

# Nailing that first bowl

[June 29, 2015 Darryl Fitzgerald](#)

Recently I've been working with a few bowlers who are just starting on the competitive path. A few of them have played in Tournaments, some Districts/Provincials (especially Novice & Junior) and in some other competitions like League nights around the club.

It's always interesting to hear the thoughts of these players once they've had a taste of some higher level competition. I don't think anyone fully understands the skill required to play this game until they have had a taste of playing people better than they are. The mental toughness, focus, vision and touch required to play bowl after bowl is extreme. The ability to not only roll a bowl to a jack on the centre line, but to adjust to varying lengths and then to be able to further adjust to a moving jack requires a vast array of physical skills, mental skills and a lot of practice.

I often see practice going on where it's a simple draw or drive routine. Roll a jack out, roll your bowls close and repeat or in the case of a drive, roll the jack, then drive at it and repeat. Just the basics and no real goals other than the draw to the centre jack wherever it may lie.

I asked many of the "newer" bowlers I've met this year (as in 5 or fewer years playing) what the most frustrating thing(s) are when you are playing or what gets you the most worried/stressed when you play yourself or with a team. (I also posed this question to a few seasoned players in regards to new players) There were many things that came up, but one theme I picked up on from was rolling the jack and the first couple bowls. Some found it hard to roll a jack or roll the first bowl close. When asked if they practice jacks, many say NO. When I ask if they have any drills to help work on adjusting weight and a lot say NO.

Some of the seasoned players are noticeably frustrated when their lead would roll the jack to a random length (not where it was asked) and then the first one or two bowls would be nowhere near the target jack. Many don't realize how the first bowl can change all of the bowls to come after and how a good or bad bowl can really lift or drop the team. Every miss builds up pressure and makes you feel like the next bowl MUST get close, it can also feel like you're letting your team down. You feel obligated to get one close to make sure the next bowler on your team has something to work with and isn't multiple shots down. The pressure of that can make drawing close even harder.

I've touched on practicing rolling the jack in a past post, so I'll refrain from any detail here (See: [Who Cares about Rolling a Jack?](#)). But along the same line as that post, I want to draw attention to the importance that a well thrown jack and a great first bowl has on your game.

Take a moment to recall a time you rolled your first bowl right onto the jack. Perhaps it was an inch in front or behind, maybe you had a resting toucher on the front or back. Regardless, you nailed that shot. How did you feel after that shot? How did you feel rolling your next shot? I bet it was a great feeling! If you drew two feet in front or behind with the second, that probably felt fine as you knew you had a great first shot. If you missed your first by three or four feet, how did that second shot feel? Probably felt like a MUST MAKE shot! If you are a Skip, how does it feel when your lead nails that first shot? I bet it feels just as good!

So doesn't it make sense to take time to practice weight control and especially being able to relate rolling the jack to rolling your bowl? Getting out to practice with both jacks and bowls can be advantageous if you set the right goals and set a proper focus for your drills. Being able to relate the rolling of the jack to the rolling of your first bowl so you can nail the length is a huge part of controlling the game and setting your team up for success. For leads, your skip will love you if you can master this skill. for singles play, this can set you up for a lot of success!

Below I will detail a couple of drills I recently used to help players work on weight control and also on jack to bowl relation.

#### Drill #1 – Steps

This one is used by many people I've trained with and coaches I've worked with. It's simple because it requires 4 jacks (or 4 target mats or 4 half tennis balls). Place one on the minimum distance and one on the 2 meter mark (maximum). The other two are to be placed at equal distances in the middle so you have four targets at various lengths. Each bowl played is to a different length and you cannot bowl to the same length twice. I tend to guide a player to start short and move to the next longer mark until they hit the max on the 4th, then coming back they start long and proceed until they hit the minimum. If you've done this a few times, you can start by mixing up the length and keeping to the same rule: you cannot bowl to the same length more than one. This gives a little variety and keeps this fun. (Boredom is always something to avoid when doing drills)

The idea is to gain the skill, touch and confidence that you can make substantial adjustments with each bowl while hitting a similar line (the jack moves — remember that!). If you are rolling bowls all over the green, you'll need to step back and work on fundamentals to focus on point of aim. If you are close and hitting a similar line each time, it should just be a matter of feeling the adjustments in weight to get each length. This not only allows you to test all the fundamentals, but you can also see how the player makes changes to their delivery for various lengths (maybe good, maybe bad).

*Variation:* Set jacks at various lengths, but also off centre. By adding in the need to adjust your line it can test the focus of the player and give them an added challenge. I like putting a couple on the boundary and seeing how the player adjusts.

#### Drill #2 – Jack and Jill

This one I used to train myself on rolling a jack and matching it with my first bowl. It's a very simple drill where you set your mat at the two metre mark and then roll a jack. Next you roll your first bowl to that jack trying to match it. Now move rinks to get a clear green or have your coach/partner clear the rink. Roll another jack and a single bowl trying to match it. This is repeated until you start to get a close bowl to the jack you are throwing. Not only does this help practice throwing jacks and setting length, but it gives you only one shot at matching that jack. The focus is that your #1 goal and your most critical shot is the first one. No second chances, no repeats. A great outcome of this is if you can really find a player's strong length and natural tendency by rolling the jack and a bowl. Are they rolling the jack to the same spot, but always coming up the same distance short? It can be frustrating to the bowler as they only get one shot to hit the target, but the idea is to really start learning how to relate the roll of the jack to a bowl. It is a great advantage to be able to match them and get that first bowl close.

*Game variation:* I sometimes play this as a follow-up. Crown green 1-bowl singles. Take a mat and jack, place the mat and roll the jack and play it wherever it lies. Two players to a mat, one bowl each and play singles for 8 ends, then switch partners. This gives a fun little game where everyone is trying to make that one bowl count! Wherever the jack ends up is where you place your mat and start your next end — any direction, and spot on the green is playable.

Give these drills a try to see how you do in matching that first bowl to your jack. I guarantee you will love it when you start nailing that first shot and putting the pressure on your opposition!