



curling.

by Martha Riacks

that's with ice,

Not Hair.

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Curling!

In Bowling Green, OH, ice is nice. The high school hockey team are regular state champions. Scott Hamilton, of Olympic Gold fame, got his start here, and there's a pair of twin girls that are expected to be Olympic contenders in just a few more years. The local university's comprehensive ice area is the center for all of this, including 10,260 square feet of dedicated curling ice.

I was first introduced to curling while watching CBC one Saturday. (It comes in standard from Windsor, Ontario with our other television channels here in BG). I was utterly confused by what sort of game this was: eight women in skirts running across ice, furiously wielding brooms and shouting nonsensical words. And the scoring – utterly comprehensible. I could tell there was some sort of intense strategy being worked out, but it made absolutely no sense.

I have since learned that curling is played in over 30 countries, mostly european nations along with Japan, the US, and Canada, where it seems to have gained its greatest popularity. Curling is believed to have originated in Scotland, where it was played on frozen lochs and marshes, and was a fledgling sport by the 1630's. It became an official Olympic sport in 1998 and was reportedly even a television viewer hit during the Salt Lake City games in 2002.

Curling is a game of skill, strategy and socialization. You have four players on each team who all alternate at throwing the stones, 42 pounds of granite with a plastic handle on top. You don't actually throw the stones; you release them to glide across the ice while pushing out of a starting block on the end of the ice, called a hack. Two other players have brooms, with a short rectangular head with either bristles or a nylon pad, and sweep the ice in front of the stone. The sweeping causes the ice to almost melt and smooth out, which makes the stone glide faster almost hydroplaning.

The goal is to place the stones in the house, a bulls-eye marked on the ice, as directed by the skip, the team captain who stands down at that end of the ice. You earn one point for each stone of yours that is closer to the center of

the ice than the most central stone of your opponent. Sometimes you want to place the stones in the house, sometimes you want to place guard stones in front and you can also use your stones to knock your opponents out of play; this is called a take-out.

It's a friendly and orderly game, with games beginning and ending with a handshakes and a greeting of "Good Curling", an aspect of the game officially referred to as The Spirit of Curling by the US Curling Association. It's almost an antithesis of hockey, as far as ice sports go, and the epitome of the polite canadian image, with plenty of friendly solicitation afterwards.

All of this knowledge came about because I saw several flyers posted around town, announcing "Come Try Curling!" Deciding it was an excellent opportunity to gain a better understanding of the sport, or at least figure out how the scoring worked, I showed up. These open house nights were sponsored by the Bowling Green Curling Club to attract players for their annual leagues. I surprised my usually uncoordinated self by actually not embarrassing myself, too terribly, during this learning opportunity. So, since I'd been looking to keep myself active while my bike gathers its winter dust in the garage, I decided to join the Club's introductory league.

This was a concentrated focus on practicing curling techniques; while curling might not need the skills typically associated with sports, like catching or throwing, there is a lot to think about. Slide out of the hack, balancing on one foot, use the broom as an additional limb for support, keep your rear leg stretched out with the knee off the ice, then straighten the rock, gently letting go of the handle. It takes quite a bit of practice, so I tried focusing on each step until I felt comfortable enough with it to do it automatically, almost. Sweeping is a bit easier to manage, as long as you can get the hang of running on ice, avoiding all the other stones, and, oh yeah, sweeping the ice furiously at the same time.

After our six introductory sessions, I felt comfortable enough on the ice to join a team in a regular league on a team. For someone who has never played a team sport, besides in gym class, I'm finding it quite exhilarating, whether we win or lose. I practically ran in the house the night I received my club member pin, eager to show it off, and have found myself to be surprisingly concerned about our ranking going into the end of season bonspiel (that's a curling tournament). (We've won one, lost three but every loss has been an extremely close one, while most other teams have been winning and losing by pretty hefty margins. So that means we've got a poor record but might actually be surprisingly better than other teams with the same ranking.)

This theorizing and strategizing brings me to my final point, as to why curling is the first sport that has attracted my extremely analytical mind. While curling is clearly a sport, it is also, very simply, just a game of strategy, a life-size board game. It's exciting! I finally found a sport I like.

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