

Level 2 CPD – Full Detail Document

Generic Approaches to Early-Game Head Patterns

Overview

This CPD topic explores how to coach players to recognise and respond to common early-game head situations. It provides coaches with the skills to guide players through assessing the head, selecting appropriate shots, and understanding how early decisions influence the remainder of the game.

At Level 2, coaches are expected to develop tactical awareness in club and intermediate players who already have consistent delivery and an understanding of line and length. This CPD bridges the gap between technical instruction and strategic decision-making, focusing on the opening stages of play where control and confidence are established.

Purpose

To help coaches develop a structured approach to teaching players how to approach and manage early-game head situations, ensuring they make effective tactical decisions that set the tone for the rest of the game.

Aims

- To introduce coaches to a set of generic principles for approaching different head patterns in the opening ends.
- To help players understand when to build, defend, or change the head.
- To develop confidence in decision-making through observation, questioning, and scenario-based practice.

Learning Objectives

By the end of this session, coaches should be able to:

1. Identify and explain common head patterns that emerge during the early stages of a game.
2. Demonstrate and justify suitable tactical approaches for different head situations.
3. Coach players to apply early-game decision-making through purposeful practice.
4. Reinforce effective communication and questioning to encourage player ownership of tactical decisions.
5. Evaluate a player's tactical understanding and adaptability during practical play.

Introduction

The early ends of a game are crucial for establishing rhythm, confidence, and control. While the scoreline may not seem critical at this stage, the tone and momentum of the match are often set within the first few ends. A team that gains control early often carries psychological and positional advantage into the mid-game.

Many developing players can deliver accurately but struggle to recognise what the head is telling them. They may continue to play 'standard draw' bowls even when the head demands adjustment. Teaching players to read and respond to the head transforms their play from reactive to proactive.



Understanding Early-Game Head Patterns

- Open Head (no clutter or obstacles) – Common in early ends where players are still finding pace. Coaching focus: encourage players to build the head safely, maintain line consistency, and establish positional control behind the jack.
- Front Bowl Block – A bowl resting short and central can block the draw line. Coaching focus: help players learn to change hand, adjust the aiming line, or use a controlled 'yard-on' to dislodge or rest.
- Jack Off-Centre – Occurs when Jack is cast to one side of the rink or displaced during play. Coaching focus: explore how to select the more favourable hand and use positional bowls to control the new head shape.
- Clustered or Short Head – Several bowls grouped near the mat end due to under-weight deliveries. Coaching focus: increase awareness of length control and encourage positive adjustments.
- Two-Down or Defensive Head – Player or team is behind in shot count early in the end. Coaching focus: make calm, positive tactical choices rather than forced aggression—teach when to draw for a second or rest an opposition bowl.

Generic Early-Game Tactical Principles

Tactical Principle	Coaching Explanation
Control the Mat and Jack	Early control of length and position influences every head that follows. Vary the jack length to test the opposition and gather information on the green.
Build Before You Attack	Establish bowls in and around the head before taking risks. Early aggression often loses valuable positioning.
Positional Awareness	Encourage players to place 'insurance' bowls behind the head as safety cover.
Anticipate – Don't Over-Defend	In the early stages of head development, players cannot defend against every possible outcome. Good tactics involve anticipating the opponent's most likely response, making a calculated choice, and accepting that some risk remains. Trying to guard against all scenarios often weakens your own head and reduces attacking opportunities.
Adapt and Observe	Reinforce that the head tells the story—adjust play according to what the head presents.
Team Communication	Each player contributes to developing the head. Reinforce clear dialogue and shared understanding.

Teaching Approach

Coaches should use a blend of explanation, questioning, and demonstration to develop player understanding. Begin with visual examples or rink diagrams of different head types. Use questioning to prompt tactical reasoning, such as 'What would you play here?' and 'What risk does that create?'. Reinforce correct decision-making even when execution is imperfect and encourage open discussion between team members.

Coach Prompt: "Is it realistic to defend against everything in this head? What are the top one or two threats you actually need to cover?"



Example Discussion Prompts

- What do you notice about the head shape?
- Where is the danger if we lose this end?
- How can we protect our current shot?
- If you were the opposition, what would you play next?

Common Player Errors and Coaching Remedies

Observation	Coaching Remedy
Continues to draw to a blocked line	Reinforce observation skills; encourage using the alternative hand or a different mat position.
Over-aggressive play early in ends	Emphasise the 'build first, attack later' mindset. Use controlled drills focusing on percentage shots.
Lack of positional cover	Demonstrate using an 'insurance bowl' behind the head and show how it saves losing multiples.
Poor communication between players	Use mini-team exercises requiring verbal agreement before each shot.
Fixation on previous error	Teach reset routines and positive body language.

Practice Design and Structure

Each practical scenario should replicate realistic early-game conditions. Avoid artificial drills that isolate single skills without tactical context.

Open Head Development

Setup: Jack at medium length, clear rink.

Task: Build a balanced head – one front, one behind, one close.

Coaching Focus: Reinforce pace control, steady rhythm, and spacing.

Blocked Line Situation

Setup: Short bowl obstructs one hand.

Task: Explore an alternative line or play controlled yard-on.

Coaching Focus: Read angles, question choices, and debrief outcomes.

Two-Down Head

Setup: Opposition holds two shots.

Task: Choose the safest corrective option.

Coaching Focus: Shot selection under pressure; risk management.

Integrating into Coaching Practice

Coaches can incorporate these tactical themes into existing club sessions by using short scenario-based ends instead of full games. Encourage players to describe their tactical intent before each delivery, rotate mat and jack positions frequently, and provide feedback at the end of each scenario rather than after every bowl to preserve flow and realism.

Review and Reflection

Encourage self-reflection at the end of each session using guided questions:

1. What was the key tactical learning from today?
2. Which head pattern challenged you the most?
3. Did your shot choices improve as the session progressed?

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4. How can this be applied in your next club or match setting?

Assessment and Evaluation

Coaches can assess effectiveness through observation of player decision-making quality, accuracy of verbal analysis, and adaptability when faced with changing head patterns. Provide balanced feedback, acknowledging correct reasoning even if the physical execution failed.

Conclusion

Generic early-game approaches provide structure and confidence to developing players. When coached effectively, players begin to think strategically—recognising patterns, selecting appropriate shots, and supporting teammates in building the head. The coach's role is to guide observation, simplify decision-making, and promote confidence through understanding rather than instinct alone. Early tactical awareness forms the foundation for higher-level play.

