



Curling History in Canada

By Mike Bryson, September 2007

Curling is a great sport and part of Canada's heritage. The following is the history of this fine sport and some interesting facts about how it all started in this country. I hope you enjoy it.

The precise beginnings of curling will always remain a mystery! However, it is not hard to imagine a man, hundreds or even thousands of years ago, who weighed a smooth, heavy rock in his hand, then watched and listened with fascination as he launched it along a glistening bed of ice on a frozen river. This "first curler" must have been intrigued by the way the rock moved and by the grumbling sound it made as it twisted and turned. Other people in the not so distant past have heard this same sound and have applied it as a nickname for the game of curling ... it is often referred to as "the roaring game".

Scots and continental Europeans have engaged in many a lively dispute as to the true origin of curling. Both claim to be founders. Did Scots invent the game, or was it imported by Flemish sportsmen who emigrated to Scotland during the reign of James VI (James I of England)? Did Europeans engage in some early form of curling, and did Scots merely adopt and enhance it? The evidence, based on works of art, contemporary writings, and archaeological finds, has sparked a number of theories, but nothing is conclusive.

Some of the earliest graphic records of a game similar to curling date from 1565. Two oil paintings by the Dutch master Pieter Bruegel, entitled "Winter Landscape with Skaters and a Birdtrap" and "Hunters in the Snow", show *eisschiessen* or "ice shooting", a Bavarian game played with a long stick-like handle, that is still enjoyed today. Another work, an engraving by R. de Baudous (1575 - 1644) after N. van Wieringen, entitled "Hyems" or "Winter", shows players who appear to be sliding large discs of wood along a frozen water-way. Other sketches from around the same time show a Dutch game called kuting, played with frozen lumps of earth.

The first hand-written record of what could be called an early curling game dates from February, 1540, when John McQuhin of Scotland noted down, in Latin, a challenge to a game on ice between a monk named John Sclater and an associate, Gavin Hamilton.

The first printed reference to curling appears in a 17th century elegy published by Henry Adamson, following the death of a close friend: *His name was M. James Gall, a citizen of Perth, and a gentle-man of goodly stature, and pregnant wit, much given to pastime, as golf, archerie, curling and jovial companie.* It seems too that the game tempted many people from all walks of life. Records from a Glasgow Assembly of Presbyterians in 1638 accused a certain Bishop Graham of Orkney of a terrible act: *He was a curler on the ice on the Sabbath.*

By the 18th century, curling had become a common past-time in Scotland. Both the poetry and the prose of the era provide numerous records of bonspiels, curling societies, and curling as a great national game.

The real controversy over the birthplace of the game was initiated by the Reverend John Ramsay of Gladsmuir, Scotland. In his book, *An Account of the Game of Curling* (Edinburgh 1811), he

argued in favor of Continental beginnings. His research into the origins of curling words (examples: bonspiel, brough, colly, curl, kuting, quaiting, rink, and wick), led him to conclude that they were derived from Dutch or German. Claiming that most of the words were foreign, he wrote, *but the whole of the terms being Continental compel us to ascribe to a Continental origin.*

The famous historian, the Reverend John Kerr contested Ramsay's views and campaigned in favor of Scottish beginnings to curling. In *A History of Curling* (1890), Kerr questioned: *if Flemings had brought the game to Scotland in the 1500's, why did Scottish poets and historians make no special mention of its introduction before 1600?* He also saw no proof that many of the terms were Continental, explaining that many were of Celtic or Teutonic origin (examples: channel stone, crampit, draw, hack, hog, skip, tee, toese, tramp, and tricker).

To add to the puzzle, archaeological evidence of a curling stone (the famous Stirling Stone) inscribed with the date 1511 turned up, along with another bearing the date 1551, when an old pond was drained at Dunblane, Scotland.

The true origin of curling is cloudy, lost in time. There is no doubt or dispute, however, that the Scots nurtured the game. They improved equipment, established rules, turned curling into a national past-time, and exported it to many other countries throughout the world.

EVOLUTION DEVELOPMENT

As curling gained popularity in Scotland in the early 1800's, a uniform set of rules became necessary for the many new participants. The Duddingston Club was the first, in 1804, to set out the "Rules in Curling", remarkable for their common sense and for their similarity to those followed today.

Subsequently, as more and more clubs were formed, it became evident that a governing body had to be set up to co-ordinate the growth of the curling community, at least in Scotland. John Cairnie was an accomplished curler who had built a curling hall at Largs, Scotland in 1813. He was also an innovator and the driving force for the creation of a "Mother Club of Curling". In 1833, he called on all Scottish clubs to submit lists of their officers, numbers of curlers, and matches played. The information was used to establish the Grand Caledonian Curling Club in Edinburgh in 1838, and to provide for its members *The Annuals*, a record of curling that has been compiled regularly since 1839.

In 1843, the Grand Caledonian was granted the patronage of Prince Albert, and was renamed as the *Royal Caledonian Curling Club*. Since then, patrons have always been members of the Royal Family, and beginning in 1900, have been either a king or a queen. The founding of the Royal Club gave curling its first central association, and the occasion is generally considered as the most prominent and far-reaching event in the history of the sport.

Curling in Canada

Scottish immigrants introduced curling to Canada where it thrived and attained a level of excellence that remains unsurpassed.

The sport evolved significantly from its humble beginnings when, in the winter of 1760, Scottish troops melted down cannon balls to fashion curling irons. Long, harsh Canadian winters were ideal for the game.

By 1807 the first North American club was established. On January 22 of that year, twenty sporting Montreal merchants, who had been curling on the ice of the St. Lawrence River behind Molson's Brewery, founded the Montreal Curling Club. (In 1924, the club was honored with the privilege of adding "Royal" to its name.)

Early rules of the Montreal Club stated that the losing party pay for a bowl of whisky toddy, to be

placed in the middle of the table for the rest of the curlers.

A second club was organized at Quebec City in 1821, also using irons. Curlers from each city met halfway on the St. Lawrence River at Trois Rivières in 1836. Quebec won, 31-23, with the losers paying for dinner.

The Montreal and Quebec curling clubs sought affiliation with the Royal Caledonian Curling Club as soon as news of the founding of the Royal Club reached them. They were accepted and named the Canadian Branch of the royal Caledonian Curling Club in 1852, with headquarters in Montreal. The Canadian Branch still exists as the governing body for curling in eastern Quebec and the Ottawa Valley in eastern Ontario.

Nearly 40,000 people, most of them Scots, settled Ontario between 1816 and 1823. Some of them were stone masons and made their curling stones from granite. Ontario's first curling club was in Kingston (1820). Within five years, the game's popularity had spread to Toronto. Curling clubs sprouted all over the province and the founding of the Toronto Curling Club in 1837 foreshadowed that city becoming the center of curling in Ontario.

Competition between Quebec and Ontario curlers grew and in 1859, with the coming of the Grand Trunk Railway, curlers no longer had to travel days by horse and wagon to compete against each other. The only problem was that Quebec curlers insisted on competing with their irons (used widely in Montreal until 1954), while Ontario curlers wanted to use granite rocks. They compromised by playing separate matches using irons against irons and rocks against rocks. Quebec invariably won the games using irons and Ontario won the games played with rocks.

Curling spread fairly quickly throughout Ontario in the early part of the 19th century. But even though Ontario curling clubs had three times the membership of Quebec clubs, they remained without a policy-making voice until 1874, when they united and joined the Royal Club as the branch of the Province of Ontario.

Curling spread more slowly in the Maritimes. Coal miners from Scotland, with curling stones in tow, settled in Nova Scotia and started clubs in Halifax (1824) and Pictou (1829). Another group of Scots brought the game to Newfoundland, forming a club in St. John's in 1843. New Brunswick sportsmen were inspired to take up curling after reading about the 1853 Grand Match at Carsebreck, Scotland. They imported stones, liked the game and formed a club in 1854. Islanders caught onto the game later and founded a club at Charlottetown, Prince Edward Island in 1887.

Manitoba's first settlers, in 1812, made curling stones from oak blocks. Curling exploded in the west, turning Winnipeg into the center of curling, with more clubs in Manitoba than in Quebec and Ontario combined. The Manitoba Branch of the Royal Caledonian was established in 1888 and curlers from all parts of Canada and the U.S.A. flocked to the Winnipeg Curling Club, with 62 rinks participating in the bonspiel that year.

Small clubs began to pop up all over Saskatchewan after about 1880. They catered to farmers and featured thatched wooden huts to protect curlers and the natural ice from the snow and wind. Before long, Saskatchewan had more curlers than any other province. Early clubs in Saskatchewan, Alberta and British Columbia chose to turn to the Manitoba Branch for guidance.

Cold winters drove curling indoors and the bigger clubs began to build indoor rinks after 1840. By 1900, Canadian curling clubs had moved almost exclusively indoors. Indoor rinks and later, modern ice-making technology brought the sport closer to an art form, eliminating snow, ice bumps and much of the luck that had previously made up the game.

Canada felt the need for its own governing body to regulate the sport and the Dominion Curling Association (later renamed the Canadian Curling Association) was founded in 1935. The CCA was instrumental in promoting the Canadian men's championship and in starting a national high school championship in 1950, a national ladies' championship (1961), mixed (1964), senior men's

(1965), junior ladies' (1971) and senior ladies' (1973).

In 1974, the CCA opened a new branch, Curl Canada, to develop a national teaching program. The goal of Curl Canada instructor courses and clinics was to train instructors to teach standardized curling skills and techniques. The initial concept has grown since then to also include coaching certification, ice technicians and club management.

Canada currently has an estimated 1,000,000 curlers and is generally considered the dominating force both in innovations to the sport and in competitive curling success.