

# From Core to Score:

## Shuffleboard Strategy for the Win!

*By Martin Shapiro*

There are principles of strategy in court shuffleboard that will take any player from novice to winner in quick succession. It's easy to learn these principles, and with some practice in execution you will soon be a force to be reckoned with on the courts. Refer to my Dictionary of Shuffleboard Terms if you aren't yet familiar with any of the specialized shuffleboard terms (first appearance in all caps) as you read on.

**CourtShuffleboard.com scope note:** Examples in this article use common competitive-play conventions and strategy assumptions. Rules, formats, hammer sequences, court conditions, terminology, and local practices vary by organization and venue; adapt the concepts accordingly.

### CORE STRATEGY

The core of good shuffleboard strategy consists of two simple rules: If you have the HAMMER, CLEAR-clear-clear-SCORE YOUR HAMMER; if your opponent has the hammer, try to STEAL THE HAMMER. This applies to every FRAME so long as the scores remain close and no one yet is about to win.

### SCORE YOUR HAMMER

When you have the hammer, the best way to ensure that you will have an OPEN BOARD to score it is to use your first three shots to keep the BOARD clear ("clear-clear-clear-score"). Push those first three discs fast to clear off both your opponent's discs and your discs. If the opportunity arises to HIDE one of your first three shots for an extra score, take it, unless you have a strong lead in scores and the end of the game is near at hand, in which case it is better to avoid putting a disc on the board as your opponent will be looking for any opportunity to KITCHEN you.

### STEAL THE HAMMER

There are three ways to steal the hammer: 1) keep your opponent from making a score; 2) score your own disc in the same frame; 3) or both! Unless your opponent is significantly ahead in score (the value of two or more discs and no hammer shots coming next for you to even it up), put up a GUARD first. Your next shot depends on what your opponent does. If he puts up a SCORING DISC, clear it. If he puts up his own guard, you can either score your next disc BEHIND your guard or FILL IN to stop your opponent from scoring behind their guard. If he puts up a DOUBLING DISC, BLOCK it if doing that won't give your opponent a guard to HIDE a disc, or else clear it. After your last shot, you either want to have a HIDDEN scoring disc or have a series of blocks IN FRONT of the SCORING DIAGRAM that prevent your opponent from scoring their hammer. In most cases, using your last shot to complete the series of blocks is just as valuable or more valuable than trying to score your own disc.

## WATCH THE SCOREBOARD

Look at the current scores every frame before you shoot your first disc, and during a frame if you need to. The scores will dictate your best strategy going forward. (While you are at it, check to make sure the math of the recorded scores is correct at the end of every frame.) When the scores are about even or you are ahead, stick to Core Strategy. In a POINTS GAME, whoever is ahead in scores benefits from adding to their score, even if the opponent adds the same amount in a frame. If you are the one behind in scores, to steal the hammer favor BLOCKING THE BOARD over scoring your own disc in the same frame, as this prevents your opponent from advancing towards the winning score with his hammer shot.

## TO THE KITCHEN

If you aren't trying to come back from being behind in scores, use KITCHEN SPEED PLUS when attempting to KITCHEN your opponent's disc. This avoids leaving your opponent's disc scoring if you err on the slow side with your shot. The most valuable time to kitchen a disc is on your hammer shot, especially if you can STICK and score your own disc at the same time. With a few exceptions, do not try to kitchen a disc that isn't within the SCORING TRIANGLE. The exceptions are: 1) your best option is to clear the disc anyway and there is little risk that you will give your opponent a useful guard if you stick (a FREE RIDE, for example); 2) you are behind in score, it's your last disc of the frame, your opponent has the hammer, and there is no other disc currently in front of the board that will help you block the board to STOP THE HAMMER; or 3) your opponent is about to win making you desperate to set them back in score.

## KITCHEN BAITING

If you are two or more discs behind in score and you don't have upcoming hammers to make up the difference, switch from Core Strategy to putting up KITCHEN BAIT as you need to create an opportunity to set your opponent's score back. Along the way take any opportunity to score extra discs. This also applies when the end of the game is near and the math of the scores predicts that your opponent will win. For instance, in a doubles 75-POINT-GAME, the score is 60 YELLOW to 58 BLACK and black is OUT at the FOOT. Yellow has two hammers coming in the following two frames which will likely bring yellow to the 75-point winning score, so black must put up kitchen bait in the current frame to try to set yellow back in score, even at the risk of possibly being kitched himself. Similarly, in the second-to-last frame of a FRAME GAME, if your opponent has over a ten-point lead, you must do your best to get at least one of his discs in the kitchen.

## KITCHEN BLOCKING

Don't block your opponent's disc that is in the kitchen except when they are close to winning and it is your last disc of the frame on their hammer. This is especially true when the disc in the kitchen is DEEP in the kitchen, making it more likely that when clearing it your opponent's CUE DISC will stick in the kitchen. Instead, score your own disc, usually on the opposite side of the court in the seven as far to the outside as you can to make it difficult for your opponent to use it to REVERSE THE KITCHEN. If it is earlier in a frame you can place a guard on that opposite side from the kitched disc (a TAMPA if you are shooting to your side of the court or a ST PETE if you are shooting to the other side) to be used on your next shot to place a hidden scoring disc. If you shoot on the same side of the court as your opponent's kitchen, whether a block or an unhidden scoring disc, your opponent will have a shot at bumping it up to reverse the kitchen, or you might leave the kitched disc exposed enough to be cleared anyway and your shot to block was just a wasted disc.

## STAY AWAY FROM THE CHASE

Don't CHASE your opponent's hidden scoring disc. On your second or third disc of a frame, it is usually better to just clear the guard that's hiding the scoring disc, maybe even clearing the scoring disc as well with a COMBINATION shot. When you chase instead, you risk three bad results: you miss clearing; you GLANCE into the kitchen; you clear but it's easy for your opponent to hide another disc behind the same guard, maybe even better hidden. On the other hand, you might go after the scoring disc if you are confident you can leave your own hidden scoring disc in its place, or sometimes when you can kitchen the scoring disc. When shooting the hammer, unless your opponent is close to the win or significantly ahead in scores, it is just as valuable to score your hammer shot as it is to use the shot to clear your opponent. But if you can do both with the hammer shot, then go right ahead, unless it's a tough shot. If you don't have the hammer and it's your last shot, do what you can to limit your opponent to the one-disc score: make your own hidden scoring disc if you can or complete blocking the board to stop your opponent from scoring a second disc with the hammer shot.

## TAKE THE HIDE

Unless you are significantly ahead in score and the win is in sight, or you need to kitchen your opponent to set them back in score to prevent them from reaching the winning score, take the opportunity to hide a scoring disc whenever there is a good guard available before your last shot of the frame (unless, of course, your opponent has a scoring disc you need to clear). This is true even when the guard disc you will use isn't your color. Your opponent may misplace their own guard giving you one you can use, or they may stick when clearing, giving you a guard. Be alert for these opportunities! But be careful if the court has DRIFT. It may be impossible to fully hide a disc behind the guard when shooting into the drift, leaving your disc exposed for your opponent to kitchen.

## DON'T BE A SUCKER

When you are ahead in score and especially when you are close to the win, your opponent will be looking for a way to set you back in score. Watch out for the SUCKER'S HIDE! Your opponent may purposely put up a badly positioned guard to get you to shoot a disc onto the board, thus creating an opportunity to kitchen you. Even if you succeed in hiding your disc well, there is almost always some way to send it into the kitchen with a COMBINATION SHOT, if not a direct shot. Stick to Core Strategy to bring you to the win. There is no need to RUSH THE GAME by trying to get that extra score.

## SNUGGLE TO THE WIN

Although the SNUGGLE is inadvisable early in a game or when scores are tight, they can help you advance to the win in a points game. If you have a very strong lead in the scores, you can snuggle to get an extra score to bring the game to a quicker close. Even though this is technically rushing the game, it is a valid strategy when you are confident in the accuracy of your shots. Don't take the snuggle in front of your opponent's doubling disc as they can use your snuggle to double and possibly put you on the line at the same time. But you can snuggle to your own doubling disc, especially when your opponent has the hammer. Snuggling is also a good option in front of your opponent's PIGEON, often a better choice than tapping them into the kitchen as this avoids giving them the opportunity to reverse the kitchen. But you better be good at snuggling right up to the disc on the board or you will be giving your opponent a golden opportunity to kitchen you as well as stick to score.

## DON'T COMMIT SUICIDE

Hiding behind a Tampa is good strategy but hiding behind a St Pete that is on your own side of the court is very risky business. To make it, you must send your disc down SUICIDE ALLEY, which is the shot with

the highest chance of shooting your own disc into the kitchen. If you are behind in scores and it is your last disc of the frame when your opponent has the hammer, it's a chance you may need to take. Otherwise, find something better.

## **PLAY THE DRIFT**

When playing black on a YELLOW COURT or yellow on a BLACK COURT, avoid the Tampa guard when you are shooting OUT in a frame as it will be difficult to place it correctly, hard to use, and your opponent can use it as their St Pete guard most of the time. Instead, play defensively by putting up a somewhat wide to the outside St Pete to prevent their use of a Tampa, then try to get more blocks up before their hammer shot to keep them from scoring. Rarely try to kitchen a scoring disc that is in the outside corner of a seven on a court that drifts toward the center on that side. It is too often that in the attempt you glance off and end up in the kitchen yourself. Clear it with a FAST CLEAR.

## **PLAY THE PERCENTAGES**

Best strategy for any hammer is the shot with the greatest chance of success while advancing your score. If you shoot to clear your opponent without a good chance of scoring your own disc as well, there is no advantage over just taking an easier shot to score your disc (unless you must get rid of your opponent's scoring disc to keep them from advancing to the win). Don't go after a hidden scoring disc with your hammer even if it's in the ten. It is only two points better to clear that ten than to score your own eight, and you might not succeed in the attempt to clear their ten. But sometimes the guard disc is so close to the scoring ten, it is easy to clear the ten, making for a high chance of success. Let the scoreboard tell you which is the best choice. Also factor into the percentages of success that whenever you shoot to clear a disc there is a chance that you will glance off into the kitchen, especially on a drift court.

## **BE A TEAM**

Your doubles partner is your teammate. You must work together to win your games. It is up to you to check your teammate's CLOSE DISCS and challenge CALLS when necessary. Watch to see if your partner wants you to look at a disc to tell them how far it sits over a line or how far it is behind a line. Work out ahead of time a method of communicating the distances, such as holding up fingers to represent the number of inches. Never admonish your partner or even give sour looks, rather give positive remarks when earned or encouragement when they need it. Just like you, your partner is there to enjoy the game. If your partner is open to it, you can point out errors in strategy between games to help them improve, but don't berate them for missing shots – everyone does it from time to time and everyone has off days. You want your partner to enjoy the day and keep coming back.

## **BREAKING THE RULES**

None of these rules for strategy apply all the time. You should adjust your game for a variety of factors including the strengths and weaknesses of your opponent, the court conditions (drift, speed, sticky spots, broken surface, wind, etc.) and your partner's performance that day as well as your own. If your opponent is edging ahead of you, playing the same good strategy as you but shooting a little better, you may also need to change your usual game to try to offset their advantage.

## TIPS TO REMEMBER

1. Some courts have stickier lines – look to see if the paint of the lines is broken or mottled. You may need a little extra speed on the disc to avoid LINERS.
2. Discs in the same set may vary in speed. If you find a slow one, you may want to shoot it out early in frames to avoid missing your hammer shots. The black discs are usually a little slower than the yellow. Also check the bottoms of the discs before a match starts. Note any edge chips that may cause a disc to slow or waver. Keep the chip on the edge closest to you when shooting.
3. Use the practice discs before a game to learn as much as you can about the speed and drift of a court along different lines of shooting – don't just shoot the practice discs randomly. Don't shoot a second practice disc for the same shot as a previous one – you can extrapolate what you need to know from the results of the first shot and it's better to use the second one to learn something else. Watch your opponent's practice shots – you'll be playing that color too and can learn from watching. The speed of a court may be somewhat faster shooting from one end than from the other. The drift of the court may vary from each end as well, although often you can confirm your observations about the drifts from your end by watching the practice shots from the other end for similar drift tendencies.
4. If the court is BEADED, later in a match there will be less beads as play progresses. Generally, the sides of the courts will remain fast while the centers will slow and possibly develop sticky spots. The kitchen will have the least beads of all as they get the most use from being used as the STARTING AREA. This will make it easier to get a disc to stick in the kitchen.
5. Don't let your opponent's chatter or stance distract you from the game. You have the right to silence and free movement when shooting. If you need to, ask your opponent politely to be quiet during your shot or to take a step back, or to lift their stick if they leave it down after shooting.
6. Don't vary your shots from the best strategy just because you are unsure of making a good shot. You will win more by following best strategy and having the occasional miss than by not following best strategy. Eventually, your shooting skills will catch up to your strategy skills.
7. When behind in the scores, if you already have two scoring discs and are shooting again the same frame, put up a third scoring disc even though leaving one or more discs exposed, unless that third disc PUTS A HANDLE ON one of your other scoring discs that is hidden.