

OUR OTHER ICE SPORT



When Mom warned you not to throw stones, she wasn't talking about this popular Okanagan winter-buster

When you see the portrait of James Cameron Dun-Waters (the Okanagan's early 20th century answer to the Scottish landed gentry) on the cover of Stan Sauerwein's book *Fintry*, you wonder if this man ever had a passion for anything. Known as the Laird of Fintry, his face defines the dour Scotsman.

Togged out (and "togged" is the only adjective that comes close to working) in his curling tweeds and Tam o' Shanter, he glowers at the viewer from the sepia-coloured photo. Could this man possibly be having fun?

Apparently so. James was so obsessed with curling that he wrote this ode to the sport:

*"You cannot be a piker
and you must stand the gaff,
And learn to hit them with a smile
and miss them with a laugh."*

Before cars and chairlifts made downhill skiing accessible, curling was the Okanagan's

big winter sport. By the turn of the 20th century, every town in the North Okanagan had its own curling sheet (read ice rink). It's not that southern Okanaganites didn't like to curl, but the game was played outdoors in those days and the southern end of the Valley was often not cold enough to form a stable ice surface.

Curling arrived with the earliest immigrants and was promoted by the likes of the Laird of Fintry. He was so devoted to the broom and stone that employment on his estate often depended as much on a man's ability to curl as it did on his ability to do the actual job.

The Laird's 21st century curling descendents are cut from a different bolt of tweed. Although the game is taken just as seriously, today there's a lot more laughter and not a dour face among the players.

Kids as young as eight curl in organized leagues and seniors well into their upper 80s and a few in their early 90s still play for the love of the game.

Curling is regarded by many an old man's game. Americans scoff and refuse to call it a sport because there's no fast action or violence and the scores don't skyrocket to create the feeling that something great has been accomplished. Even video game designers don't see enough action in curling to create a virtual version. Google curling and the closest thing you come up with is Barbie's curling iron.

When you talk to a dedicated curler, you hear aphorisms like “chess on ice.” Curling is a game of strategy and cooperation more than sudden bursts and individual stardom. It doesn’t take a rare individual to play, just one willing to walk a different path.

At the Kelowna Curling Club (KCC), Ewan and Ramsey Murray are making headway in the sport. The 12-year-olds are part of the club’s 15-member junior league. Fraternal twins, the brothers wear orange hoodies—a far cry from the Laird’s tweeds and tam. But they’re serious enough to defend curling in the face of all the hockey hoopla broadcast on television.

“Hockey’s too violent,” says Ewan. “I watch it on TV and see all the guys getting hurt and I don’t want to be injured. Besides, I’m not that good at skating...”

Ewan and Ramsay are on the KCC Junior Club’s travel team, playing in tournaments with other clubs around the Valley. There are 14 curling clubs in the Okanagan where they can compete.

Teammate Logan Miron, also 12, has been playing for seven years. Like

a lot of curlers, he started with his grandpa and although he likes watching hockey, he understands the financial cost of the game. “It’s too expensive. With curling I have a lot of fun and it turns out that I’m good at it.”

Anyone interested in curling can get into the game for under \$50. All you need is a broom and a set of clean-soled shoes. The stones and ice sheets are provided by the curling club.

Girls have a different take on the sport. It’s a level playing field with the boys and as much for socializing as it is for the good-natured competition.

Vernon’s Carley Cade also came to the sport through her grandfather, Doug. He’s been curling for nearly 40 years and started on outdoor sheets in the North Thompson. Now he coaches the juniors at the Vernon Curling Club and passes on his knowledge to Carley, mixed in with a bit of family together time.

Hailee Kepes is another keener. Within her first month-and-a-half of curling she had improved to the point where she joined Logan, Ewan and Ramsay on the KCC travel team.

Curling starter-kit

Curling has its own language and strategic tactics, which can be a little confusing if you only watch the Brier or Tournament of Hearts once a year. Here’s a primer to get you started and talking like a curler.

Gear, Rules and Play

Curling Sheet: The sheet of ice the game is played on is pebbled like an orange peel. The ice may be fast or slow. On fast ice, a stone will travel farther with a given amount of throwing force.

Stones: Sometimes called rocks, modern stones are polished granite and weigh between 17 and 20 kilograms. They have a handle on the top and a maximum allowable circumference of 910 millimetres. Originally, curling stones were flat on the bottom, but today’s stones have limited contact area called the running surface, a ring slightly more than six millimetres wide and only 130 millimetres in diameter, and the edges round up and away from this. Modern stones allow the thrower a greater ability to turn the stone creating the “curl” in its path down the ice. This lets the thrower place the stone with more precision.

Brooms and Brushes: These are used to sweep the ice ahead of the stone and for balance by the thrower. Originally, when the game was played outdoors, curlers used brooms made of corn fibre similar to today’s household broom to sweep the ice clean and affect the action of the stone. Sweeping melts the top surface of the ice, producing a thin film of water that reduces friction with the stone allowing it to move faster. Brushes came into use by older curlers who needed support, but they have now been adopted by all curlers. Today brushes have pads rather than bristles.

Shoes: Depending on how serious a player is, the curler has the option of using dedicated curling shoes or slip-on soles that are worn over a clean pair of athletic shoes. Dedicated curling shoes have two different soles—one with a smooth sliding surface and the other with a textured surface to grip the ice. The smooth sole is worn on the shoe a player glides on and is usually Teflon. The hack shoe (the one used in the hack and to propel the player up and down the curling sheet) is designed to grip the ice.

Teams: Four players to a team. Each player throws a stone. The skip is the person who controls the play by directing the throws of teammates and the work of the sweepers. In play, one person throws, two sweep and one directs. When the skip throws, the third directs.

House: The circular targets at each end of the curling sheet made up of three rings defined by their diameter as the 4-foot, 8-foot and 12-foot rings.

Button: The centre of the house.

Hack: Gives curlers something to push against when making the throw. Hacks are placed 12 feet behind the button.

Centre, hog, tee and back lines: The centre line evenly divides the curling sheet along its length. The hog line (21 feet from the button) is the point by which the thrower must release the stone. The tee line crosses the centre of the house and the back line is at the outside edge of the 12-foot circle nearest the hack.

Hammer: The last-rock advantage in an end. To start the game, teams may toss a coin to determine first end hammer. Then the hammer goes to the team that did not score in the preceding end. If neither team scores, the hammer remains with the same team. The team with the hammer tries to score two or more points and if only one point is possible, the skip may decide not to score in order to keep the hammer for the next end.

Play: Players deliver stones to reach a particular position in the house (draw shots), to rest in front of the house (guard shots) or bump an opponent’s stone out of play (takeout shots). Until four stones have been thrown, takeout shots cannot remove an opponent’s stones from the free guard zone (between the hog line and tee line outside the house).

End: Games are comprised of ends—10 for advanced competition and eight for club play. Each team plays eight stones in an end. When all the stones have been delivered, the team with the stone closest to the button wins the end and scores a point for each of their stones lying closer to the button than the opponent’s closest stone. Only stones lying in the house can score.



“I really like curling and it’s really helped that I’m with an amazing team who are helping me get better and better.”

The first written record of curling was in 1541, but the game was obviously played well before that. Curling was an outdoor sport between the 16th and 19th centuries and may have benefitted from what is now known as the Little Ice Age. This was a cool period lasting from the Middle Ages to the mid-1800s, which coincided nicely with the growth of curling.

Because of the long, cold winters Canada proved was an ideal locale for the sport. It arrived with decommissioned Scottish soldiers who received land grants as pensions in what was to become Canada.

The Royal Montreal Curling Club was founded in 1807 and is the oldest continually active sports club in North America.

Scotland still maintains control over the game that most Scots feel is their national sport. The World Curling Federation is based in Perth, Scotland, and the Royal

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Caledonian Curling Club is the “mother club” of curling. Ironically, the Royal Caledonian was founded in 1838 making it 31 years younger than the Royal Montreal.

Also known as the “roaring game” because of the sound the stones make as they pass over the ice, curling is now played across northern Europe, Japan, China, Australia, New Zealand and Korea.

Yet for a game that’s been played constantly for at least five centuries and internationally for nearly two hundred years, curling is pretty casual compared with many other sports. The first world championship, in Edinburgh, Scotland, wasn’t held until 1959.

Canada took home the first Scotch Cup. Ernie Richardson, from Regina, skipped the winning team. Richardson and his family are game legends of the sort Don Cherry would love to talk about.

Curling finally made it into the Olympics in 1998, but Olympic curling has kind of a hazy history. It was introduced to the International Winter Sports Week in 1924 and sporadically continued as a demonstration sport.

In a strange twist in 2002, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) declared the 1924 Winter Sports Week to be the earliest Olympic Winter Games. The IOC then went on to award medals to the winners of that event. In a competition that included only men and official teams from just three nations, Great Britain received the gold, Sweden took home the silver medal and France walked away with the bronze.

But all the events between then and 1998 were only considered demonstration games. Too bad. In the 1932 Olympics, for example, curling was a demonstration sport with teams from Canada and the United States. Canada won, 12 games to 4. Stone and broom have been taken to heart in this country. According to the Canadian Curling Association, we are the

largest curling nation in the world with more than 729,000 active players (2008 Census). Since 1998, both men’s and women’s teams have stood on the podium in every Olympics.

When Sandra Schmirler, first ever woman’s curling Olympic gold medalist, died in 2000, over 15,000 people attended her funeral and it was broadcast on national TV.

So what is it about curling that appeals to the Canadian soul? Is it the lack of bench-clearing brawls? Or is it civility and polite competition where you don’t have to man-up on steroids and UFC commercials?

This is a very civilized game played by all ages where sportsman-like teams shake hands and wish each other “Good curling” before the event and afterward, teams stack their brooms and the winner traditionally buys the loser a drink.

Curling is a game for people with a wide range of physical abilities

Stick curling has come on strong in recent years. This version of the sport allows the players to use “push sticks” to deliver their rocks. For many folks

with joint issues, this allows them to play the game without having to bend or squat at the hack (the anchored blocks that allow the player to push off on the slick ice surface).

An experienced stick curler has all the control players using hand-thrown stones have. The stone can be spun either clockwise or counter clockwise to alter its course down the sheet and the weight of the throw (the force with which the stone is thrown) can be varied to successfully accomplish different tactics.

Stick curling also makes it possible for special needs athletes take part in the sport. Jonathon Macdonald, a 24 year-old special athlete and his buddy Dayle Booth represented KCC at the Special Olympics provincial championships a few years ago. Another friend, Joanne Siefried played on the provincial Special Olympics team and placed second in the recent Provincials.

Joanne, along with Teri-Kay Lawrence are the veterans of the Special Olympics team having joined when KCC first offered stick curling.

All three are proud and brag about their accomplishments. But

Jonathon has another reason why he likes curling — it introduced him to his girlfriend and fiancé Tiffany Conners.

Tiffany curls from her wheelchair. When it’s her turn to throw, a teammate pushes her chair off from the hack and she guides the stone with her stick toward the Hog Line (the line where a curler has to let go of the stone or be penalized). Tiffany is in total control and follows the skips directions on placement.

When she has to sweep, she works her brush over the ice surface while being pushed along.

“I have a lot of fun on the curling team. The people are really nice and I get to meet a lot of new friends. It’s especially cool because I got to meet Jon through curling.” Tiffany holds up her diamond engagement ring emphasizing her love of the stones. **OL**

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