

The History of the Blackhawk Curling Club

In 1961 a group of curlers who had relocated to southern Wisconsin and northern Illinois formed the Beloit Curling Club. The new club curled at the Wagon Wheel Ice Palace in Rockton, IL. The members had previously curled at other clubs and were used to the male only tradition of curling.

Over time, membership from the Janesville area grew. Being new to the sport and unfamiliar with the male only tradition, the Janesville members would bring their wives along with the promise of drinks and dinner. The Janesville women took to the sport and drove down to the Wagon Wheel during the day for lessons on curling technique, followed by lunch and maybe a cocktail or two.

There were a number of earlier attempts to stir up interest in curling in the Janesville area.

In January, 1892, the Janesville Gazette reported that "George Skinner was practicing to assist Dr. Mills in making a high tee (line) shot at the curling rink." In addition, "Richard Skinner was sliding a flat iron over a slippery sidewalk in preparation for the curling club's meeting."

It's unclear what happened to that early club, and it wasn't until the early 1960s that a curling rink appeared in Janesville again. That's when John Marling, owner of Marling Lumber and a member of a Madison curling family, and Jerry Seidl, a local dentist who had curled in Medford, persuaded Janesville officials to construct an outdoor curling rink at what was then called Goose Island (Traxler Park). With a number of curlers from the Wagon Wheel they hoped to promote the sport in Janesville. Alas, the night before the event it rained, and the carefully laid rink dissolved into the Rock River.

In 1965, a group of curlers decided to establish a club in Janesville. In an effort to draw from a larger area, the name Blackhawk was chosen for the fledgling club. The founders knew they would need artificial ice, and a building large enough to house both the ice sheets and the clubhouse. In 1968 the former Oscar Mayer Sales Barn (Back of the Yards) on the south side of Janesville was leased. Four sheets of ice were laid out, with plastic pipes connected across the dirt floor as pigeons fluttered in the rafters. The BS (literally) was scrubbed off of the benches around the bull pen where animals were viewed prior to sale. The ice house had no heat control, and the ice could be so frosty a rock would shudder to a stop before the hog line. Alternatively, the ice sheets could be filled with moguls from dripping rafters and the air would get positively foggy.

Despite those drawbacks, the club hosted a men's league, a mixed league and two nights of pickup games. The women curled in the afternoon and the Beloit Curling Club sponsored a men's league, as well.

The cavernous barn proved to be much too large for the fledgling club as membership did not grow as expected. The Beloit curlers decided to return to the Wagon Wheel, and recruitment of new curlers was focused mainly in the Janesville area. The building owner took over the club house for a tavern/restaurant, and was eyeing the ice house for bowling lanes. By 1970, with rising energy costs, the membership decided to look for a new location.

A partner was found in the 4H organization which needed more exhibit space for the annual Rock County 4H Fair. A steel building large enough for 3 sheets of ice and a club house was erected on

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the fairgrounds by the club, and donated to the Fair Board. Many club members provided countless hours assisting with the construction. The curling club would use the building over the winter months and the Fair Board would use the building for various events over the summer. The ice was ready for the 1972-73 curling season, and has been the home of the Blackhawk Curling Club ever since.

Payment of the new building was still an issue. To generate additional revenue, the Sunspiel was hosted over Labor Day weekend from 1977 through 1983. Curlers would pitch their tents at Camp Rotamer and 5 sheets of ice were prepared at the Janesville Ice Arena. Stories are still being told about the weekend long parties at the campground.

A club house addition was completed in 1988 to complete the current configuration.

Currently the Blackhawk Curling Club has around 140 members with league games being played most days of the week.

The club has hosted a Men's Bonspiel (Last Chance) in late March and a Mixed Bonspiel in January since the beginning. Both events have always been popular, with the Mixed event pulling in 24 teams in 1973. A Women's Bonspiel (First Chance) has been held the first weekend of November since the early 1990's.

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Sources: Margot Lovejoy
Pete and Peggy Jacobs
Charlie Mowbray
Cathy Idzerda
Janesville Gazette archives
Beloit Daily News, November 22, 1969