



JIM MACLEAN/RIVERTOWNS ENTERPRISE

Lia Nicodemo, Danielle Kohn, Alex Almeida and Alex Weinberg from Scarsdale's Fox Meadow School learn to curl on Feb. 11.

Curlers welcome Sochi-inspired wannabes

By Carter Smith

"In the beginning, the Ardsley Curling Club was created. It was good," recounts a 1973 history of the organization's founding in December of 1932. Now in its 82nd year, the club is in the midst of the ritual renewed interest that occurs every four years — in tandem with the Winter Olympic Games. A recent Wednesday evening was a case in point as three separate league matches were taking place on the club's three playing surfaces or "sheets" of ice. On that day, reporters from the Wall Street Journal and WPIX television, as well as from the Enterprise, visited the facility.

For the club's first three decades, members met weekly at St. Andrew's Golf Club in Hastings, until, as the club history put it, "they had their own home and new ice in their Promised Land."

Since 1966, that "promised land" has been atop North Mountain Road in Irvington, where the club is preparing to host a 2014 Olympic Open House Series over five days — Feb. 24-26 and then March 1-2.

According to the club's president, Tom Doherty of Irvington, membership swells to about 300 in Olympic years, before settling back to around 200 in off years. The Ardsley club is the only curling club in Westchester. The closest neighboring club is in South Plainfield, N.J., with another in Bridgeport, Conn., and a third in the town of Bellmore on Long Island. Although most of the club's members live in the Rivertowns or elsewhere in Westchester, some come from as far away as Brooklyn.

"Right now in the United States, there are about 16,000 curlers and a lit-

tle less than 200 curling clubs," Doherty said. The highest concentration of curling clubs is in the Midwest.

The Ardsley organization's season runs from September until late March or early April, with league play beginning in October. While the club has yet to claim an Olympian among its members, it has had national champions. Bill Stopera and Martin Sather were part of the men's U.S. national

championship team in 2012. Two others, Gert Messing and Dennis Mellerup, were on the men's 2013 senior national champion team.

Doherty discovered curling while earning his MBA at St. John's University in Queens. Browsing through a sports directory while researching possible careers, he came upon a listing for the

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Curling

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U.S. Curling Association. He called the number for the Wisconsin-based association and was told about the curling club in Ardsley. "I came up on a Saturday and threw a couple stones, and I've been here ever since," he said.

Although Doherty's wife, Pat, is not a curler, roughly 40 percent of the club's members are female. Until last year, one of them was 94-year-old Jean MacIntosh, a longtime Irvington resident now living in a retirement community in Briarcliff Manor. MacIntosh was an active curler until last year. She and her husband, Herbert, who passed away in 2000, joined the club in 1967.

"During the week I'd curl once with the women, and during the weekend I'd play in a mixed team with my husband, and another couple from Irvington — Tony and Vanda Ficalore, the Fletchers — Betty and Herman — or Jeff and Pippa Broadhurst," she said.

"Before I started curling," she continued, "I can remember being in Scotland at some old castle and here was this rock, with a handle on it. We know they used that at some point for curling."

MacIntosh, who served as chair of the club's women's league, frequently traveled with her husband to tournaments, known as bonspiels, in the Midwest, Canada or even Germany.

A few years ago, the club had a high school league that included Irvington, Dobbs Ferry, and Hastings. However, budget cutbacks forced that league to disband. Now, a group of students from the Hackley School in Tarrytown come to the club on Thursday afternoons during the season.



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Scarsdale students sweep the "pebbles" from in front of a stone on Feb. 11.

While the Ardsley club dates back to the Depression era, the game itself was born in medieval Scotland. The first written reference to a contest using stones on ice appears in the records of Paisley Abbey, Renfrewshire, in February 1541. In fact, the traditional source for the granite used for curling stones is a quarry on Ailsa Craig, an island off the Ayrshire coast of Scotland. The

quarry produces two kinds of granite, Blue Hone and Ailsa Craig Common Green. In the past, most curling stones were made from Blue Hone, but the island is now a wildlife preserve and the quarry is restricted by environmental conditions that exclude blasting. The world's only other source of granite for curling stones is Trefor Granite Quarry in the village of Trefor on the north

coast of Wales.

While those unfamiliar with the game may find the rules baffling, they are relatively straightforward. Two teams of four players take turns sliding heavy, polished granite stones, called "rocks" in North America, across the sheet toward the "house," the bulls-eye target marked on the ice. Each team has eight stones. The goal is to accumulate the highest score for a game; points are scored for the stones resting closest to the middle of the house at the conclusion of each "end," which is completed when both teams have thrown all of their stones. Because tiny frozen droplets of water covering the sheet, known as "pebble," cause the stones to "curl," instead of sliding straight, sweeping the ice helps combat the problem by diminishing the friction between the stone and the sheet, thus allowing the stone to travel a straighter path toward the house.

Over the years, curling equipment has evolved. Brooms once were once made of corn strands, much like household brooms. Today, they are made of synthetic material.

Doherty also attributes some of the growing interest in the ancient game to modern technology. "I think it's a combination of the Internet and web-streaming. A lot of clubs are streaming their bonspiels," he said.

The Ardsley Curling Club hosts its own McKay-Douglas Bonspiel, which began yesterday (Feb. 20) and ends Monday, Feb. 24. "We have teams traveling from Jersey, Cape Cod, New Hampshire," Doherty said.

Looking back at her years of curling, MacIntosh said, "It was wonderful. Anytime I meet anybody, I say, 'Do you know what curling is?' and I try to get them interested."