
BASIC TACTICS IN LAWN BOWLING

by **Rob Judson**
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Setting Competition Goals

Game Formats and Procedures

In common with sports like golf, shooting, archery, etc, lawn bowling is a target sport. Lawn bowling games take the form of singles, pairs, triples or fours according to the number of bowlers in each team. A game is played on a rink, which is a demarcated strip of a bowling green. An end begins when the first player lays a mat and delivers an unbiased jack, which serves as the focal point for a head.

The projectiles used in the game are bowls, which two opposing bowlers or teams of bowlers alternately roll along the rink towards the target bowl, or jack. The bias of bowls causes them to travel a path of increasing curvature as they slow down. Thus, a bowl provides forehand or backhand approaches for entering a head. Players grip a bowl with its biased side either on the left or the right depending on the chosen hand of play. The line, speed and objective of each bowl delivered depends on whether its purpose is creating, consolidating, defending or attacking the head, any of which can be the tactical key to winning the end.

The specified conditions for a particular game specify the number of deliveries allowed each player before an end is completed and progressive scores are determined. On completion of each end, a player or team receives one point for each of its bowls resting closer to the jack than any opposing bowl. The direction of play on the rink reverses for successive ends, each of which follows a sequence of the laying of a protective mat, delivering of the jack, and delivering of the allowable number of bowls, in turn.

The specified conditions for a game indicate when play is to end and a winner is to emerge. Team games (pairs, triples and fours) usually finish on completing a specified number of ends. The winner of a singles game, or a game within a set, is usually the first player to accumulate a specified score of points. The winner of a sets match is the first player to win a majority of the specified maximum number of games (usually 3 or 5). Scorecards should show the points won for each end completed and the cumulative scores in each game. A scoreboard at the end of the rink should show the cumulative scores in each game and, for games comprising a specified number of ends, the number of ends completed.

Strategic Aims

Some competitors would express their tactical aim for an event in terms of winning at all costs, or winning if possible. However, a focus on winning has some difficulties. First, it is suggestive more of ego-involved, than of task-involved motivation for participating in the sport. In other words, there is sharper focus on 'destinations' than on the positive experiences of 'journeys'. Second, some people have conditioned themselves to equate winning with success, and losing with failure. They would thereby have difficulty in expressing their aim for an event, other than in terms of winning. Third, some people would consider that an aim expressed other than in terms of winning would be a recipe for not winning, or that losing is automatically a conscionable outcome. Even top-ranking competitors experience competition losses, and most competitors in all sports experience more losses than wins. Fourth, event outcome, i.e. winning or losing, depends on many factors outside the individual control of either competitor. Competitors can control only their own performances. Where one competitor is outperforming another, that other has no way of changing the likely result of the contest other than by improving performance. Should the competitor in the lead continue to outperform, any winning aims of the other would be in disarray and no longer relevant. Towards the end of the game, that opponent would tend to experience distraction, anxiety and powerlessness because of the score line.

A preferable form for a strategic aim might be: "To secure the greatest possible advantage of shot numbers through low-risk tactics, or failing that, to secure the least possible shot disadvantage". Such an aim would apply to the delivery of every bowl in every end of the match, whatever its possible or probable outcome. It would imply a quality of performance that sustains pressure on opponents right to the last bowl of the game. At times, the calibre of relative performance will yield a winning result, which is a bonus or reward for that particular effort. However, the basic strategic aim should relate to ability and performance, not to winning.

Basic Tactical Concepts

Establishing the Head

Tactics are an element of all sports and games. The use of tactical skill in the course of play is neither unfair nor poor sportsmanship. It mainly involves the exercise of common sense and the avoidance of poor decisions.

Competitive bowlers should have a thoughtful approach to each game. They should watch jack and bowls during any trial ends to obtain a feel for the green conditions. Trial ends of full length best indicate the approximate aiming angle required. If there is a cross wind, competitors should determine whether the wide hand or the narrow hand is the kinder side of the rink. When all other things are equal, the narrow hand is commonly the easier hand to play. The aiming angle will be narrower, and the smaller angular distance between the destination point and the aiming point is normally easier to accommodate during the aiming process.

Leads should avoid playing 'around the clock', i.e. playing the same hand, end after end. If one side of the rink is kinder, the team should direct its play on that side. Leads should also avoid the temptation to change hand for their second delivery. By changing hand, a lead can immediately leave opponents with resting opportunities on both sides of the jack. Singles players or skips might wish to change to the opposite hand if the opponents are favouring it with telling effect.

Bowlers should avoid bowling short, particularly when not lying shot. A team is bowling short if more than half of its bowls are stopping short of jack high. Players should be mindful of the need to avoid short bowling, especially when their team is not holding shot. Short bowls tend to block access to the jack. Any movement of the jack is usually rearward, leaving short bowls in ineffective positions.

Bowlers should avoid bowling narrow when lying shot. A team is bowling narrowly if more than half of its bowls cross a direct line to the jack or other destination. Narrow bowls tend to disturb the jack or to leave resting opportunities for the opposing team on the opposite side of the head.

If the green is rather slow, foot traffic near the ends of rinks will gradually increase the pace of green there. A team more alert to this effect can, if first to play, place the jack near the 2-metre mark with the expectation that opponents might not allow for the extra pace and lose bowls in the ditch. Skips could consider locating the jack near the two-metre mark if opponents seem shy of the ditch or troubled by faster grass there. It might also be a good location should one or more members of the opposing team be 'nigglers'. A team that prematurely attacks the head could ditch many of its attacking bowls. A team should avoid locating the jack at the two-metre mark if their opponents seem able to ditch it with running shots at will.

If the lead and second players are more adaptable than their opponents, the team might profit from frequent changes of end length. For the start of a new end, skips of teams to play first should consider mat and jack location. If they allow leads to choose their own length, they should ensure the length is consistent and is providing their team with a competitive edge. They should consider maintaining a winning length, or changing what has tended to be a losing length. A medium length would provide a winning opponent least scope to change length for the ensuing end. Medium length could be a safe choice for the first end. There is then least risk of an improper delivery due to length error because of a misjudgement of green pace.

Team Tactics

When a club or players themselves form a team, it should be the most competitive team possible. This involves the teaming of players who not only will demand 100% of themselves, but also will help each other to produce a 100% effort. In other words, the team should comprise the strongest players available, consistent with the likelihood that they will work together in a mutually supportive way. Whether they are close friends, or even well acquainted with one another, should not be a key consideration.

The more cohesion within teams, the more successful they tend to be. Healthy team cohesion results in points on the scoreboard. Uninhibited, positive communications using considerate words and body language are cohesive. The ability to foster team harmony and cohesion is a basic tactical skill. The maxim that 'a champion team will usually beat a team of champions' applies. Occasionally it falls to a skipper to bail a team out of trouble, but the earlier players are equally responsible for ensuring that the team does not continually get into trouble.

Teams with compatible members are sometimes unsuccessful because of inappropriate tactics when under pressure. Competitors should avoid spoiling their performances by hurrying delivery preparation. If an opponent misses a drive, there is no obligation to hurry a delivery to shorten the delay before the opponent's next drive.

Competitors should apply themselves undistractedly throughout a game. They should avoid wasting easy opportunities to add to the score when not under pressure. Any member with a weak opponent should maximise that advantage for the good of the entire team's performance. They should remember that no team wins a game until the opposing team irrecoverably loses it.

Leads and seconds should never 'niggle' at (i.e. gratuitously attack) the head in personal attempts at beating their opponent. This behaviour can place a team four shots down when the second leaves the mat. Unsolicited advice from thirds can irritate and erode self-confidence of their skips. Skips should avoid this problem by having a courteous understanding with their thirds about their need for information or suggestions when on the mat themselves.

Once regularly selected to play in the skip position and thereby to act as tacticians of teams, some skippers tend to feel that their tactical wisdom becomes less fallible. Some of them become quite unreceptive to advice or enlightenment on their tactical method. Skips generate team cohesion by avoiding an egocentric personal style and adopting a consultative approach to team tactics. Effective skips can do this without compromising their responsibility and decision-making authority.

A skip's early duty is the forging of a good relationship with the third. Other forms of mutual support and respect flow from there. Everyone in a team should feel the equal of the others. A skip is part of a team, not above it. Skips should confer with their teams before each game. Skips could consider stationing new or inexperienced thirds at the head to better communicate their tactical thinking.

Skips of newly constituted teams should ascertain the shot repertoire of each player. They should ascertain which players like feedback about length errors. If the third is a better driver than the skip, the team can use the third to do more of the driving when heads develop in a way that driving becomes advisable.

Game Planning Basics

Lawn bowling is a coactive sport where teams play games by taking turns, rather than an interactive sport like hockey where all members of opposing teams are continuously engaged. Therefore, key aspects of a competition game plan apply intermittently while the team has possession of the rink. The plan should be embraced by all members of the team, and committed to writing where circumstances permit.

Generally, a game plan will reflect a chosen strategy, and will include the intended tactics for achieving it. Simplicity is an attribute of a game plan that makes it easy for competitors to remember when under pressure. Complicated or highly detailed game plans tend to be forgotten in tight contests.

A game plan should allow for changes should particular tactics prove unproductive. Therefore, flexibility is another positive attribute for a game plan provided a team changes its tactics in a coordinated way.

A game plan should not ordinarily contain tactics designed to mask known weaknesses. Weaker elements of performance should receive attention during the training and practice plan of the individual or team, rather than as elements of a game plan. Careful attention to shortcomings in the days or weeks before the starting day of a competition should have replaced weaknesses with new strengths.

If the competition green is obviously slow, or exposed to a gusty, variable wind, the game plan should reflect a determination to minimise short or narrow bowls, and to avoid continual changes of delivery line in efforts to 'fight' the wind.

Post competition analysis should include relating performances to relevant game plans.

Shot Selection

Head-Reading Basics

A good method for a team to use for evaluating its options is the SWOT procedure. SWOT is an acronym for Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats:

- What is our shot advantage now? What are the strengths or preferences of the bowlers whose turns are to follow?
 - What is our present deficiency of shots? What are the perceived weaknesses of each team?
 - What opportunities or potential rewards does the head offer? What is the degree of difficulty entailed with each?
 - What are the threats or risks entailed with each option? What is the scoring effect of the worst outcome?
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In identifying tactical opportunities, skips will have regard to the number of ends remaining in game, of deliveries remaining to complete the end, and of the cumulative scores (including the margin in the current end). They should always seek to identify the 'percentage' shot.

Once holding one or more shots, skips should continually assess the likelihood of attacking play by opponents. Opponents competent in attacking play could attack at an early stage in development of heads. The more shots a team holds, the greater the likelihood of attacking play by opponents.

Attacking play is not always a sound option of a team that is down one or two shots. Skips should carefully evaluate risks. The possibility of loss of an occasional end by a shot or two should not cost a team the game. Misfortunes during attacking play can make a disadvantage worse. If a team has only one shot saving bowl in the head, dislodgment of that bowl could greatly increase the shot disadvantage. If opponents have numerous receiving bowls behind the jack, disturbance of the jack might hand them an even larger count of shots. However, if they are deficient in bowls behind, a team could exploit that oversight. When well positioned to win a game, a team should consider leaving risk-taking to the opposition.

Controlled weight shots are difficult to play accurately on fast greens for the same reason that the wide hand of play is typically the harder. Playing surface and random wind variations tend to have a relatively greater effect on bowls in course on fast greens. Skips can halve the degree of difficulty of particular shots if they can offer players two attempts at them. Players who miss at the first attempt thereby do not waste the 'feel' for an appropriate correction.

An isolated jack or a bowl presents a narrow target. The wider a target, the greater is the likely success of attacking shots. A bowl is wider than a jack, and a group of bowls presents a wider target than an isolated bowl. The nearer the target, the wider is its relative size. Therefore, attacking shots tend to be more successful in shorter ends.

Sometimes a particular approach into a head offers a number of positive outcomes in combination. There may be combinations of favourable wicks, rests, wrests, run throughs, and trails on offer, each with minimal associated risk. The line of entry into the head that would produce a favourable outcome can sometimes span half a metre or even more. Such situations represent a low degree of difficulty.

Basics of Selecting the Shot

Singles competitors should remember that draw shot play is pre-eminent in their games. Singles heads contain fewer bowls and they tend to have larger gaps through which bowls can pass. Leads and seconds should draw to the jack until defensive placements beyond the jack become advisable. This approach creates a basis on which the third and skip can build.

Before the start of each end, skips should review the progress of the game. During early ends of games, skips might consider difficult or risky shots that offer high rewards if successful. During later ends of games, skips of teams leading comfortably should tend to avoid risky shots. In games that are part of a side's match or a round robin event, skips should consider ways that their teams might improve their margins to maximise the cumulative scores of their side.

In the course of an end, skips should monitor how many shots the team with the advantage is holding. They should also monitor how many deliveries remain for consolidating or disturbing the head. Timing is an important element of successful changes in tactics. The team holding shot should balance the merits of drawing more shots or placing bowls to defend shots already held. The team not holding shot should balance the merits of bettering opposing bowls or killing the end.

The team holding shot has the following options:

- Adding another shot
- Blocking an opponent's preferred approach into the head
- Placing a bowl in anticipation of rearward movement of the jack
- Nudging the jack into a less exposed position
- Dislodging one or more of an opponent's shot saving bowls.

Drawing to add another shot usually has good prospects of success. An extra shot provides an element of insurance should opponents move a shot bowl. However, it may have little value in a close, jack high position or if it creates a cluster of shots that presents a large, easy target. Bowls at rest can assist the achievement of another shot by obstructing the run of a bowl out of the scoring zone. A deflection or 'wick' off another bowl can favourably redirect a moving bowl. A slowing bowl could come to 'rest' in a good position against a stationary bowl. A bowl in course could push another of the same team's

short bowls onward into a good position. It could push another short bowl onward and follow at a reduced pace before running through to a good position.

The nuisance effect of short bowls is common experience. The blocking of a bowler's preferred approach into the head has both physical and psychological effects. In a physical sense, a block forces an opponent to adjust aiming line, or delivery speed, or both, or to switch hands. Psychologically, a defensive and highly visible block astride the delivery line 14-15 metres from the mat sometimes makes opponents apprehensive. They may be distracted from good preparation for their next delivery.

Blocks tend to be more effective on slow or medium paced greens. On slower greens, the span of required delivery angles for the full repertoire of shots is narrower and varies less for different delivery speeds. Thus, bowl paths are more predictable. Blocks are more effective when an opponent has fewer options. Alternative avenues of entry to the head may be impassable, risky, or unplayable. Positioning of blocks has lower margin for error than positioning of receiving bowls. Skips should use the most accurate of their available draw shot bowlers for positioning them.

The placing of a bowl in anticipation of rearward movement of the jack should neutralise the benefit to opponents of disturbing it. Bowlers best do this by placing receiving bowls in the path of the jack's likely movement. They should consider the merit of having the best back bowl, which commands not only the ditch but frequently also several square metres of the rink adjacent to it. If opponents have bowls at the back of the head, a good defensive tactic is to match them. This tactic is particularly sound if the speed of attacking bowls is difficult to forecast. When the opposing team lacks potentially scoring bowls but has bowls positioned beyond the jack, there is likelihood that they will attack the head. Teams holding shot should normally obtain covering strength with receiving bowls beyond the jack before they adopt blocking tactics.

The team not holding shot has the following options:

- Drawing for shot or to save
- Wrestling shot bowls out of the count
- Moving the jack to save or to score
- Killing the end

Like their opponents, the team not holding shot can also use gentle wicks, rests, wrests and run-through shots in the process of drawing for shot or to save. If the jack is in the ditch and a team is one shot down, it should favour drawing for shot. If the bowl runs into the ditch, the team's position is no worse. If the team is several shots down, it should favour drawing to save. However, a team saves nothing if its bowl runs into the ditch. The team not holding shot can also play firmer attacking bowls. However, if not holding shot on completion of an end, they should at least have bowls in the head that restrict the opponents' scoring margin.

Wrestling shots need enough velocity to achieve their purpose. Fast wrestling shots usually become dead if they are off target. Slower wrestling shots can yield 'live' bowls in receiving positions if they miss their target.

Players of the team that is shots down may try to engineer movement of the jack towards their receiving bowls once they have receivers in place. This tactic is often productive where opponents have a toucher on the jack. To avoid movement of a close opposing toucher with the jack, separating them with a gentle wrestling shot might be a sound preliminary tactic. The trail shot is a common way of moving the jack. The attacking bowl forces the jack away from opposing bowls and follows in a similar direction before coming to rest. Faster versions of the shot can follow or 'trail' the jack into the ditch.

Aggressive opponents sometimes unsettle novice players, who might wonder whether accurate draw shot play is their best tactical option. However, even accurate drivers usually have more misses than hits, particularly on medium to long ends. If there are generous gaps between bowls lying shot, and there are blocking bowls ahead of the jack or receiving bowls near the ditch, or both, there is not much for an opponent to drive at. Recorded observations of more than a dozen interstate-level fours games on Queensland greens with a pace of about 16 seconds showed that the percentages of reaching shots played were as follows:

Fast Shot Frequency of Members of Highly-Ranked Fours Teams				
	Leads	Seconds	Thirds	Skips
Reaching Shots (including drives)	0%	9%	19%	27%
Drives (included in previous)	0%	1.8%	3.5%	8.4%

In other words, these are the approximate ratios of reaching shots decided as tactically opportune by expert and prudent players. The observations showed that accurate drivers tended to use the drive somewhat more than average. To benefit team performances, clubs could identify any tendency towards excessive use of drives or reaching shots generally by recording statistics for practice games and making comparisons. They could bracket percentages to obtain comparable benchmarks for 4-bowl pairs games.

Communicating

Communicating the Choice of Shot

Skips should acquaint their teams with their tactical thinking. Brief opportunities to communicate among teams occur when changing ends. Team members can exchange views in mid-rink out of earshot of opponents. Skips should avoid unsettling their teams with flamboyant changes of end length.

Skips can use verbal head directions effectively when conditions are favourable. Noise from the environment or hearing impairments of players adversely interferes with verbal directing. Skips (and thirds) should avoid verbose information.

If the tactical circumstances are complex or if the required shot has a fine margin for error, they could invite players to the head for a personal inspection.

A simple direction such as "beat your last bowl" is often all that a player requires. Skips should avoid vague directions, such as "be up", "put one behind", or "come through the head". Sometimes they require a bowl in a position that is the same distance from the mat as another bowl at rest. In such instances, they could indicate that the bowl at rest is a guide for appropriate delivery speed or length.

They should avoid negative instructions such as "don't hit that bowl in the approach". Otherwise, they make bowlers more aware of the risks of a shot than of its positive tactical objectives.

Alternatively, skips can use visual signals in directing a head, particularly if circumstances are unfavourable for verbal directions. They should not leave their leads guessing about where to place the mat and jack. They can use the fingers on one or both hands to beckon (bring the mat farther forward), to push (take the mat farther back), or to pat downward (place the mat where you are). They can plant a foot or hold a white cloth to indicate where they want a jack or bowl to come to rest. They can similarly indicate the required point of impact for an attacking shot. They can use an outstretched arm to indicate the required hand of play.

Skips should accurately communicate the result of shots. If a skip reports a delivery that is a metre short as being "two metres short", the corrective attempt is likely to be a metre long. Skips should indicate distances in front of or behind the jack, which are hard to gauge from the mat, by planting a foot in a jack high position. By converting distances along the rink to distances across the rink, skips give players on the mat a better visible guide to the requirements or result of shots. Skips and thirds must remember to mark all their teams' touchers.

Skips should incorporate positive motivational messages in their verbal and non-verbal communication. They should acknowledge careful attempts at playing as directed, particularly when those attempts produce favourable results. They should avoid any temptation to offer undeserved praise. For example, a draw to the jack that finishes over two metres past the jack is not a good attempt by most criteria and hardly deserves accolades as a 'handy back bowl'.

Communication Within Teams

Body language and oral communication of skips should be mutually consistent; otherwise, they convey mixed messages to teams. Players are likely to take more notice of body language than of spoken communications. Communication initiated by skips has some inherent limitations whereby:

- communicating may be rendered difficult by environmental noise
 - communicating opportunities are limited by physical separation on the rink, which may give rise to inferences of aloofness
 - communicating may be limited to bowl playing directions
 - motivational and cohesive feedback might be overlooked
 - communicating may be primarily one way
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- communicating among team members as they change ends might be infrequent.
- casual communicating among the rest of the team might not be task-oriented.

Those limitations may be minimised by:

- shortening lines of communication: possibly through collective pre-game tactical planning, and by free exchanges when changing ends.
- developing unambiguous signs and gestures for communicating information when distance or environmental noise inhibits communicating orally
- inviting two-way communication among all members of the teams, which provides a network for evaluating observations and suggestions.
- including informational and motivational exchanges when teams confer on change-overs
- accepting that skips retain responsibility for the team and the ultimate authority for decision-making, but that skips are equal partners in the communication and mutual support processes.

Courtesies During Games

Bowlers should address one another by their given names during the course of a game. It is good sportsmanship to acknowledge displays of exceptional skill. Flukes are simply revelations of unrecognised opportunities. They balance out over time, so it serves no purpose to take too much notice of them. After games, the graceful losers should congratulate the modest winners. They should avoid making excuses for their lack of success on the day a topic of conversation.

Bowlers should fairly share the task of kicking bowls after completion of an end. Bowlers should give the skip their loyal support and comply with directions. If the skip's bowl remains in the ditch from the previous end, teammates should dust it and place it handily near the mat before changing ends.

Opposing leads should facilitate play by courteously handing the mat and jack to each other, as convenient. Bowlers can similarly hand bowls to one another when convenient. The enjoyment of a game of bowls is diminished if either team indulges in gamesmanship. Inconsiderate distractions such as loud noises or conversation, visible movement of players objects or shadows, impact of kicked bowls, etc should be avoided while a bowler is on the mat preparing for delivery. Bowlers should avoid delaying play by leaving the rink without consent. They should avoid asking to leave the green unless there is a reasonable necessity. They should avoid interfering with the head until the result of the end has been agreed. If an opponent has obviously not counted all the bowls the team is entitled to count, good sportsmanship should prevail.

Bowlers should shake hands at the end of a game. After games, players should sit with their opponents. Home team players should offer visitors refreshment. After domestic games, winners are normally the first to offer drinks. After singles matches, markers should be included in the invitation. Considerate thought and common sense are the keys to acceptable standards. Courteous losers normally reciprocate in turn.

In changing ends, bowlers should avoid straying on to neighbouring rinks or otherwise distracting play on them. Borrowed personal items such as tape measures should be returned to their owners with thanks. Mats and jacks should be collected and returned to the usual distribution point. Bowlers should treat one another, the way they expect to be treated by others.

Tactical Practice

Practice Head Reading

A useful method of teaching and practicing head reading and shot selecting skills is through the setting of heads that illustrate tactical problems or challenges. The method works better if bowlers are available in groups for studying and discussing among themselves the tactical options available and their own choices of the percentage shot. Some method of distinguishing bowls of one's 'own team' from those of the 'opposing team' is useful.

Game theory or common logic might persuade one to feel that some rules could be developed for comprehensively



analysing the lie of a head and for selecting of the percentage shot to play in the immediate circumstances. For providing practice in these skills, coaches commonly set hypothetical heads for analysis by their client group. Surprisingly, even skips of state and national teams often read heads and identify the tactical opportunities they offer quite differently. Therefore, they often have wide differences in their choices of the percentage shot, yet are able to offer well-argued and convincing explanations in support of their choice. However, even bowlers of this calibre could sometimes greatly misjudge the degree of difficulty of selected shots, and there might well be scope for greater development of structure in the art of head reading and shot selection. Some basic approaches appear under the 'shot selecting' heading.

The Phantom Bowler

The exercise described under this heading is attributed to Jimmy Davidson former English National Bowls Coach, and appears in the Scottish Bowls Coaches Manual. I has proven equally effective in Australia.

A fours team competes against a 'phantom bowler' who would ordinarily be the team coach. Team members deliver their bowls from the mat. The phantom bowler at the opposite end of the rink either places or kicks bowls into the head. The opposing skip directs the team's players from the head in the usual way. The team plays a couple of trial ends, during which the phantom bowler assesses their standard or ability. The phantom bowler 'delivers' the first bowl each end. Order of play then alternates in the usual way so that the team skip plays the last bowl.

The phantom bowler avoids 'drawing the shot' too often. Otherwise, the team would get too much practice in attacking play, and insufficient experience at establishing, consolidating and defending a head. The phantom bowler tries to give players adequate opportunities to test their skills whatever their positions in the team. During or after each end, the phantom bowler uses open question technique to encourage positive discussion about the standard of the green, the tactical opportunities and risks that emerged, and how the team handled those challenges.

Phantom bowler exercises provide valuable learning experience and practice.

