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Curling

Michelle Duritsch

From the instant the Winter Olympics showcased a group of grown men furiously cleaning ice with brushes, I was hooked. I am not too surprised that I developed a fascination with curling at the age of eleven, as I have always been drawn to subjects that I deem peculiar, and, therefore, worthy. From annoying my brother constantly with the cartoon Sagwa, the Chinese Siamese Cat, to choosing to dislike Justin Bieber or the Jonas Brothers because that was expected of every girl in my grade, I wanted to set myself apart from others. Years later, at the age of nineteen, I define myself less by trying to be contrarian, and instead I embrace what captivates me. And curling has remained constant.

My initial penchant to the sport of curling came from the ease at which I could crack jokes. I mean, the premise alone was more than enough for an immature kid to poke fun at while finding enjoyment. Curling was hypnotic. It dominated the television timeslots, and I could not tear my eyes away. While others groaned at the sight of a “filler” sport during the Olympics, which are supposed to be action-packed, I found solace when it was just me watching a sport I knew nothing about. On the outside, my family may have seen a young girl giggling and poking fun at foreign gameplay, but behind that façade was a deeper connection that I veiled with jokes. In the world of sports, curling is an anomaly all on its own that somehow draws in fans with its unique gameplay.

People always find a way to entertain themselves. For instance, I find joy in watching curling, so enjoyment is purely subjective. This may explain why Scottish farmers in the 1500s decided to start sliding granite stones down a frozen bog for fun. They either really liked what they were doing, or winters in Scotland were extremely boring. By some miracle, this game caught on and eventually developed into the great sport we call “curling”. Naturally, curling found its way to Canada in 1759 and then trickled down to the United States in 1832. Curling

continued to slowly gain traction until making its debut at the first Winter Olympics in 1924. However, curling was not a medaling sport at the Olympics again until seventy-two years later in 1998, which just so happens to be the year I was born. Despite what television broadcasters predicted, curling was a moderate success among the viewership and has continued to be a presence at the Winter Olympics to this day.

Curling looks ridiculous. However, when curling is broken down into its fundamental rules, it appears less ridiculous, although not by much. There is only so much I can do to legitimize a sport that includes sweeping the ice as a rule, but I will try my best. In order to fully understand the mechanics behind curling, we have to start from the ground up by analyzing the ice. It is a gripping topic, I know, but the grip of the ice is central to curling. Curlers are passionate about their ice and make sure the conditions are just right. First off, the water has to be pure to minimize contaminants, as the stone will not slide or curl properly if there are rough patches. The surface of the ice itself also has to be level. The most important aspects with curling ice are the small frozen water droplets called “pebbles.”

These pebbles reduce the amount of friction between ice and the curling stone, which is important in the stone’s projection; otherwise, on an untreated surface, the stone would stop halfway down the ice. As the game progresses, the ice will wear unevenly, forcing players have to adapt to any type of ice. How thrilling.

When I hear the word curling, I automatically associate it with the scrubbing of brooms on ice; however, these “brooms” are actually brushes. Depending on the curler’s preference, they can choose from two types of brushes: a cloth-covered brush or a hair brush. The brush functions as a tool to reduce friction between the stone and the ice. The brush slightly warms the ice and clears off any excess debris. This differs from my previous understanding of the brush’s purpose. I had thought the brushes kicked up ice in order to slow the stone down, but in reality, the brushing causes the stone to travel farther and straighter than its original trajectory. The term “curling” comes from “the technique when the deliverer releases the stone with a subtle twist on the handle that causes it to turn as it glides on the ice.” The signature curl, or bend in the stone’s path, comes from the fine-tuned release, and the brushing can smooth out a curl which also causes it to travel farther.

The trick to successful curling is finding the balance between knowing when and how to use the brush.

Curling terminology can be tough to follow simply because you have to stay awake long enough for it to be explained properly. In curling, there are ten rounds called “ends,” and teams can score at the conclusion of each end. During an end, each team alternates throwing the stone eight times, and each of the four players—the lead, the second, and the skip—throws twice. The lead, the second, and third throw the first six stones while the skip stands at the end of the lane and calls the shots, essentially acting as the team’s cheerleader. The skip, or team captain, is responsible for the team’s strategy and delivers the final two stones. When the round finishes, the position of the stones determines which team earns a point.

One aspect even more exciting than curling ice and terminology is the curling scoring system. On each end of the floor are targets called the “house.” The house is where the magic occurs. The curlers aim for the middle of this twelve-foot circle. The scoring occurs at the conclusion of each end, and only one team has a chance to win points. After the players have delivered every stone, the team with the closest stone to the center receives a point for every stone that is closer to the center than their opponent’s stones. If there are no stones on the house, then neither team receives points. That is always a sad occurrence.

The most basic curling strategy, besides not falling face-first on the ice, depends on whichever team delivers the final stone. Stone placement is crucial to scoring, so the team that throws last has the advantage of hitting the center of the house without the chance of the other team knocking it away. The team throwing first then has to place their stones in defense of the house. This is why some teams place their first stones so far in front of the target instead of trying for the center. They want to make it as difficult as they can for their opponent to hit the center at the end and score points. Taking in consideration the placement of each shot, along with the angles and the decision of whether or not to sweep on the shot, curling becomes an intense mental game that depends on communication between teammates.

If you have ever seen photographs of triumphant gold medalists celebrating their victory, they cannot compare to perusing through the United States Men’s Curling gold medal photos from Seoul. Picture this: grown men waving brooms aloft in celebratory shock while wearing

outfits that resemble patriotic pajamas. It is majestic. The United States has never been known as a curling powerhouse (that distinction is saved for Canada and Great Britain). The Americans had never won a gold medal in men's or women's curling. In 2006, the American men brought home a bronze medal, but at the next two Olympics, they finished last place and second-to-last place. The gold medal for the men at the 2018 Winter Olympic games, while hard-earned, was an unexpected game-changer. The American men were down in the tournament, and they could not afford to make a single mistake while facing teams like Canada and Sweden. Curling is not a sport that lends itself to underdogs, but the Americans handled the pressure like champs and went on a hot-streak. It was a crazy curling comeback story, which is my kind of curling story.

Tyler George, one of the members of the winning team, said that "We just want our sport to be loved by our country as much as we love it." With this success story, historical win, and the passion of these men, maybe the tides will change for curling. One can only hope. How could a sport that starts off the Winter Olympics with "the ceremonial blaring of the bagpipes" to honor its Scottish heritage not catch on with the general public?

Like clockwork, curling clubs across the United States experience a spike in public interest after the heavy media coverage of the Winter Olympics. Dean Roth, the leader of Curl NYC, said that with the regularity of the curling broadcasting: "true curling mania first hit the United States back in 2002, during the Vancouver Olympics."

After the Winter Olympics, curling, sadly, receives little-to-no media coverage and love. Curling is also a sport that many Americans, myself included, think is not as difficult to learn compared to other Winter Olympic sports, such as snowboarding. Curling is exotic in that way, that Scottish way. The combination of an unusual sport and its four-year coverage has generated a small group of admirers. The United States Curling Association has seen its membership numbers double to 20,000 curlers in the past fifteen years. With the recent gold medal victory of the U.S., the Milwaukee Curling club said that in regard to curling interest: "this is an exceptional year with the success of the American team." Time will only tell if the victory of the Americans will lead to society's overarching acceptance of curling as a legitimate sport, and not just an outlier on display once every four years.

Fundamentally, a sport is a social spectacle. From a sociological perspective, sports are

composed of the dynamic relationship between its players and fans as they celebrate a cherished pastime. Sports would not flourish without this outside support from the fans. So, write to your local congressman about curling—for the betterment of society. As a society, we make up sports, and sports also make up society. For instance, in order for a sport to increase in popularity, there has to be support from the masses. The shift in sports popularity that is most evident is American baseball. Although baseball was the most popular sport in the early 1900s, by the end of the century football had surpassed baseball in its popularity. This shift reflects the change of the times, whether it be technological or political. Since sports are interwoven with the evolution of society, “sports can be viewed as a microcosm of a larger society.” In 2018, individual voices are amplified and heard through the internet and its many social media sites, like Twitter and YouTube.

Using these platforms, individuals can express their opinions and find their own group in the collective. There are whole sections of the internet devoted to singular topics and this makes otherwise obscure media spread. We pick and choose what becomes popular with viral videos and the passing of information through our social medias. This social advancement of the internet will be reflective in the sports world in the upcoming years. Curling could skyrocket in popularity and recognition. We are in an age where normalization and acceptance are easier to achieve with technological advancements and this societal trend lends itself for curling to become a more popular sport as more people examine it closer. It seems that almost anything can become popular nowadays, so it is time for curling to own the spotlight.

Fascinating is one word I would use to describe curling. Its foreign nature caught my eye and pulled me in, and I have been a fan ever since. What started out as a joking admiration turned into sincere appreciation of the sport. Maybe I should just attribute my inclination toward curling due to my Scottish heritage. Who knows, my ancestors could have been tossing granite stones across the frozen bogs of Scotland, and I could be doing my part to continue their legacy. It could be in my blood—or not. I have been exposed to numerous sports growing up and have always been involved in as many as I can physically manage. I can remember season after season of playing both basketball and volleyball simultaneously. Throughout the eight years I played volleyball, to the brief time I spent on tennis lessons, to that one time I convinced my parents to let me take gymnastics (which is a terrible idea if you cannot do a cartwheel), I have never

experienced a sport like curling.

Curling, an Olympic sport that out of all the others I could see myself being capable of performing at a high caliber level. Curling, a sport where I could empathize with players as they swept as if their lives depended on it. My eleven-year-old self saw a piece of me reflected on that ice while I tried to conceal this connection with as many jokes as possible. Now I laugh because of the way I used to act. I laugh because I know better. I do not laugh because I am embarrassed, I laugh because I am proud of who I am and wish to share it with others. I am passionate about topics that are considered out-there by others and I will not conform to what society considers important. Although, if the popularity of curling rises, I may be part of the majority. I will not mind if curling does not soar in popularity because I will always have a special connection to a sport that has more to it than meets the eye. As a new member of the Butler University Curling Club, I am an advocate for a quirky sport that has some fantastic individuals, myself included.