

CURLING* WHAT FOR, HOW TO, WHERE AT

Although curling has a long and honorable history as a winter sport, it is unfamiliar to most people. A participatory team game, it will never attain great popularity as a spectator sport, for there is no fast action and dangerous body contact to excite an audience. Also, it is a game not only of physical skill, but of strategy which, like chess, makes it difficult to understand for those who do not know the game. A third reason for its unfamiliarity, is that by nature of the playing surface, it is almost impossible to see what is going on, unless the spectator hangs from the rafters, which is uncomfortable . . . In Canada only, the game has received extraordinary attention possibly because the winters there are long and dull, so lots of people have taken up the game and can watch it knowledgeably. Important games are televised by means of mirrors hung on the ceiling over the ice rinks. Winners are awarded rich prizes and get to sign autographs. This fame is unusual elsewhere, even in Scotland. There are Scots who do not curl. There are Scots who never heard of curling.

Curling as a team sport is a Scottish refinement of an ancient winter game. Wherever there was a stretch of frozen water, and boys and men with rocks, there were bound to be contests as to who could hurl the rock the farthest, hit a target, who could do both these feats with one throw. A rudimentary form of curling evolved in medieval times throughout Europe - in Scandinavia, Switzerland, Scotland, the Low Countries. The earliest depiction of the sport is a vignette in a winter scene painted by the Flemish artist Pieter Breughel (1530-1569). In Scotland curling was developing into a game of finesse. They weren't skidding clumps of ice and frozen dirt at a target area. A curling stone weighing 26 pounds, and dated 1511, was found near Stirling, and can be seen at a museum in the city-Smith Institute . . . In Scotland, real curling had begun.

Sport to a Scot involves more than physical ability - it takes in something else, something Scots would call 'canniness'. Dealing with the unexpected, the unusual. Take golf. Scots look with scorn upon America's manicured golf courses - the watered fairways, never soggy, never dry - (and fast). Scottish golf courses of note are on the seacoasts, where the winds blow, where rain and ocean spray whip the skin, and bend the coarse grasses this way and that. Play on such courses - the Scots call them links - is never the same. So it was once with curling. Lakes and streams never freeze into perfect surfaces, free of blemish. Somewhere a whisper of a breeze makes a ripple, an icy ridge takes form. A droplet from an overhanging tree falls on the freezing pond and makes a lump on the shining surface. Cold weather makes a hard and frosty ice rink - whereas moderating temperatures make for slippery

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conditions. But soon it was realized the ice had to be protected from the elements, for, unlike the surface of the golf course, the ice for curling is an ephemeral substance. Therefore rinks went indoors, and ice was artificially made and kept - when that became technically possible. The techniques for making ice made the game available to areas which could not count on winter ice at all, to parts of the country subject to sudden thaws, to places where it snows a lot on frozen waters; it made the game possible for players who aren't canny about any aspect of winter except to keep out of it by staying indoors. Getting to the curling rink through wind and weather involves sometimes, more skill, strategy and canniness than the game itself.

The technology for making and keeping ice caused a boom in the growth of curling clubs in the USA. Scottish immigrants had brought their game with them to upper New York State, and to rural areas of the midwest, particularly Wisconsin in the early 1800s. French Canadian traders plying the inland waterways - the Great Lakes, the Mississippi River introduced the game to these areas at about the same period. It was contiguous to these older places that the new clubs, such as Janesville Blackhawk sprung up. Nowadays the boom seems to have tapered off: the sport has settled down to slow and steady growth. Today's curling is played on a stretch of smooth ice, with a target area of concentric circles at either end, which is 46 yards in length, 8 yards wide. This sheet is called a rink. Play is between two teams of four players each - also called rinks - . Each player in turn according to position, throws two rocks alternately with his like number on the opposing team. He tries to place these stones in the target circle at the opposite end of the ice sheet. His aim is directed by his team captain, or 'skip'. Once his two stones have been thrown (delivered), his duty is to keep the ice ahead of his teammates' rocks clean and slippery, by vigorous sweeping with a broom just in front of the moving stone. It is said that inspired sweeping can increase the distance the stone goes before coming to a dead stop, by as much as 8 feet. It is my opinion that this furious activity is more for the purpose of keeping the player from hopping around on the sidelines, as he endeavors to keep warm. However hardy our Scottish ancestors, garbed in thick knee socks and woolen skirts, it was chilblains on the thighs and rump unless one kept moving. The skip, who is the last player on the team to deliver his rocks, is presumably the best shot maker on the team, and the most knowledgeable in strategy.

Curling stones weigh 42 pounds each. They are flattened rounds with handles on top, and bevelled edging on the bottoms, which enable them to maintain the direction in which they are thrown and not skid all over the ice. They are quarried in special areas of Scotland, of an especially heavy granite, weight enhanced by the streams which wash over the rock. They are expensive. Scotland has a monopoly on this type

of granite. Ideally the stone revolves six to eight times from the tee line where play starts, for the length of the rink, turning in' or 'curling' and coming to rest, in that part of the target area which the skip has designated. The skip stands in the target circle, and with stylized signals of arm and broom indicates where and how the stone is to be thrown. There are two types of broom. A corn broom is the traditional one. It resembles the besom of twigs which early curlers used to filch from kitchen corners. A later development is the push broom, which is easier to use. Whereas the corn broom is whipped back and forth horizontally ahead of the stone with loud thwacking, the push broom scrubs the ice.

The object of the game is to get as many stones as possible in the target circle, and to keep the opponents' rocks out of it, or at some distance from its center. A perfect score for one end is 8. All one team's rocks score and none of their opponents'. This seldom occurs. A game consists of 8 ends. If you had 8 perfect ends, theoretically a team could score 64. This NEVER occurs. A game is conceded when it becomes impossible for the opposing team to catch up. This is a gentleman's game. No cutthroat tactics, and always "politessel" After each end, play resumes in the opposite direction. In this way no time is wasted returning the heavy stones to the original starting place. Such waste of time and energy would be anathema to Scots. Nevertheless it makes watching the action from anywhere but above, difficult. When the game was devised, recreation was in the doing, not the viewing. The Scots had no conception of the money to be made from spectators. . . . Only one team scores per end. It is the one whose rock is nearest the center of the target. Any additional stones thrown by that team, which are closer to the target than any stone of the opposing team, score.

In the early 1960s, John Marling of the Marling Lumber Co., a member of a curling family in Madison, and Jerry Seidl, a dentist who had curled at a club in central Wisconsin, persuaded Janesville officials to construct an outdoor curling rink next to the skating rink at Goose Island (Traxler Park). With a nucleus of curlers from Janesville and Beloit, who were curling at a commercial establishment in Rockton, Illinois, they hoped to promote the sport in the Janesville area. Alas, the night before the promotional event, it rained, and the rink vanished into the Rock River.

Curling continued at the Wagon Wheel in Rockton. But a seed had been planted - in curling parlance, a stone delivered . . . Why would Janesville get a club then, and not Beloit, which at that time had more curlers? One important factor. The ladies.

The curlers in Beloit were jealous of the male tradition of the sport. They had come to Beloit from established curling centers elsewhere. The majority of Janesville curlers had no such hangups. They were part of the expansion that began with artificial ice and the entry of women into the clubhouse and onto that ice. Whereas the Beloiters

had formed an all male curling league, the Janesvillites had from the beginning dragged their wives to the rink, with the promise of drinks and dinner at the Wagon Wheel following the athletics. The Janesville women found the sport to their taste and took to driving to the Wagon Wheel for lunch and lessons in curling techniques from the manager of the ice rinks. Blackhawk curling etiquette is based on his teachings, which are Canadian in origin, rather than derived from the traditions of the Eastern USA clubs.

'Tommy' was well pleased with his middle-aged pupils, and encouraged a rink to enter a curling tournament the Wagon Wheel was sponsoring. A Janesville rink entered, and won the third event. It was our club's first trophy - won before ours was an official club, with a proper women's auxiliary. Organization, rules, by-laws were pretty loose in the days of our youth! Maggie Marling, who would become the first official president of the women's auxiliary, (first called the Rockettes) skipped that team, with Bobbie Schroder-Vice, Audrey Holloway-second, Margot Lovejoy-lead.

Women have always played an important role in the Blackhawk Curling Club - somewhat to the discomfort of traditionalists. They are no longer auxiliary members, without the vote, but have all the rights and responsibilities of full membership. A few years ago, they changed the name of their organization to the Blackhawk Brooms, which had less of a sexist ring. The Broom in question refers to the flower of the broom plant from whose coarse stalks, broomstraw is derived.

A second attempt at organization of an official club came late in 1965. The founders knew by then they would have to have artificial ice; they would need a large building to house both ice sheets and a clubhouse. They found such an edifice ideally located on Prairie Ave., between Janesville and Beloit. It was the Oscar Meyer Sales Barn, which was being sold to some Janesville businessmen who needed a tenant. The barn was much too large for the fledging club, but the founders had grand visions. An 'expert' was sent for, to pass upon the choice. His enthusiasm for the sport surpassed his expertise on the subject of housing it. The expense of this ill-advised beginning almost killed the brand new club. It never acquired the membership to support such an enormous facility. Recruitment of members was pretty much confined to Janesville - there was only a smattering of Beloit women, and the Beloit men were anxious to maintain a separate identity - so even though the Club has purposely been named for the area rather than for either city - most Beloiters were not willing to put forth the effort and funds needed for the success of the new facility; they thought they could continue curling at the Wagon Wheel.

Until the 1972-3 season, the Blackhawk Curling Club was located in the great barn. Four rinks were laid out on the dirt floor of the large roofed corral, where the animals had once milled about before being

led into the bull pen for inspection by the buyers. Blackhawk members of both sexes fitted together and laid the plastic pipes through which the cold brine would circulate to freeze the water flooding the levelled sand floor. The men assembled the second-hand ice making machine at the far end of the rinks, and babied it through season after season as it labored and groaned about the business of cooling that vast space two stories high, where pigeons fluttered in the rafters. The women scrubbed the BS (literally) from the benches around the bull pen, which would become the viewing area, and they raised money with rummage sales. The membership gathered in the panelled office area and waiting room near the entry to puzzle out how to finance the operation. Most took out debentures, and co-signed for bank loans. Machinery, utilities, equipment (the stones themselves were on loan) had to be purchases. We now had a clubhouse, and many a fine party took place in that cramped office space. Invitations were sent out to Blackhawk's very own bonspiels, and our teams travelled to bonspiels elsewhere. Junior Curling was initiated. Pins were designated and ordered (curlers exchanged pins with their opponents after bonspiel play). But money problems multiplied. Loans came due. Debentures could not be redeemed. Energy costs soared. There were worries about the rent. The clubhouse space was soon taken over by a tavern-restaurant operation, and it was eyeing the curling rinks hungrily, envisioning another kind of recreation in that space - something not so seasonal, which would bring patrons to the bar year around . . . bowling . . . How could the poor struggling curlers compete with that type of revenue! And the ice was not all that satisfactory. When it was -20° outside, it was -20° inside. The ice was so frosty it took the throw of Sampson to get a rock in the house. In warm weather, the rafters dripped, and made lumps the length of the sheets. There were more than ice lumps. Frozen in the ice were pigeon feathers, and worse.

So it was, that after much soul and pocket searching, the members looked elsewhere for rink space, and decided to build rather than buy or rent. The pessimists among us - and there were plenty - said it would not go, but go it did. Together with the 4H organization which needed more room on the Rock County 4H Fairgrounds in summer, the Blackhawk Curling Club put up a steel building large enough to house 3 sheets of ice and clubhouse space. The delighted women prepared to decorate, furbish, buy an efficient range to replace the old clunker they had been using. They found the menfolk had other ideas of club needs - and that is when they rebelled . . . some of the funds they had so willingly donated, they wanted spent to lighten **their** load. From such small injustices comes the cry for equality! Rummage sales were out, auctions and luncheons in, for money-making. The men did more. Sunspiel. They gambled on the desire of curlers to jump the season - to curl while the summer sun still hung hot in the sky. Curlers came and camped at Camp Rotamer. Our new curling stones were carted to ice

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rented at the Janesville Ice Arena. From all over the midwest the curlers come yearly to the Labor Day Bonspiel; it has been a tremendous financial boon. Loans have been paid off, debentures retired . . . The Blackhawk Curling Club, about to enter its 3rd decade, is a healthy club, with a stable membership. Old timers have organized their own group within the club, but as one by one curlers they stack their brooms and retire to the viewing area for good, new ones come into the club. Junior curlers become full members. The roar of the rocks down the ice, goes on. There are many names I could have mentioned - those of the pipefitters who relaid in the new facility the pipes they had originally tied in place in the rented barn - oh those frost-nipped fingers - the men who worked so dauntlessly on the cranky ice machinery, who painted walls, and stapled insulation, made ice, hammered here, hammered there. The women hunkering over hot stoves feeding guests, washing up. All the faithful ones who turned up on time not only for the fun of curling, but to keep the club afloat in inclement weather. The bonspielers who filled in vacancies at the last minute, who have represented our club so well at home and abroad. I **will** mention our Millie Seidl, chosen to travel to Scotland by the US Women's Curling Association, to represent America in curling exhibition play - that was a signal honor for our young club.

This writer is taking to the sidelines after many years of fellowship and good curling. Bless you all. And so, I stack my broom.

Margot Lovejoy
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