

Boccia Theory

Over the past 2 months, I have spent extensive time researching and reviewing Boccia games from the various international competitions that were held last year. I did so with the aim of acquiring more knowledge of the game, and also to discover the main factors that constitute a winning end.

I felt that last year, my equipment did not lend to allowing me to put on court the performances I know I am capable of producing. I am confident that, with the new ramp and a more reliable set of balls, I will have all the tools necessary to compete successfully in Beijing. Since coming back from Colombia, my main focus, apart from the ramp, has been to develop and improve my current ball set. I resolved that I did not want to settle for anything less than a perfect roll, as anything less is simply not conducive to competing successfully. I decided that I would use one of the wooden ramps from CPA as they are built with a smooth curve line which would allow me to test the balls without needing to worry whether the ramp was contributing towards the characteristics of their roll. I have spent multiple hours in training since Colombia on testing and improving the balls. Whilst we concede that this is always going to be an ever changing and ongoing process, I am confident that at this point in time, my ball set is at international standard. Once the new ramp arrives, I may find that I need to do some fine tuning, but it should be an easy process from the foundation I've created.

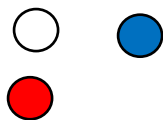
The purpose of my research however, had nothing to do with equipment. From my experiences last year, I knew there was something I was missing and that, in order to be successful, I needed to change my game and do some things differently, I just didn't know exactly what it was that I needed to do. This was the purpose of my research; to find out what constitutes a winning end and where this was lacking from my game.

I went about watching YouTube videos of BC3 games from the Asian Teams and Pairs Championships, the European Teams and Pairs Championships, the Seoul World Open and the Poznan World Open. I went in with the intention of analysing ball by ball the strategy and gameplan of the team that won each particular end. There were many things I found in common which seemed to be the fundamental factors in the winning and losing of an end. It all came down to the way the end was constructed. Much like a tennis rally, the team who built the head favourably for themselves always won the end. In this manner, the fundamental aspects I have identified that constitute the winning of an end are:

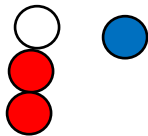
1. Give your opponent as few opportunities as possible to access the Jack

It goes without saying, however there is far more to this than meets the eye. We actually have much more control over this area of the game than we believe, and it all comes down to effective drawing, and measuring drives. It has come to my attention that the worst possible shot you can play is when you draw slightly too hard and bounce off the Jack, giving your opponent a wedge to play into. It is actually better to miss entirely by a big margin, as it makes your opponent play onto a single target rather than the kind of wedge that is presented when you bounce off the Jack. So this made me think how to avoid enacting such a shot. I firstly started by trying to understand what makes this shot occur. Through this, I realised it is usually a matter of the ball rolling on just slightly further than you anticipated. It then made me think that why have we not addressed this properly in the past. I believe this comes down to fundamental philosophy surrounding the shot. We always aim to draw on to a vacant Jack. Whilst this is obviously the best case scenario in switching an open Jack, it also opens the opportunity for this mistake to occur. It is in all honesty the tiniest mistake, and it could come down to just 2 or 3 cm

on the ramp. I believe this inherently has made us overlook the detriment when the shot occurs. Because the mistake is so small, it is usually referred to as “unlucky” and glossed over, with the reality of exactly how bad the shot is being subconsciously ignored. However, as we all probably realise when we really think about the situation that is presented when a draw ball bounces off the Jack, a golden opportunity is undeniably granted to the opposition to use that ball to their advantage and secure the head of the Jack. I then thought to myself, what is the best way to correct this mistake. If it is often committed unknowingly, where you genuinely believe, in accordance with the calibration, that the ball has the right pace put on it, how is it possible to correct it? It dawned on me that this basic principle of the ball rolling slightly further than you anticipated can easily be worked around. If that is the cause of the mistake, then the right course of action would be to in fact aim not to draw onto the Jack, but to a spot just short of the Jack. In this case, if the ball rolls as you would expect it to, you would either have switched with a ball slightly short but in line of the opposition:

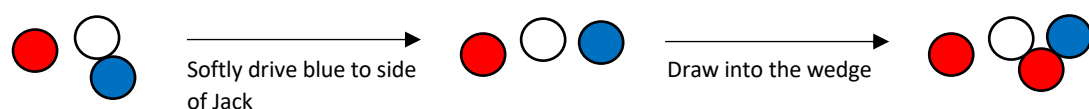


Or if you didn't switch, you would have the opportunity to push and follow your ball onto the Jack and secure a very strong hold:

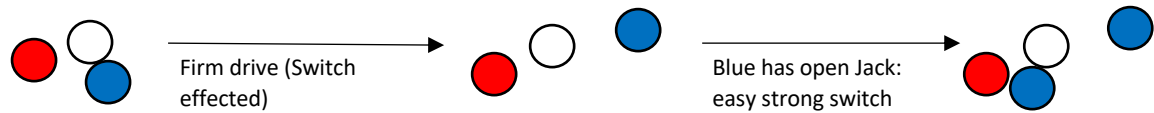


It also resolves the issue presented with drawing onto the Jack in that, if the ball rolls slightly further than you anticipate, it will not bounce off the Jack, rather, it will simply roll onto the Jack and effect a perfect switch.

The second aspect associated with the theory of giving your opponent as few opportunities as possible to access the Jack is measuring drives. By measuring drives, I mean using more finesse when driving so that you position opposition balls advantageously for yourself, rather than just eliminating them from play. The basic principle I have come up with is that you should almost never effect a switch with a drive. Obviously there are exceptions to this, however most often this is a very sound rule to follow. The reason I say this is driving will more often than not expose the Jack, and if you are switching and leaving the Jack exposed, your opposition has the opportunity to secure the Jack. The easy way to combat this is to drive considerably. This would infer moving opposition balls enough to expose the Jack for yourself, whilst ensuring they stay close enough to still hold shot to give you the next ball. See the flowchart below for a basic example:



Whilst only demonstrating a basic example, this demonstrates the basic principle and it is evident that the application of this principle may be utilised in more complex situations. If we were to examine the effect a more traditional or less considerate drive would have on the dynamics of this head, it becomes clear how it plays into the opponent's hands. The flowchart below demonstrates this:



As shown, it is far better to be measured with drive balls as it allows you to build the head in your favour. The fewer opportunities you grant your opponent with access to the Jack, the better your chance of winning the end. As a rule, never switch until you have control of the head. This starts with drawing effectively and controlling drives.

2. Use opponent balls to your advantage

This principle is essentially a broader application of point 1. It refers to the concept of moving opposition balls to the side of the Jack in order to produce a more strongly founded head. Keeping your opponent balls close to the Jack presents an enormous advantage, provided you can execute the strategy. If you can manipulate your opponent's balls so that they are adjacent but close to the Jack, it allows you to create a buffer or wedge that you can play your balls into. This provides a better opportunity for you as it allows for higher percentage shots, and less perfect Boccia. When you open the Jack up completely by driving opposition balls away from the Jack, it gives you only a single target to aim at. If you are able to move your opponent's balls so that they remain a part of the end, but sit on the side of the Jack, you can actually double or triple your target area, meaning you can afford to go in with less concern for pace, as if it is too hard, there is no risk of bouncing off the Jack because of the buffer provided by the other balls. This concept is further detailed, as you must also be conscious of what side of the Jack you move your opponent's balls to as this has an angular impact as the end progresses. I will demonstrate this below:

Figure 1 shows an end where the blue player has moved the red 1st ball to the right hand side of the Jack:

Fig. 1

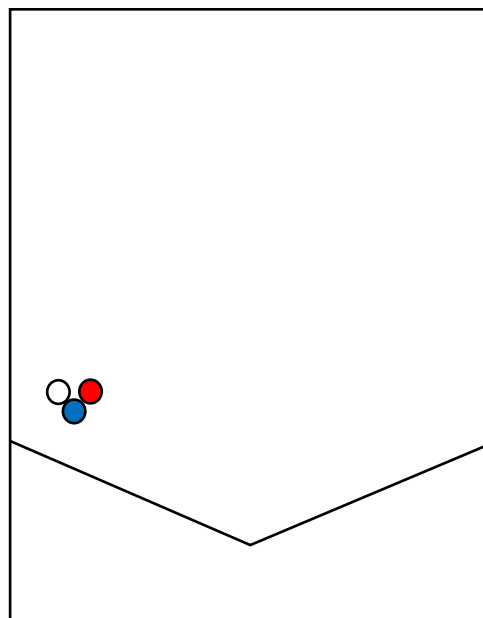
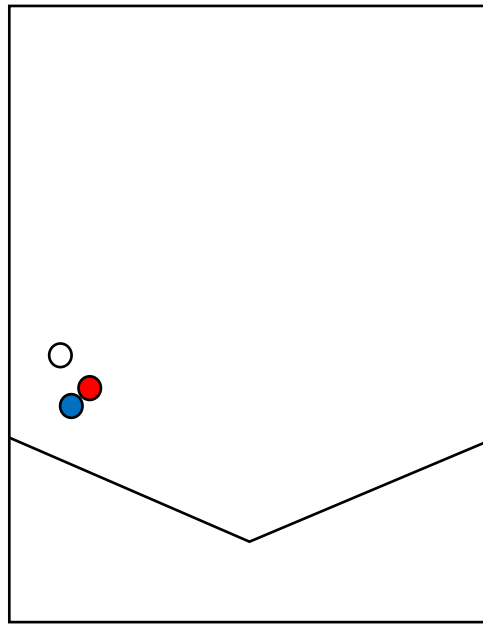


Figure 2 shows the same head after red had attacked it:

Fig. 2



As is shown, due to the angles from which the balls are coming from, after red has attacked the head, the Jack moves back and the red that was on the side once again disrupts the blue angle and makes it difficult for the blue player.

Figure 3 shows an end in which the blue player has moved the red 1st ball to the left side of the Jack:

Fig. 3

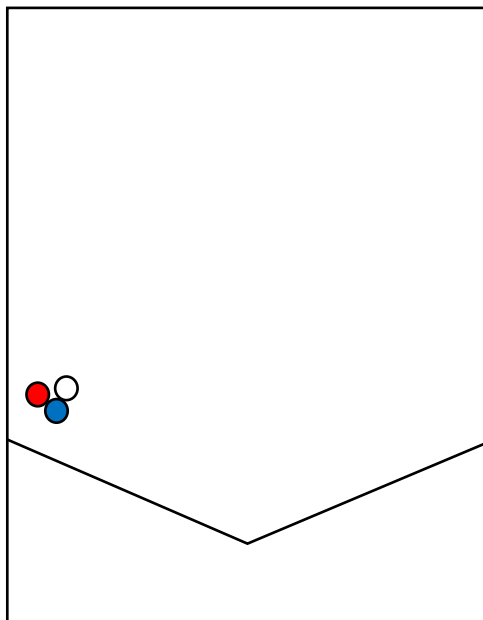
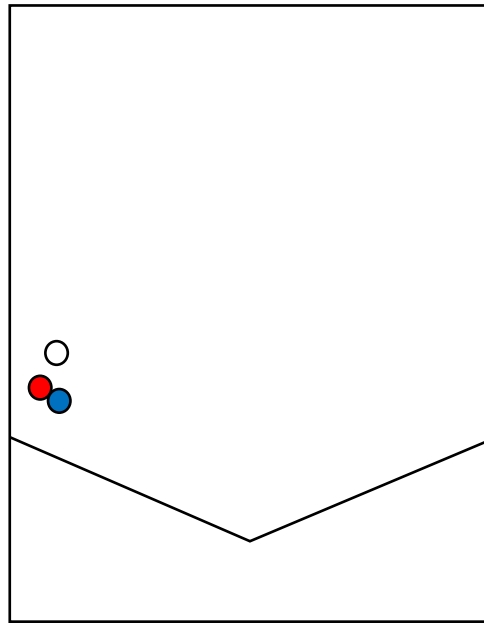


Figure 4 shows the same head after red has attacked it:

Fig. 4



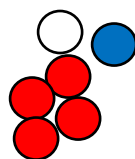
As shown in this instance, due to the angles and orientations of the balls, as the Jack moves back in response to the red player's attack, the blue line will never be disrupted by the red 1st ball and the Jack will always remain contestable. In fact, the Jack actually becomes obscured for the red player in this scenario.

It can therefore be concluded that not only should we consider building heads with our opponent's balls, we should also consider which side we choose to move our opposition's balls to. As a general rule, I believe that, where possible, you should always try and move opponent's balls to the opponent's side (left if red, right if blue) of the Jack.

3. Dominate the area in front of the Jack

I believe it should be the most basic intention of any Boccia player to play balls in front of the Jack. If nothing else, endeavouring to dominate the area in front of the Jack will always leave you in a good defensive position in any end. However, it is not only a good defensive mechanism, it is also an integral feature in the winning of an end.

I believe less emphasis should be put on switching efficiently. If you are able to generate a switch with 4 balls, where all 4 of those balls are crowding the head of the Jack, it is going to be very difficult for your opponent to get back in the end. I do concede that switching with as few balls as possible should be the aim, however if it doesn't eventuate, I don't think it should be a concern provided that you are playing balls conservatively to the head of the Jack and in the end generate a well built head. The diagram below is demonstrative of this:



Whilst it has evidently taken the red player 4 balls to switch a fairly basic head in this end, it has actually ended up very favourably for them. The key to this is that the red player has played calmly and conservatively with the intention of eventually nudging the cluster onto the Jack, which has been achieved with the 4th ball. This is generated with the mind frame of playing to the front of the Jack. It is a very simple concept but an enormously effective one. If you have the ability to crowd the head and temper an aggressive style, you will always end up in a favourable position and will force your opponent to win the end.

4. Short 1st ball on longer ends (>7.5 m)

This particular point is more strategically based than theory. However, I noted it as a tactic which produced a winning end that set the tone of a match and ultimately proved the difference between the 2 teams. I noticed it in a pairs match between GB and Sweden at the European Teams and Pairs Championships and once I analysed how the end progressed, it became clear that it had a fundamental impact on the deciding of the end. The link to the game is below:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gYnqv7rBi7c>

The strategy of playing your 1st ball short at longer ends is far more complex than it seems. It opens up a range of possibilities and can be super effective against unsuspecting opposition. By playing your 1st ball short and in-line, it immediately provokes a decision based response from your opposition. They must decide straight up whether they are going to attempt to drive your ball to clear the line to the Jack, or whether they are going to try and contest the Jack by drawing. As was reflected in the GB Sweden game, most players would elect to contest the Jack, as they would inherently see the red ball as being a bad shot, rather than a deliberate one. The reason why this decision is so important is that controlling pace at this length is so difficult and generating a poor switch is highly likely when drawing. If a poor switch is effected, it is easy to follow up by knocking your own ball onto the Jack, or, as is demonstrated in the aforementioned match, you can draw between your opponent's ball and the Jack provided it is sufficiently close to the Jack.

The reason this differs from playing your 1st ball onto the Jack is that it invokes a decision-making process. If you play your 1st ball onto the Jack, your opponent doesn't need to make a decision, as the only course of action if they want to win the end is to attack. Also, playing your 1st ball with the intention of getting on decreases the margin for error as if the pace is incorrect you could bounce off or draw past the Jack. With playing it short, you are always at least going to have a ball in front of the Jack.

(The reason I believe a short 1st ball tactic is less effective on shorter ends is that controlling pace is much easier and it will be more likely that your opponent is able to effect a good switch by drawing).

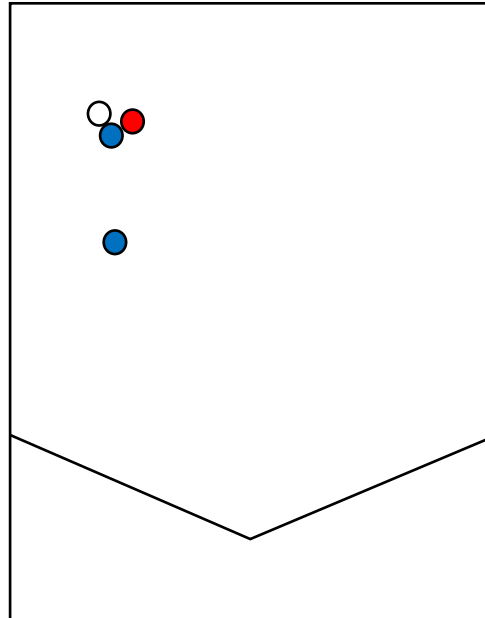
5. Pre-blocking on opposition long ends (>7 m)

This is a tactic utilised by José Macedo to great effect. He possesses a very soft 1st ball of each colour which do not roll any further than 6 m. Rather than not using them or using them last when his opposition plays long, he first uses them to block the line of his opponent to the Jack, and then contests the end. Due to a very soft ball's characteristics, the opponent will find it very difficult to move the ball from their line as the resistance the ball possesses means several drives are necessary to move it. In doing so, he effectively makes his opposition play multiple balls,

often they're harder ones, to even get a look at the head of the Jack. If done correctly, it is nearly impossible for the opponent to get back in the end as they simply do not have the firepower to contest the end after they have re-established a line to the Jack.

Figure 5 depicts the most perfect example of a 2 ball switch using a pre-blocking ball:

Fig. 5



As shown, the red player must now play through 2 balls to access the Jack, one of them being exceptionally soft and hence resistant.

These principles and strategies are all derived from research I have conducted and evaluated. I have come to the conclusion that such concepts are all primary constituents of a winning end. I do concede that there are likely many more theories and tactics which are contributors to the construction of a winning end, however I believe these are the most basic and noticeable factors. I strongly believe that from a tactical perspective, this is the direction we must move in in order to achieve greater success and become a more Boccia savvy and internationally competitive country.