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"A PANE IN THE GLASS"

Competitive Data

By Bill Tschirhart

Competitive Data is a term I use frequently! Here's one I rarely use; shooting statistics.

I realize that this might come as something of a shock to some of you who gather and religiously use statistical information and if it works for you as you guide your athletes, keep doing it! I find statistics marginally helpful but any help in a highly competitive situation is welcome. I get that! Before I start getting email after email from those of you who DO use statistical data as a forensic tool to dissect the performance of a team in an effort to improve its performance, I should add that I have sought out the statistical data provided by the event organizers or gathered by someone close to the team as verification of something I was seeing.

It's been my participant observation that some coaches get lost in a sea of data and run the risk of falling victim to the adage, "He/she couldn't see the forest for the trees."

I have stated this countless times in the past. Every shot is a "team" shot. Someone has to decide on the position of the brush and the weight to be delivered. Someone else is charged with the responsibility to send the stone on its way. Two others take up the challenge of judging the velocity and/or line of the stone (perhaps with the assistance of that player in the house) to add whatever brushing will enhance the likelihood of the successful completion of the shot. Why then do we say, for example, that the lead shot 78%? That's categorically inaccurate! It wasn't the lead who shot 78%. The accurate statement therefore is, "***The team shot 78% on the first two shots of each end.***"

Those who know me well are aware of my feelings regarding all-star designations in curling. I hope before I draw my last breath, I will see the day when our sport does the prudent and ethical thing and ceases the practice of singling out individual players for recognition (read "all-star award") solely based upon that athlete's shooting statistics. That's just wrong!

Question: Would you want to play for a skip that shoots 50%? Most would not but I would. What I forgot to tell you was that the 50% of the shots that were made were the second of the two shots in each end. What good was that 50% shooting statistic? Timing must play a role in the relevance of shooting statistics.

I've used the bowling analogy before. If you deliver five strikes in a game in frames one, three, five, seven and nine, of course your score is somewhat augmented. If you had bowled those five strikes in frames eight and nine then struck out in frame ten, the affect those consecutive strikes have on your total score would be significantly different. Timing is everything! As with curling, clearly the more shots made, the greater your chance of a good performance but the point is, a shooting statistic of 70% can be all but useless in one game but the determining factor in another strictly based upon "when" the shots were made. In club clinics, I use this point to help recreational curlers know when they have crossed the threshold to the world of competitive curling. If you sense that it's a critical point in an end/game and you're ever so grateful it's NOT your turn to shoot, you're a recreational curler and we've all been there. But, if in the same situation, you're totally ticked it's NOT YOUR TURN to deliver the shot, welcome to the world of competitive curling and you can't "fudge" the feeling. You'll know on which side of the fence you reside when the time comes! By the way, if you are on the "recreational" side of that fence, you're not a second class citizen. You simply need more experience. Keep curling my friend! You'll someday feel the rush that comes with sitting in the hack with a big shot on the line!!!

Not all curling shots are created equal. Some are clearly more significant than others. When the performance of a team is reviewed statistically, the shots that make a difference must be segregated from the others before a meaningful analysis can take place. Although there is now an attempt to include degree of difficulty into the statistical formula, it's not perfected by any means and therefore given the wide discrepancy among curling shots in terms of their degree of difficulty, shooting statistics remain marginally useful in my opinion.

Make no mistake. The media loves them! TSN's terrific triumvirate of televised curling events would be lost without them! So use them if you must, but coaches, *be sure shooting statistics serve you and not the other way around.*

Actually, whereas shooting statistics is numbers-based, competitive data sometimes involves no numbers/numerals at all. In a sentence, *competitive data is any information that accurately depicts what's really happening with a curling team.* Allow me an example from the area of strategy and tactics.

Shooting statistics might indicate that a team's overall shooting efficiency, over a significant period of time, is 78%. Competitive data, as a result of a forensic analysis of the team's strategy and tactics, might reveal that the shots the team is playing and the way they are being played do not match the team's stated philosophical approach to both strategy and tactics. In other words, the team might feel it's an offense first team but the shots being selected and the way the shots are being played are that of either a defense first team or a blended attack team. Who cares that the team is shooting an admirable 78%?. It's not playing the right shots. If, on the other hand, that shooting efficiency of 78% was based upon shots the competitive data suggests are more in line with the team's philosophical view on how the game should be played, the "performance" I would suggest, would be different, perhaps dramatically so!

Competitive data can be the analysis of a team's collective technical delivery skills. How many grips does a team employ as each team member delivers any of the four shots* curlers are called upon to make in any game? Where does each player place the stone relative to the hack or center-line for each of those four shots? Where does each player release the stone relative to the top of house or the hog-line for each of the four shots? How is the rotation (either clockwise or counterclockwise) being applied by each

athlete for each of the four shots? And lastly, how many rotations are applied from release to stop for each of the four shots? That competitive data is really important!

In my view, a critical piece of competitive data is the array of shots that a team employs as it implements its game plan, regardless of the degree of success of those shots. A team that feels it is more offensively inclined, upon a review of the shots it's attempting, might learn that 73% are take-outs. That doesn't make sense. An offense first team should not, on average, be attempting 73% of its shots as take-outs. If it's performing well and making a high percentage of those take-outs, then that competitive data would suggest that the team is perhaps enjoying success as a defense first team, not an offense first team, realize that fact and perhaps make other adjustments that will further enhance its likelihood of performance.

Competitive data is not solely the domain of the time from the first to the last shots of the game. Competitive data should be gathered in the preparation phase of training as well. For example, drills should not be done in a practice session haphazardly. Without going into a full-blown, detailed explanation of drills, their usefulness and implementation, suffice to say that if a drill is worth doing, it's worth recording the statistical results (heh, did I say "statistics?"). When a drill is attempted another time, ***the team should know its average score for that drill and attempt to improve it.*** For individual drills, shooting statistics clearly have their place as the athlete's performance is not affected by an outside agent (read "teammate"). Again, as with all other drills, keep a record of the athletes' scores to determine an average and then try to beat that average on subsequent attempts.

Competitive data in the preparation phase of training will also include information relative to physical preparation. It will include all manner of recorded information about exercises (sets & repetitions and duration). Your nutritional data will help you stay on the diet of foods that will best promote performance and be invaluable as you prepare your "food pack" for the next competition.

Competitive data enters the realm of team dynamics as you and your teammates create your "communications protocol" (who says what to whom, when it's said, how it's said, where it's said and why it's said). Remember, ***most of the distractions that negatively impact the performance of a team come from the team itself!***

Your performance goals, the goals over which you and your teammates have complete control are an integral piece of competitive data as they can and should be the building blocks to performance. Performance goals are the ones that are incrementally measurable and by that I mean that you don't either pass or fail. You can achieve a portion of it! For example, if a performance goal in a game is to get an interval time on all the draws attempted by your opposition and you missed one or two because you were communicating with a teammate, then you would have been perhaps 93% successful in achieving that goal.

I believe by now you get the picture about competitive data! It's simply a record of what's really happening with a curling team. Athletes who keep a journal are ideally positioned to know what's really happening and not what they "think" is happening. Multiply that times four and you have a team that is best prepared to perform to its capabilities.

Enjoy working with your athletes and I'll see you soon behind "A Pane in the Glass"!

**clockwise down weight shots (all shots without the velocity to cross the back line), counterclockwise down weight shots, clockwise up weight shots (all shots with enough velocity to cross the back line) and counterclockwise up weight shots*