VISUALLY IMPAIRED

LAWN BOWLS

COACHING FOR

COACHES-

A GUIDE

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Visually Impaired Bowls

Coaching for Coaches

About the author

David Stott is a sighted bowler and has achieved personal success at club level (Club Champion indoors and outdoors three times each to date) and has represented Somerset. He is a qualified Club Coach and member of the Somerset Bowls Coaching Association. He has been a member of the County Coaching Team, taking skills days to several clubs.

David was introduced to the world of visually impaired bowling by his friend and fellow club-member, Bob Rossiter - a Visually Impaired Bowls England international of some years' standing. David has been Bob's coach at the Disability Bowls Masters, the UK indoor and outdoor internationals and the World Blind Bowls championships in 2013. He has also front-coached a B1 Northern Ireland player.

In June 2014, David was appointed Team Manager for Visually Impaired Bowls England.

David (left) and Bob at the UK outdoor singles international 2012
Introduction

All visually impaired (VI) bowlers are entitled to use aids to assist them in their game. For some, simply being told the position of woods in the head (using the clock system) is sufficient but, for many, ‘higher level’ aids are required. These can include having the centre-line string put down or using a monocular. Some bowlers, however, find the assistance of a ‘helper’ vital. For some, the ‘helper’ may simply help the player with positioning the mat, guiding the player onto the mat and handing her/him the bowls, guiding the bowler down the rink and around the head, deciding the shot(s) and collecting the bowls together following the decision of shots scored at the conclusion of each ‘end’. This ‘helper’ is sometimes referred to as ‘coach’ or ‘director’ and, in competitive bowls, these titles are perhaps more indicative of the role these people should have.

At the World Blind Bowls Championships, held in Worthing in July of 2013, it was only too evident that the most successful nations’ bowlers were assisted, to a great degree, by their ‘directors’ (coaches). This applied at all levels of impairment – from B1 through to B4. The director, by various means, would ‘give the player the green’ and the player then only needed to get the ‘weight’ right. I say ‘only’ because, as we all know, ‘weight’ is not an easy thing to master and even with the best ‘direction’ from the coach, the bowler still has to bowl her/his woods along the line indicated by the coach.

The relationship between bowler and coach (I will use the terms ‘coach’ and ‘coaching’ hereafter) is, of course, key – for it is the coach’s role not only to provide physical support to the bowler, but to provide moral and psychological support as well. A bowler lacking confidence or becoming dispirited is unlikely to perform to the best of her/his ability. Not all bowlers will want a particular
type of coaching and not all current coaches will be familiar with, or happy to employ, the coaching methods described below. It is, perhaps, a matter of ‘horses for courses’ (if you’ll forgive the cross-sport metaphor) – but, from the play shown at the World Championships, the closer the bowler and coach work together, the better the results.

There were several methods of coaching on display at Worthing and I will give a brief description of those I observed below and I will start with probably the most demanding, for player and coach, coaching the B1 (totally blind) bowler. *For simplicity, all references are for right-handed bowlers and all bowlers are referred to as ‘he’ – for no other reason than to reduce the number of keystrokes!*

**The Basics of Bowls**

Although a bowl takes a curved path in its course from hand to jack, bowls is essentially a game of straight lines. In order to get the bowl to finish ‘on the jack’, the bowler has to send the bowl with the correct 'weight' along the correct 'line of delivery'. For this to happen, the player and/or coach has to determine where the aiming point is for the particular green in the conditions prevailing at the time. (See diagram below.) Of course, in the outdoor game, these conditions can vary minute-by-minute.

![Fig.1 Aiming Point/Delivery line.](image)

The bowler should be pointing his feet at the aiming point with shoulders at right-angles to the line of delivery. The step (if taken) should be along the line of delivery (‘walking the line’) and the follow-through should end with the fingers pointing at the aiming point. This delivery action is exactly the same, whether bowling forehand or backhand.
Different bowls manufacturers produce different models of bowl and each model has its own drawline (see illustration below).

**Fig. 2** The drawlines (i.e. the illustrative path bowls will take from hand to jack) for Drakes Pride bowls. (N.B. not to scale.)

It is therefore imperative that if the coach is going to be able to give the player the correct 'green', he must know what the player's woods are likely to do, must be able to identify what corrections are necessary (given the green & other conditions) and to help the player make those corrections during the course of the game. Moreover, the coach should watch each and every bowl - both of his player and the opposition - as valuable information can be learned about what the green is doing, what the opposition's bowls can do and therefore what tactical/positional shots your player could employ.

**Coaching V. I. Bowlers**

Unlike any other bowler, the B1 bowler is entirely dependent upon the information received from his coach and from the marker. All bowlers have their own, individual delivery and preferences and some B1 bowlers can gauge the ‘green’ by feeling for the string and measuring, with their fingers, the distance to the left or right of the string they must send their bowl in order for it to finish on the centre-line. This will have been developed over some considerable time and practice and the player will use the trial ends (and
deliveries during the game) to judge what adjustments need to be made to their ‘standard’ distances off the string. Some deliver from a kneeling position, some from a crouch and others from an upright stance. In a kneeling position, with their left hand well forward, the bowler will ‘know’ the green to take by brushing his left thumb as he lines up with practice swings and delivers his bowl.

Above: Eric Gallagher (England B1 bowler) kneels on the mat and feels for the string. Below: Having decided the ‘green’ to take, the bowler lines himself up for delivery.

Another kneeling technique is to place the right thigh along the delivery line while kneeling on the left knee and swinging the arm parallel to the thigh when delivering the bowl. Bowlers using crouching or upright deliveries might use the placement of their feet to give them direction and by carefully controlling their upper body movement and delivery arm, they can achieve a remarkable degree of consistency. Indeed, because of the impairment, V.I. bowlers are much more meticulous about their positioning on the
mat. Many sighted bowlers would do well to remember that the greater the consistency one has on the mat and in delivery, the more accurate the bowl will be and the better the outcome.

Above: Sarah Marshall (England B1 bowler & UK champion / world silver-medallist) lines herself up on the mat. She feels for the string and places her left foot meticulously in the same position for each delivery, on forehand, backhand or jack. Sarah uses Drakes Pride bowls as the dimple grips on these bowls fit her hand precisely. Choice of bowls is itself very important.

Left: Sarah gauges her left foot position on the mat in preparation for her back-hand delivery.

N.B. Sarah is left-handed!
Some B1 bowlers benefit from 'front coaching' where the coach stands in front of the bowler (at an agreed distance which has been worked out over time and through experience) with legs astride the intended line of delivery. It is then by use of voice (or sometimes hand-claps) that the coach gives the line to the player. It is incumbent upon the coach to learn from every delivery and make adjustments accordingly - the purpose being to position the head (or hands) exactly on the delivery line in order that the bowler can focus on the voice (hand-clap) and deliver the bowl accurately.
Examples of vocal instructions are: "Bowling to me. 5..4..3..2..1", "Swing, Swing, Swing and bowl to me!" Whichever method is adopted, the V.I. bowler is using the stereoscopic feature of our hearing to pinpoint where the sound is coming from and hence where to aim his bowl.

Another method observed with B1 bowlers is 'back coaching'. Put simply, this is where the coach positions himself behind the bowler and directs the bowler to deliver along the required line. This could be by making small adjustments to the bowler's positioning on the mat or by observing 'practice swings' and indicating "left a bit" or "right a bit" - until the bowlers swing is along the delivery line - followed by "Bowl!"

Left: Back-coaching from the coach's perspective. This player's delivery style is that he places his right foot on the mat, pointing along the delivery line, with his left foot extended backward.

He is left-handed, bowling his back-hand and you can just make out his delivered bowl by his left thigh.

Note the straight line from his rear foot, through his shoulders to the path of the bowl. This wood turned out to be 'shot'!
B2 bowlers are going to have a range of impairment - from a bare perception of light and shadow to a shape or form at a short distance. In this case, the front- and back-coaching methods described above could be used. In addition, a variation on front-coaching is the positioning of the coach's foot off the string at a set distance from the front edge of the mat. The bowler can just make out the toe-end of the coach's foot and it is this at which he is aiming. The coach's responsibility is to get his foot in the correct place - and to get it out of the way if the bowler is slightly off-line! Again, this method needs time, patience and practice to get right.

Above Left: Having practiced this repeatedly, coach Barry Walsh has stepped out five paces from the mat and, again through experience, know his player needs to take the green at the end of Barry's toe. Above Right: Barry can either give his player the green by standing front-on to him or by standing to the right of the string (for a right-hander's fore-hand) and indicating the green with his toe-end (below, left).

Below Right: Barry gives the green on his player's back-hand.
It might be argued that such 'front coaching' methods are little removed from the placing of two beer mats on the rink for the sighted complete novice to bowl through when first being taught - but at the end of the day, this method works. As long as there is no physical contact between coach and player at the point of delivery, it appears that any coaching method is acceptable for World Blind Bowls.

The B3 bowler has more sight - again over a range of impairment - and front-coaching is less-frequently used in England than it is elsewhere in the world. The question is, "Why should this be so?" If front-coaching is good enough in all sight categories for the World Champions and Runners-up, it seems logical that we, too ought to at least give front-coaching more consideration. Back-coaching (as previously described) may also be appropriate - and, as always, encouragement, advice and moral support are more of the coach's roles.

The B4 bowler has the least visual impairment of those recognised for competition by World Blind Bowls. Again, this sight category covers a range of impairment. Some B4 bowlers, for example, may have very restrictive 'tunnel vision' whilst others may be able to see that there is a jack and woods in the head but has no perception of distance or where the bowls are in relation to each other or the jack. Whether or not the bowler can 'see' the head, more active coaching for B4 bowlers was seen to reap rewards at the Worthing World Championships. The marker's 'clock-calling' will, of course, assist the B4 bowler - but, at present, the coach's role in England is much more about advice and support. If more visually impaired bowlers 'grew up' with front-coaching, perhaps there would be a greater acceptance of these methods.
Concluding Remarks

In any sport, the relationship between player and coach is a critical one. There must be mutual respect and trust. Player and coach both have roles and responsibilities and, although the physical delivery of the bowl is down to the player, the coach has the responsibility to give the player the best possible chance of success. If the wood ends up elsewhere than intended, the 'fault' does not necessarily lie with the player and the coach will do well to remember to accept the 'blame' at times.

For some, the sheer joy of being on a bowling green is pleasure enough. For the competitive bowler, however, playing really well is what brings real pleasure and satisfaction. Winning is not necessarily the be-all and end-all ............... but no-one will deny that the ultimate is 'gold', first-place, being the best.

Players and coaches, working hard together, can improve performance. VIBE missed out on a team medal at Worthing on shot difference. An improvement of only 2.5 shots per game would have seen us take the team bronze. We have a big gap to close to get up alongside Australia and South Africa ........ but together we can do it!

Finally, I would like to express my gratitude to all those who have helped in the development of this guide - from the bowlers and coaches who agreed to be photographed to the friends and colleagues who have offered their views and suggestions.

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