monsters in the uncharted sides of the sheets.

Which brings up another point that bears repeating: don't push the rock. Pushing leads to wild throws that rarely work anyway. If you're too light (that is, the rock doesn't have enough momentum to make it down the sheet) just let go as is and accept the fact that you've wasted a rock. At least you can watch it go and see how the line was – pushing will screw up both the line and the weight. All the force should come from your legs in the initial push-off. The longer you hold on to the rock, the better you can line yourself up with the broom and get a feel for the rock. So, ideally, you would push off a bit harder than you needed to, and hold on to the rock until the weight settled down a bit to where it should be, and release it. All the force comes at the beginning, and you stabilize things from there, with a very gentle release -- remember that when releasing, the turn is a very gentle rotation, just a tweak, really.

Righty or Lefty?

I've mentioned, but not gone into much detail yet, the slider. The slider is a piece of slippery plastic that you, well, slide on. You balance on your slider foot when throwing, and many people keep the slider on for sweeping, as it's easier to just slide along while pushing with one foot, sort of like a mini skateboard.

For right-handers, the slider goes on your left foot, and vice-versa for lefties.

I've literally been yelled at by real curling coaches for this last bit of advice, so feel free to ignore it... when you're just starting curling, you may find it easier to "switch hit". That is, if you're a right-handed person, you might find it easier to put the slider on your right foot. The logic is: your right foot tends to be more dominant, so with the slider on that, you're able to balance on your right foot when throwing. The trade-off is that you have to throw the rock with your left hand, however, that isn't as bad as forcing some people to try to balance on their left foot, since so much of the throw is actually in your whole body (which is balancing on that slider foot), rather than your hands.

Now, if you want to keep curling and get good at it, people suggest that you do it the proper way – your balance will improve on either foot anyway, and then you'll get to use your right hand for throwing, and your stronger right leg for pushing off. In my not-so-humble opinion, some of these reasons are now obsolete (see below), but they are still somewhat valid: you'll probably be a better curling throwing the right way around in the

long run, but there might be a bit of a hurdle right at the beginning as you learn to balance on your off foot.

Some history on the issue: curling used to be a harder game than it is. The “standard” sheet of ice has gotten significantly faster (less resistance) in the last decade or so. Previously, curlers pretty much *had* to lift the rock off the ice and swing it to help get some extra momentum to ensure it got all the way down there (particularly for takeouts). So, it would have also been necessary to use your stronger dominant leg for pushing. This is not the case anymore, and I do not recommend anyone try the old fashioned lift-swing throw (it puts you off balance for a second, leading to a greater chance of falling, and if done poorly can hurt your lower back). I personally suspect that because of the prevalence of lighter ice and the near total dominance of the easier slide-throw, you’ll begin to see a lot more curlers “switch hit” in the future (as I do) – balancing on that dominant leg will probably be more important than pushing with it (though I’m still not sure how important holding the rock with your dominant hand is).

Scoring

Scoring* in curling is very simple and natural. The problem is, baseball uses a similar scoreboard and got it completely back asswards, and it completely messes with the head of whoever tries to learn the curling way afterwards. Read on to find out how to score in curling, or just leave it for the one person on your sheet who already knows to translate for you.

* - by that, I mean recording the score on the scoreboard. I already explained how points are earned, and it has nothing to do with baseball, and is hopefully fairly intuitive.

The scoreboard in curling has points painted on permanently, and little tags for the ends:

Red												
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
Blue												

So, at the beginning of the game, it starts out like that. Let's say that in the first end, red gets 2 points. Then, you put the 1st end tag (a tag with a 1 on it) in red's row, above the marker for 2 points:

Red		1										
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
Blue												

Simple, isn't it? Red has 2 points, Blue has 0, and Red got those points in the first end. Let's say that red got one more point in the 2nd end, and then blue got 1 in the 3rd end:

Red		1	2									
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
Blue	3											

So you can see that red has 3 points (just look for the right-most tag above the points in the middle), and blue has 1. You also see which end the points were earned in, so if we're going into the 4th end, we can see that since blue won the 3rd end, blue will throw first!

Playing out the rest of the 8-end game, tell me how many points each team has here:

Red		1	2		5	7						
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
Blue	3		4	6			8					

...that's right, it's 7 to 6 for blue. Blue scored two points in the 4th end (bringing them to 3 total), but gave up two to red in the 5th (bringing red to 5). Blue then took the 6th for one, and gave up one in the 7th, bringing the score to 6 to 4 in red's favour. However, blue managed to score 3 in the final 8th end, winning the game 7 to 6.

In the event of a blank end (nobody gets any stones in the house), the tags go off to the side, where there are a few hooks without numbers above them for this purpose.

To confuse the issue, let me show you how baseball's scoreboard works (warning, it's backwards, so if you get curling scoring now, stop reading!)

Baseball starts off looking fairly similar:

Home									
Inning	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
Away									

Let's say that in the first two innings, nobody scores a run. Then in the 3rd inning, home scores one run and away scores two. The board would look like:

Home	0	0	1						
Inning	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
Away	0	0	2						

You see how you have to put up a tag every inning for every team, sometimes with the same tag (i.e., you have to put zero up a lot). It's a system that requires having a large cache of tags handy. Curling is simpler – you just have the points across the middle, and you only need as many tags as ends you intend to play.

To be fair though, curling is a game where only one team can win an end, whereas in baseball both teams can score runs every inning.

Advanced Topics

So, having mastered the basics, let's discuss a few advanced curling topics.

First is the "free guard zone." This is a rule that started in Europe, and has only recently become standard in Canada (along the same timeline as the lighter ice I mentioned earlier). Again, some history: in curling, if a rock is unguarded (that is, it is in the house with nothing in front of it), it's a pretty easy shot to hit that rock and knock it out. There was one (in)famous game with Russ Howard (I may get the details wrong since I'm going by memory – Google isn't helping me find the records) in the 80's where after one team scored their points in the first two ends, they proceeded to take out every single opponent's rock (even if it wasn't in the house) and blanked every other end in the game. Needless to say, it made for a boring game, and was a pretty cheesy tactic.

Somewhere in the fog of history, a rule was invented that prevented you from taking out a guard with the first four stones of the game (that is, the lead rocks). It was first accepted by the Europeans, and only grudgingly accepted here in Canada (and then only because it was putting our players at a disadvantage in international tournaments, having to play by different sets of rules for the provincial playoff rounds and the international finals). But it's here to stay now, so best learn it. If you do knock a guard out of place with the first four stones of the game, then your rock is removed from play, and the rocks are put back to their original positions. Note that you can still take stones out of the house, and you can move stones around the free guard zone, just not out of play (leading to the famous two-stone takeout: you raise a guard into the house, and then hit it a second time for the takeout).

This helps prevent the takeout game described earlier because while it's possible to have a stone curl completely behind a previously placed guard, it's nigh impossible to have a stone thrown with enough weight for a takeout do the same thing (remember, rocks curl more when they move slower, and takeouts are necessarily fast). So if you're allowed to keep your first few guards, you have a chance to place a rock in the house that's protected.

The next advanced topic is courtesy. While there are more basic forms of courtesy (not standing in the middle of the sheet and blocking the view of the team trying to throw – including your own, sweepers! – not yelling "hurry hard" completely at random), it's also accepted courtesy to queue up your opponents rock when you're shooting. That is, you bring the next rock to be thrown (your opponent's) closer to the hack to make it easier for them next shot. They'll do the same for you. It's not actually a labour-saving measure, since you'll still have to move *a* rock to the hack, it's just that you'll move theirs, so it's nice.

Finally, we come to the role of the skip. The skip has to plan out the strategy for the end. Often, strategy is reactionary (adapting to whatever your lead happens to throw, as well as what the other team does). You have to decide between calling a takeout, or trying to outdraw your opponent, whether to put up a guard or go for another point, or whether to

draw first then guard, or the other way around. Drawing first is risky since it gives the other team a shot at a takeout, but drawing second is a harder shot for your teammates. Whether or not to call a sweep is also a tricky subject. Unfortunately, most of these can only be learned through experience, particularly how to read the ice to call a sweep before it's too late (and as my team will tell you, I'm still not very good at it).

Being vice is a good way to learn, since when it's the skip's turn to throw, the vice will hold the broom for the skip, and will have an opportunity to discuss strategy with the skip for those crucial last two shots. Note that the whole team can discuss a shot at any point in the game, but that doing so regularly will really slow the game down – for the most part, you should trust your skip to make snap decisions on their own.

Good Curling!

Well, that's about all I have to say. This guide is rather long, but hopefully it is somewhat exhaustive. With this guide and a match on the TV (so that you can *see* what's going on and what your form should look like when sliding) you should be able to learn just about everything you need to for a game of curling in advance, letting you get right into the swing of things when you get to the arena. From reading and seeing what's involved, you should also have an idea of which muscles to stretch out (primarily your legs: front, back, and especially the stretch in your groin; and your obliques for sweeping).

If you made it all the way to the end here, then presumably you're really excited about curling, and I hope you have a lot of fun at it!

And don't forget your clean shoes.