

from the sidelines

by Natalie Axton

ON THE ICE, SHAKEN NOT STIRRED

ONE OF THE MOST important rules of curling is that the winners celebrate the losers by hosting them a round of drinks. Tonight, will I be able to see my first match at the Ansbury Curling Club? I see how important this rule really is. My team lost, and I'm not sure how or by how many points. I've spent the past two hours running up and down a sheet of ice with a broom trying not to fall. Despite my best attempts at getting accustomed to the space—a kind of cold white hazy slush—my eyes are still whirling and my feet are still sliding. Once we stopped "playing" I realized I was starved. Thankfully, graciously, my equivalent on the opposing team, George, who me what I want to drink. I have an idea. "I'll take a beer, any beer," I mumble.

I started curling this year on a whim and I didn't know what to expect. Curling isn't as high profile in the United States as it is in Canada and references to it draw blank stares or waxes. "You're doing what?" my mother asked me after I told her I had decided to try it. A coworker and I went to curling, but I ended at the pub and then continued she and her friends made fun of the curlers during the Winter Olympics. She wasn't alone. Curling gets the most exposure in the United States during the Olympics. It's been an event in the Winter Olympic Games since 1998. And so every four years viewers and journalists "discover" curling. Isn't it funny? Doesn't it look strange? Who are these silly people who call themselves athletes?

Curling, however, has a long history in the United States and much of that history is centered around New York. The game is a Scottish import that first came to Detroit, then spread to and flourished in New York City. The philosophy of curling is very much like that of other Scottish sporting traditions, golf. Early clubs included the St. Andrew's, the New York Curling Club, the Yonkers, the Thibault, and the Colonians, and many of them met on the frozen ponds of Central Park for matches or "tournaments."



1877: GREAT CURLING MATCH ON THE CENTRAL PARKS FROZEN POND BETWEEN THE ST. ANDREW'S AND COLONIANS CLUBS. FROM JULES'S ILLUSTRATED NEWSPIPER, FEBRUARY 22, 1877. COURTESY OF THE NEW YORK HISTORICAL SOCIETY.

According to the New York Historical Society, there was a large enough body of curlers in the United States by 1867 to establish a Grand National Curling Club of America with headquarters in New York City. In 1869 a founding member of the St. Andrew Curling Club created a gold medal to be awarded to the best curling club in the nation. Still played today, the Gordon Grand National Bontspiel is one of the oldest sporting events in the country. (It's presided by the American Cup curling team and a former bontspiel called the Bill Quirk Silver Medal.)

The Ansbury Curling Club (ACC), located on the grounds of the Ansbury Country Club, is a legacy of this early curling history. The club was founded by a member of the St. Andrew's Club in 1935. The clubhouse at the Ansbury Country Club opened in 1967. The New York Clubhouses released an "Sponsor's Manual" in order to share space with ACC. The other original clubs are gone.

George has gone from the warm rooms, the club's cozy living room that

overlooks the ice, to get my drink, and I'm watching Dina and Jim clean the ice after our game. The ACC has three sheets. "We've been playing on the far right sheet and are the last curlers to finish. The two men tell me they've been curling together for five years and that explains the repair they had during the game. Dina's been telling me to sweep the ice hard on Jim's throws so that "he'll feel better about them" not making it to the house, the scoring section of the ice sheet. Jim has explained to me where to stand during the game and how to follow the strategy. I was playing lead, the first person to deliver the rock. Part of my job was preparing the rocks for the skip, who has to travel the length of the ice to get to the back, a kind of steering block.

I came to the club during a post-Winter Olympics open house. ACC has two open houses a year. Anyone curious about the sport can register for a 30-minute slot on the ice and have from members how to safely get on and off the ice, how to throw the rocks, and how to sweep. In a non-Olympic year the open house might attract 30 people, according to George. In the open house held after the 2014 Sochi games, 500 people showed up. About a third of those, including myself, signed up for Learn to Curl, a package of seven in-depth lessons that include membership and enrollment in a league. (The club also offers open house rentals for corporate events and private parties.)

That was in the spring. In the fall I signed up for the Saturday afternoon league, which pairs new curlers with more experienced team members and includes dinner. This league demonstrates what ACC president Jeff Cooper means to all of us new members: curlers are incredibly social.

After the game the curlers retreat to the warm room for dinner. Tonight, dinner has been prepared by Jim and Judith, a married couple who have been curling for a few years. It's a pork and cabbage dish and it's been warming in the downstairs kitchen. Those of us who want to have dinner dinner \$6 to the pot. The members who made dinner are reimbursed. The rest goes to the bartender. (The bar is managed by the Ansbury Country Club.)

During dinner I ask my fellow league members what brought them to the sport. "I curl because I'm looking to meet a big, hot Canadian," jokes Jane, a thirty-something woman from New Jersey. Jane, the most ardent curler in our league, has short dark hair with green streaks through it and wears Vin Diesel top sneakers she had converted into curling shoes. Arlene, a middle-aged curler and five half originally from the Bronx, says she looked up curling years ago in the *Encyclopedia Britannica*. "I wanted to know who brings brooms to a sporting event?" she laughs. Once he tried it, he was hooked.

Many of the curlers joined because of their wives. This is the case for George, a retired lobbyist. George's wife started curling when he was still

working. When he was five, George would come to the club to watch. Eventually, he decided to try it.

James, another married curler at the table, asks, "Why is it so much fun? My wife and I couldn't figure it out." Driving home from curling in their first year they made a list of all the ways curling was fun. Meeting new people topped the list. So did making your shot.

In addition to married couples, there are lots of Canadians. (Perhaps Jim's strategy isn't so crazy? We have at least three among us my table during dinner, counting one curler to launch into the old jokes. "Did you hear how many Canadians it takes to form a world curling league?" His tone is light but his point is serious: Canadians dominate the world circuit. In Canada it's possible to be a professional curler. Here in the United States, even the Olympic team is fielded by very talented amateurs. The Ansbury Club has its fair share of elite curlers and has hosted qualifying rounds for the US Olympic trials. The next will along the ice in April with business controlling the club's more accomplished members, including Bill Soper, a U.S. men's national champion in 2012. During dinner people come by and tell me to watch Jonathan Meckler, the 2014 US mixed doubles champion who is practicing on the ice while we eat. The form, the sound, the focus are all great.

"They're playing a different game," says George of the club's elite curlers. What he says makes curling so enjoyable is that "Almost anyone can learn to curl in an hour or so." But this statement is greeted with sounds of disappointment. Everyone acknowledges that it's easy to pick up the basics, but mastery takes much more dedication. League organizer, Laura Hill, explains that like anything else, you'll get more out of curling with lots of practice and better focus.

But still the members at the table agree, "You can be old and fat and still curl." This is pointed to as one of the pleasures of curling. And so I have to ask do the social curlers consider curling a sport, or a game?

"It's a sport! It's in the Olympics, so it's a sport!" insists one member. "But what, really, is a sport?" asks another.

Dina pipes up. "I got into an argument with a woman about whether curling was a sport. I told her that anything that requires physical dexterity and is scored is a sport. Running is not a sport. It's an activity." The woman was a triathlete, and she took umbrage.

"So by that definition, golf is a sport?" asks one man who questions the dexterity required of golfers.

"I was watching sport fishing on television the other day," says John. "They catch the fish, measure them, then throw them back in." "Sport fishing is de facto SPORT fishing?" The beer comes very good. ☺

Natalie Axton is a writer in North Salem, New York.