

Curling – Like Chess on Ice



Editor's note: With the Winter Olympics taking center stage for the month of February, Jim Hummel gets a primer on an emerging fan favorite: the sport of curling.

A strategic game carried out on ice, however ice skates need not apply.

It is a polite sport for the most part. But that doesn't mean there isn't a lot of yelling.

And plotting.

"I love the strategy behind it," said Kathy Brady, who helped found the Ocean State Curling Club five years ago after watching lifelong curlers in action on a vacation to Quebec. "There's a lot of thinking and it's chess on ice. I like the strategy, but I also like that you get exercise."

That you do. And after spending a couple of nights watching club members in action, it seems more like aerobic chess on ice. The club, which has grown to about 70 members, takes over the Cranston Ice Rink for two hours every Thursday and Friday between October and March.

"Anyone can learn it," Brady said. "The first time I was on a team, I played with an 85-year-old man who still got down on the hack and delivered a normal stone."

The curling lingo can be a little intimidating, so we decided to get a rundown on what to expect when you tune into curling during the Olympics in Sochi, Russia.

The heavy round thing that takes center stage in a match is called a *stone* or a *rock*. It's made of granite and weighs 42 pounds. In Canada curlers enjoy rinks made solely for them, but here they have to share the ice and usually follow hockey practice. So club members spend the first 20 minutes or so preparing the ice, which is crucial to a good night of curling. The Zamboni does the initial clearing, then a *pebbler* waters the ice to create the surface the rock will slide on.

Then somebody who knows his way around a blow torch heats the rubber *hack*, which is imbedded in the ice and is used to push off when launching a rock.

The first order of business is to get the rocks, which are stored in wooden crates adjacent to the rink, out on the ice and cooling. Teams have four members that include the *skip*, which is the captain, and a vice skip. Plus two *sweepers*. Every match begins with a handshake before the players settle in. Each

throws two rocks per match.

“It’s very genteel. You start by shaking your teammate’s and your opponents’ hands and you end by shaking as well,” said Brady, assuring us there is no trash talking.

The object is to get as many rocks closest to the center circle of the *house*, which means there is a lot of bumping. In some cases the last rock thrown – by the skip – can determine a match. The center circle itself is called the *button*.

And what about all of that sweeping? When a player throws the rock it has a natural curl. Brady says the sweeping can affect speed and direction. “Sweeping causes friction against the ice and it actually makes the stone go farther and straighter.”

Gordon Walsh is the current club president. He is a golfer, and never tried curling until he came to one of the club’s learn-to-curl nights back in 2009.

Jim Hummel: What was it that intrigued you about curling?

Gordon Walsh: The strategy. There’s finesse to it – you’ve got to think about what you’re doing.

JH: When you first started, was it what you expected?

GW: It was a lot harder. I thought it was going to be a fairly easy sport and a couple of minutes into it, I knew it was going to be a lot harder than I expected.

JH: What was the challenge?

GW: There’s some physical challenges to it. You see them on television they get into that graceful slide down on the ice. Some of us aren’t that graceful, but you can make it work. The difference between throwing it not far enough and throwing it too far is not much; it’s a lot of touch. It’s like putting on a putting green.

Walsh admits it’s not for everyone, but encourages people to give it a try – and he expects increased interest when the Olympics get under way. “When I walked in I said, ‘I want to play.’ At my age, I’m still making new friends because new people join the club each year.”