

# The Vice-Skip

Part 1

Tony Allcock has been asked to write about the third position in a rink – a role requiring a lot more than would first appear.

**TONY ALLCOCK**  
From the 18 Times  
World Champion



**T**EAM GAMES are the most common form of bowls, with fours play being the most popular, possibly due to the pressure on green availability, but it can be said that in club play it is so naturally suited to the convivial atmosphere of a club; it fulfils the need for social interaction and provides a competitive edge.

## THE NUMBER THREE

Whilst much has been written about the specific roles of the lead and skip, it is often taken for granted that the other two positions, although equally contributory, are not so clearly identified for the purpose of having a specific role, other than that described in the Laws of the Sport.

I suppose we all know the fundamental role of a third player is to deliver the fifth and sixth bowls and to measure. However, the role of the third player is far more demanding than this and can be key to success in a rink, not just from a technical point of view but from a psychological one also.

## THE VICE-SKIP

When playing bowls in Canada and in the sport of curling, the third player is referred to as the vice-skip. This is a lovely title which gives another dimension to this position in the rink. It adequately describes what is, in essence, a 'hidden duty' of the third player but can also contribute to a disastrous outcome! The number three is the skip's right-hand man or woman, and should also be the watchman, utilising all senses to gather anything which may then be communicated to the skip. In that respect the role does need to be the strong communication channel between the remainder of the players and the skip. In many ways the three is the 'filter', who will disregard or regard certain signs appropriately in the interests of the whole team. Naturally, from a technical point of view, the third player should have a fair ability to execute all the required shots but there is, no doubt, a little more to this than would appear at face value. I would categorically say **that in selecting a third player for any rink, the compatibility between the skip and number three in respect of skill base and character must be considered as equally important.**

## DUTIES OF THE THIRD

Fundamental duties are to direct the head and to take charge in the skip's absence and it is 'expected' that he/she will measure the shots and agree with the other third. Interestingly, it is an unwritten rule that the person claiming shots will request that the opposing third concedes them. When a number of shots are involved it is good practice to put a duster down on the rink upon which to place the declared shots. This helps to avoid any misunderstanding about the count. Many disputes have been caused through the inability to count correctly amongst the excitement or dismay of deciding the total number of shots!

## RELATIONSHIP WITH THE SKIP

The third player must have faith and respect in the skip's judgement whilst also resisting the temptation just to conform to what the skip stipulates. The third player needs to do this but with a delicate air of caution for too much interaction may just be perceived as an interference which could in some instances lead to confrontation – something which must be avoided at all costs during a very competitive match!

The relationship with a skip must be based on honesty and this is something which will, at times, present a great challenge and sometimes it may be best not to give an opinion. It is true to say that an 'indifferent' relationship between the third player and skip is just the ingredient for total failure. We have often heard club members say 'I just cannot play with Sid but I love his company at the bar'. We have all witnessed that players 'change' on the green – some for the better and some for the worse. From my own perspective I certainly did and my passionate desire to win was not necessarily popular in domestic matches where part of the emphasis was on social enjoyment. The number three must respect the skip, and vice-versa – advice and suggestions and the communication of tactical strategy (and the implementation of the same) must be respected by the skip.

## SKIP HAS FINAL SAY

It has to be remembered that whilst such interaction should take place **the base line is that the skip must retain overall responsibility.** However, the third player must be mindful that if the skip is ultimately the decision maker then he/she must think very carefully when any intervention is considered during the decision making

process. It is a delicate time and if handled inappropriately can be the core reason for failure.

A simple case study here illustrates a skip that elects to play the draw shot with his last bowl to save a head, with the opposition holding six shots. The third believes that the shot is to play weight and to attempt to 'scatter' the fairly wide head in order to at least reduce the count and at best to get the shot. This is at a crucial time and the third player needs to ask him/herself:

- 1) Should I, on behalf of the rink suggest the alternative?
- 2) If so, how strongly?
- 3) Should the third player reveal any information filtered down from the other two players in the rink or not?

Whilst reflecting on these, it must be remembered that there is, I would advocate, an 'optimum' time limit for all of this (nothing to do with slow play), but from years of experience, **protracted discussions on the required shot to be played rarely achieves.** The longer the debate the greater the risk of self doubt and indecision. The answers to the three questions rest with the relationship between the skip and third, which is sometimes conveniently overlooked in the selection meeting and the match of technical skill takes priority. When I was involved solely in the selection of the successful England 2002 Commonwealth Games lawn bowls team in Manchester, my emphasis was geared to interpersonal relationships over skill base. Having revealed this, it would be a very reckless decision if technical ability did not form a major part of the decision making process as well. One third player perfectly suited to one skip will not be to another, primarily due to variance in personality. This is not 'rocket science' as any club captain will know not to select two lively outgoing extroverts as third and skip – or would they? Whilst each case is individual, a rule of thumb is that an extrovert and submissive player usually makes a healthy combination but this is dangerous ground to tread!

Differences in character of the two involved in the partnership forming the back positions of a rink are one aspect, the other has to be skill base. Some advocate that the 'drawing' skip will be best suited to the third player that has a high success rate at the drive shot. The philosophy behind this being that any 'cluttered head' of opposition bowls can be cleared in order for the drawing skip to execute the draw shot to which they are best suited.



The English 1984 world championships squad worked in harmony and had a deep understanding of each other, which was pivotal to England's success. John Bell played the vice-skip role very effectively with George Turley leading, Julian Haines at two and Tony Allcock skipping.

In one of my books I briefly wrote the 'stereotype' for my ideal number three. Fundamentally, they should:

- 1) Possess all the shots
- 2) Have a good command of the 'weighted shot'
- 3) Comprehensively be able to read the head
- 4) Be totally aware of the characteristics of the skip – and have an in-depth knowledge of them 'as a bowler'

Since the above was written some 25 years ago I would now certainly like to expand on the fourth requirement. This is, undoubtedly, the key to success in this sport and in all others involving partnerships/team work. As the appointed Commonwealth Games England Performance Director for bowls in 2002 I worked closely with Dr Ian Maynard, now Professor Maynard, of Sheffield Hallam University who, ultimately, played a huge part in the success enjoyed by the English bowls team. Ian had been involved in a number of sports and I remember during many of his team building sessions he emphasised the need for players competing in a team or partnership to essentially know as much about their playing partners as they could possibly find out in the hope that should a situation arise each would know the expectation of the other. He described a team exercise he had lead involving a sailing team who would spend weeks contained within the confines of the sailing vessel. They sat in the

boat and did a 'what happens if' scenario. This included the death of a family member back home and what each would expect to happen given such a tragedy and how they would expect the other to react. Interestingly, (and as an aside), the team voted unanimously to instruct their families that they would not wish to have such information sent to the ship.

Turning the attention back to bowls, it is important that all of these 'what happens if' scenarios are at least uncovered. To some degree, club bowlers playing fairly regularly together actually do find out what is likely to be the reaction of a player given a certain instance. However, this is usually learnt through time spent together, something which many competitive teams do not have the luxury of in order to explore and to build any relationship. What Professor Ian taught actually happens at club level but if we are to get maximum return from an international or county team, the number three should at least ascertain as much information about the skip and indeed the remainder of the rink. Four 'good' club players coming together for a county competition to play the following season can bring absolute disaster. A fundamental assessment of the quartet will reveal a very strong skill base which may just be able to sustain a successful campaign, but without a robust perception of each others' characteristics it is more likely to fail. During a match, moments of crises, dreadful starts, or a large deficit on the score board will need more than technical skill to

rectify. It will need the team to pull together, the example being set by the strong 'rear guard', with solidarity demonstrated by the third player and skip. In order to do so it is paramount that the third player understands the skip's strengths and weaknesses so any intervention required from the third can be directed accordingly and without the need for approval to act. What is for sure is that any disharmony felt between these players will spread rapidly to the front players without a word being spoken!

### THIRD/SKIP MUST CONSIDER THE FRONT END

Within the playing unit the third player spends a lot of time at the head with the skip and whilst I advocate that the strength lies in the partnership of these two, there are two other players to consider. One of the great difficulties with fours play is that there is a lot of standing around and waiting. The skip is mainly concentrating on all the bowls and from personal experience playing everyone's too! The third player is key in fostering communication between the two partnerships – front end and back end – and should be responsible for cementing the overall foundation, keeping them abreast of the current situation and imparting any psychological snippets concerning the opposition which may just boost confidence and enhance enthusiasm.

There will be more on the role of the number three in next month's issue.

# The Vice-Skip Part 2

**Tony Allcock** continues to write about the third position in a rink – a role requiring a lot more than would first appear.

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**A**LTHOUGH I played in every position in the rink during my playing career, I am aware that I rarely ever played number three in anything! However, my very first international cap for England was in 1976 at Rugby Thornfield Indoor BC when I was selected as a third. In those days players were, undoubtedly, selected on ability with a disregard for other attributes such as team play. For me, my first time playing for my country was not the greatest of experiences as for whatever reason our rink was not successful.

No thanks to the contribution of our rink, the England team had won the first two games prior to facing Scotland on the final day. The Scottish team were also unbeaten. The major problem for the England team manager was that the pre-event draw revealed that England's weakest rink, which included me, would play against Scotland's strongest on an end rink and therefore all indications were that the Hilton Trophy looked set to go north of the border. The team manager at the time, Peter Brimble, phoned my room on the eve of the final match and I suspected strongly that the call was to tell me I would be sitting out on the reserves' bench the next morning. I respected Peter for being one of England's most successful England indoor managers. He was meticulous in the deliverance of his man management skills, totally straightforward and honest. This, coupled with his own distinguished playing career fully qualified him to know how it felt to be part of a rink that was a high risk to the remaining 20 players and impart the bad news to players that they were to be dropped from the team. Having been invited to take a comfortable seat, to my utter amazement he informed me that at the ripe age of 20 years old I was to skip for England the next morning against Scotland's formidable skip Willie (The Machine) McQueen. The shock



John Bell played as an exceptionally effective number three to Tony Allcock at world championship events.

having sunken in he then told me to go and immediately speak to my new third, Jack Forster, who had been 'promoted' from second and '...talk to him in order to find out as much as possible about him'. As an aside, the next day we made a very creditable job of holding this phenomenal Scottish rink to a single shots victory and the the Hilton

Trophy stayed in England. It was the advice of Peter's which clearly identified the need to get to know the playing partner and to make the best of every opportunity of uncovering as much information about my new number three. Being a Leicestershire player and Jack being from Northamptonshire I knew him well but as an opponent. It was this very experience so early in my international career which has impressed upon me that in fours play there are two pairs which form the whole. The lead and second and the third and skip. The best units are those that work together in a pair and then have the ability to cement them together to form a rink conducive to playing well.

**'As I have previously mentioned, the number three player in a rink should carry a trowel as those playing in this position need to assist the skip in cementing the rink together, strengthening the team whilst safeguarding too much unnecessary interference which may result in the skip feeling threatened or challenged'.**

**THE NUMBER THREE**

The number three has been described by some learned scholars as the 'shadow' member of the rink. David J Bryant CBE (DJB), in his book entitled 'Bryant on Bowls', talks about the minimal time playing actual bowls as a member of a fours team and identifies the third player as '...one who does not have a specific task to perform during these waiting periods'. DJB highlights the dangers in this player losing touch with the mechanics of the rink unless of course the number three is aware of any other duties he has to perform during any given match. This is sound advice and an important reason why the third and skip need to ascertain what these may be in addition to the 'expected' duties. According to the laws of the sport, these tell us that the third player 'can' measure and 'can' tell the skip the number of shots played in an end. That is it! The laws of the sport do allow any player to mark touchers (although there is an expectation that this is carried out by the skip). However, DJB is right; in order to keep the third player involved, such duties as marking touchers (apart from their own), enable the third player to remain active and motivated.

**STRIKING A BALANCE**

At the other end of the scale, over intervention by a third can lead to unrest amongst the rink, especially if the third and skip have not talked about this beforehand. There are many back-end combinations that have worked successfully when the third player has controlled the rink from the very beginning with the desired encouragement of the skip. It could be that the third player has an extrovert character and the skip is fairly quiet and laid back in temperament. There must, however, be a full understanding that the ultimate decision maker is the skip. Having identified that the skip's decision is final, to what extent does the third player impose their views and thoughts given a difficult decision? This is very difficult to determine and a great example of this was during one world championship when John Bell was my third and we were facing a crucial end which would result in us either going forward for the medal play-offs the following day or sitting in the spectator stand. It was the final bowl on the last end of the match and we needed the shot to win. There was a great debate about two shots available - simply the draw or the take out shot. Either was problematical, primarily due to the unreliability of the behaviour of the rink and bowls in front of the head which were to be avoided. John saw one shot (supported by Julian Haines and George Turley). Due to the behaviour of the rink I preferred the other option. A great debate took place and I decided on my choice of shot. However, on walking back to the mat I pondered about the views of my team, strongly presented by my third that the shot

was the draw. Before reaching the mat, I turned around and made my way back to the head. I knew I was 'in two minds' and the emotions of making a decision against the wishes of my number three had arrested my concentration and instead of thinking about success I was preparing for failure. We once again discussed at length the shot and through the benefit of years of experience, the Allcock and Bell partnership resolved once and for all that the shot to be executed would **not** be my first choice. Well, knowing this and that I needed all the encouragement to perform this shot, the rink, ably lead by John, harmoniously encouraged me once again just before I prepared this final delivery. The history books record that we won this match by one shot and then 24 hours later stood on the rostrum in Westburn Park in Aberdeen with four gold medals and all wearing Scottish kilts (a sight for sore eyes).

On reflection, it is easy to forget such incidents in the light of success but failure may just have questioned the third player's strength of intervention and whether or not it was appropriate. As a player, I am experienced enough to know that in these sort of situations there is only one choice. Once it has been made and the shot played a post mortem may console some individuals but it will never change the result.

**RINK CONVENTIONS**

The 'norm' for club play is that the rink does exactly what the skip says (including the number three). Unfortunately, this does nothing to strengthen the harmony of the rink. As I have previously mentioned, the number three player in a rink should carry a trowel as those playing in this position need to assist the skip in cementing the rink together, strengthening the team whilst safeguarding too much unnecessary interference which may result in the skip feeling threatened or challenged. It is a fine balance but when effectively addressed can produce a contented environment which, in the face of adversity, can culture that vital ingredient of team workmanship absolutely vital to successfully face and to overcome the given challenge.

**COMPLIMENTING THE SKIP**

Finally, when involved in competition, despite the limited skill base any individual player may have, always place great reliance on selecting a number three that will compliment the skip, not just restricting it to a skills matrix. The greatest winning rinks are not necessarily the best four bowlers available and I am of the strong opinion that success lies primarily on the strength of combination between the third and skip. This forms the essential foundation upon which the four individuals can work together as a whole, forming a most successful and contented team.

**TONY'S TOP TIPS...**

HAVING THE benefit of a library of literature written on the third player, prior to writing this column I was able to do some quiet reading at home one weekend and really enjoyed being surrounded by such literature whilst sitting on the sofa. The great bowls philosopher and coach Julius Sergay, who was so influential in the success of team South Africa (both past and present), compiled an ideal check list for the requirements of the third player. These are:

1. **To make the position easy for his skip.**
2. **He must be able to draw, play the running shot and when called upon the full drive.**
3. **He must be called upon to hit the head hard to clear the way in order for the skilful skip to maximise potential without the hindrances of short bowls in the way.**

For my part I could not disagree with the above from a skills set requirement. However, not all players fulfilling the third position will be able to execute accurately all the above shots. Some will be stronger in some regards than others and this needs to be acknowledged by both the player and the skip so that they are each aware.

In addition, I would add the following vital credentials. The third player must:

1. **Be the liaison between the three other players in the rink.**
2. **Have faith and trust in the skip as a player.**
3. **Understand the skip - the character - the bowler.**
4. **Know how much intervention and participation is required or expected by the skip.**
5. **Ascertain which 'other' duties the skip may require such as measuring, score board at the end of the rink or marking touchers (duties which are not specifically listed in the laws but one open to 'any' player given the skip's permission).**
6. **Never criticise the skip but gently impart information which may just enhance. (For example, '...our second prefers the forehand given a choice').**
7. **Know whether the skip requires information of changes to the head.**
8. **Never give instruction to the skip once he/she has left the head to play their bowls.**
9. **Know when to speak and only impart information if the skip requires it. (For example, I never wanted my third to tell me that my last bowl was too heavy by a metre - I knew this and so did everyone else in the rink and spectators alike!)**