

‘Marching.... into finals, 2009’

A full season of bowls is over, final fours are decided. March 2009 is the month of miracles and premierships medals. Brett Wilkie and Kelsey Cottrell have their names posted as the final two to triumph as 2009 Australian Open AO singles champs (well done you two, great stuff).

So what have we other bowlers learnt – competitors who entered the AO qualifiers around the country; clubs who fielded sides in pennant without finalists; clubs in fact still in contention for pennant premierships. Before you give the answer, you need to know the questions to ask. Let me probe your thoughts – those of you still in pennant finals really need to have answers if wanting to hold the premiership flag aloft and high. Here goes.

1 what do we need to do for next year for the club to get into the final four

First and foremost just simply be aware of how many average wins your team needs to get into the pennant final four – 12 wins to be first, 10 for second, 9 for third and 8 wins should see you as fourth. And to avoid relegation about 5 wins are required from the 18 games. Secondly training and preparation. None of this...I won't train Tuesdays, or under a certain coach. Get used to better approaches. Third, recruitment of better players. Finally, increase the skill level of all team members. That requires your club to consider a series of coach supervised training sessions over the season.

2 how will we cope going into the finals with recent losses fresh in our minds

This is a tough one. But Adelaide United did it in soccer in the national league. Ernie Merrick, Melbourne Victory soccer coach, reinforced the need to be mentally positive. All you're technical, tactical and fitness skills were enough to take you to the finals. Now is the time to believe in yourself, your team mates. Selectors note. Hold strong. I am coach to numerous bowlers playing in finals at a variety of clubs. This message applies to all of them wherever they compete.

3 what goals have we set the club for next year

The current selectors have one more meeting post season. That should be to set the goals and direction for the club and maybe the incoming selectors for season 2010. Without goals you don't score.

4 what goals have I set myself in bowls for next year

Brett Wilkie won the AO singles championship last weekend. Way back in 2004 he shared his goals with me, which I still keep. The success he just had is no surprise to me when I look back at the level of detail he wrote in those goals. Gail Waitai won the AO pairs 2008 and shared her goals with me too. Similarly successful. Safuan, Lina and Judy all detailed their goals for the intended international success they strived for, and achieved. Doing it despite being at times unsuccessful in games, such as this 2009 AO. To be better in your bowls you must, repeat must, go to that length. I know in my coaching I cannot help anyone who has not set themselves a goal so we can refer to that statement. In fact it is my initial measure to find out how serious the bowler is who approaches me about coaching. I am serious about my coaching, maybe you are not about your bowling. Good on you!!!

5 you give the lead the choice for length, or to hand the mat away, do you as skip know what he considers

Some skips in the finals will give length and mat decision responsibility to the lead. But do you know the mindset of that lead. Will they be reacting based on their own form in the game, the result, our team, the opposition? And even so when will they be reacting – too early, too late, after 5 ends to see how we go? Hell the final might be lost by then. Skips, sit down and discuss the approach with the lead and ensure they have the foresight you expect to make suitably judged decisions. If not, blame yourself, not them, if you hand them that responsibility.

6 what can I do to perform better in the 2010 AO

Or for that matter your group/zone events, state events. Firstly view the skill levels of the best, those in the big league, and digest their elite standard. Now review the use of your weekly time in bowls. If you play pennant, that is about 5 hours as a given allocation where you apply your trained skills. If you also 'practice' with club mates in pairs/ fours roll up that may be another say 5 hours in a week. Well, kick that 5 hours to 7 hours in the week. Now ensure that 3/7 of that time is set to improve your skill level with separate specific training. That still allows you 4 hours with mates if that is what you want too.

Otherwise by retaining your normal schedule, don't expect a marked improvement in performance because your expectations exceed your work load and skill level. Stiff luck troops.

7 have we a mechanism as a team to cope when we are struggling in the finals

You will struggle at some time in these forthcoming finals. It will happen maybe 4-5 ends where nothing works. As a rink you have to keep the spirits up, you have to meet as a team in the middle of the green to change your collective behavior. No good persisting with stuff that is not working. And you have to do it no later than 3 ends of any one member's horror stretch. But don't change anything if one team member is 'bleeding to death' in the horrors yet the team is winning. Just bad luck for him, back him emotionally by speeding to victory on the results board.

8 what is our game plan

Helps answer the above question too. At the AO one skipper informed his team to win the second set. If they won the first then they won overall. If they lost the first and won the second they had the momentum to go into the tie break knowing that statistically winners of the second set were generally winners of the round. Plans on length, mat placement, handovers, hand to play were all spelt out too. Interesting to talk to that skip later about his approach. Also talking to South African legend bowler Neil Burkett about his successful approach and plans to bowls. Congrats incidentally to Neil and his trio winning the AO event so soon after arriving in Australia.

9 what lessons have we learnt from this event- AO or pennant season

Earlier I referred to selectors sitting and examining the season for the club. Well this question applies to all bowlers and us coaches, at whatever level. I have already sat with my own squad as soon as they finished AO program. Every one of them has their own perspective for their improvement. My role as their coach in these conversations is to flesh out the tangible things/ skills they will work on where we can gauge, measure, train, improve, modify or even correct. Note that is the last factor. All of the above though is a reflection of their attitude, or mental skill. How hungry are you to be better? A few national level bowlers had separate conversations and training sessions with me as soon as they were ousted from the AO setting out their next year of bowls. That's what will drive you, not me nor anyone else. Me, I do all of the above as a coach because I am driven to be as good as I can be as a coach. Who knows how far I can go? My one limitation – I need driven players who want to be much better bowlers. Actually I was asked by one of the bowlers at the AO how come I was so passionate about bowls coaching and elite development. There above is part of the answer. I love the passion.

In our sport today, your time at the top is limited if you don't take stock of what is occurring around you. We have new AO champions, new clubs in finals, new group contenders, new state and national squad members. Even new coaches- though few and far between.

All because more players are looking at ways to improve themselves, and their clubs. If you remain stationary, you are actually going backwards as the others pass you by. I encourage, in fact coach, you all to 'march' forward and learn from the triumphant who have recently finished their march in bowls this past season.

To all involved in the conduct of the Bowls Australia AO in Shepparton, well done, it was a ripper event. And again congrats to all who won at the AO and all who took the time to compete.