

# Swept away

## Thanks to the Olympics, curling enthusiasts see something rare: attention

By Jonathan Pitts

His T-shirt reads "Just Add Ice." His left shoe has a sole of Teflon half an inch thick, just right for the art of sliding. And early on a Saturday morning, as his breath turns to clouds in the custom rink (air temperature: 33 degrees), George Shirk gazes toward the target, or "house," at the far end of the ice, where a foe has unkindly left two 42-pound stones in his path.

"He's putting the screws to me today, isn't he?" Shirk says with a laugh as he considers how to play the final shot.

Shirk, 54, has been in dicier spots in his 40 years in curling. This is, after all, a mere weekend drop-in session at the National Capital Curling Center in Laurel. The Potomac Curling Club, Shirk's organization, has opened play to the public this morning as it does every Saturday, offering lessons, hearty welcomes and a chance to join in.

The outreach effort is especially important now, as the Winter Olympics currently playing themselves out in Vancouver represent a once-every-four-years opportunity for curling clubs to attract new members.

But as he surveys the lay of the playing surface, Shirk's gaze narrows. He crouches in the footholds, or "hacks," stone in hand. He thrusts himself forward and glides, his 250 pounds balanced on the Teflon shoe.

With a twist of the wrist, he releases the rock, a slowly turning hunk of polished granite that makes its way up the ice with a gentle roar, crawling so slowly you're not sure it will even make the other end.

### Highest points

You're like a lot of Americans. You love sports, including winter sports, and tune in every four years to catch Olympic skiing, hockey or figure skating on TV.

But what you know about the Games' oldest team sport couldn't fill the indentation in the bottom of a curling stone.

So it makes sense to start at the beginning.

Curling, Shirk tells you over a 7:30 a.m. cup of coffee, was created in Scotland about 500 years ago when a collection of farmers, bored by the long winter, sought an outlet for their pent-up energies.

They played on frozen lochs, he says, sliding whatever big rocks they could find toward makeshift targets.

Ice and snow were a constant problem. "That's why they had to sweep," Shirk says of the broom action that is still one of the game's unique features. "Otherwise, your stone wouldn't travel 10 feet."

Historians still debate the sport's origins, but most agree it was brought to North America by Scottish soldiers during the French and Indian War. In the time since, it has grown into a worldwide phenomenon.

About 1.5 million people in 35 countries curl today, according to the World Curling Federation.

More than a million are in Canada, where curling clubs can be as familiar a sight as the local hockey arena. Scotland, Switzerland, Japan and the U.S. are the only other nations boasting more than 10,000 curlers.

As organizers drew up formal rules (1838), held the first international meets (mid-1800s) and introduced the sport at the inaugural Winter Games in Chamonix, France (1924), the sport adopted controlled conditions in indoor rinks and became a game of scrupulous rules and strategies.

"We always refer to it as chess on ice," says club member Catherine Coslick, 32, an aviation safety consultant who drives up from her home in McLean, Va., twice a week to play. "It's fascinating to watch the moves develop."

It's also, quite proudly, a game of etiquette.

"Players call their own fouls, they always praise a good shot, and the winning team buys the first round for the losers," says Shirk, a New York-born financial writer who makes the 106-mile round trip from Carroll County at least twice a week.

This early in the morning, it's just Shirk and Ken Wray, a fellow club official, at the rink, which happens to be the only dedicated curling facility within a half-hour's drive of Baltimore. As Shirk holds forth in the lobby, Wray, a retired Navy man, carefully prepares the playing surface.

He walks the ice in lengthwise rows, spraying it with de-ionized water from a tank on his back. This creates the "pebbled" effect of curling ice - a surface of randomly raised ridges that allows the stone to glide more easily than it would on a hockey rink.

"Just think of the stone resting on the three highest points of the ice at any given time," Shirk says.

As a few newcomers filter in, pay the \$20 fee and sign their safety waivers, the two share some local history. Back in the 1960s, a few diehards (mostly Canadian expats) formed the Potomac Curling Club, which for years played on hockey ice at the Cabin John Ice Rink in North Bethesda.

About 40 years later, Clai Carr, owner of the Gardens Ice House in Laurel - a hockey and figure skating facility - offered PCC the land on which to build a curling-only rink. Club members raised more than \$1 million for the rink, which opened in 2002.

"We're up to here in debt," Shirk says with a "we'll-figure-it-out" chuckle.

The club, which leases the land for \$1 a year, now has about 200 members.

Shirk waxes eloquent about the game's early days, the continuing prowess of the Scots, the sport's arcane scoring, and the prospects of the Americans in the Olympics. ("Those guys throw a thousand stones a week," he marvels.)

Curling, like baseball, is a game that inspires conversation, and it's clear the talk could go on all day, but half a dozen newbies are donning their gloves, grippers and sliders, some veteran members have filed in, and Shirk can't linger with a visitor. It's time to hit the ice.

## Generating heat

A curling rink is made up of sheets - parallel lanes in which the competition occurs - and Wray stands in one, barking out the basics, as half a dozen rookies look on from the rubber-padded sidelines.

"This is the 'house,' " Wray says, gesturing to a 12-foot, red, white and blue target painted on the ice. "The bull's-eye here is the 'button.' Ever heard the expression 'right on the button?' It's a curling term."

Wearing a T-shirt that reads, "We throw rocks at houses," Wray, a 20-year curling veteran, seems every bit the tenured professor who still loves teaching the intro class.

His students include Jeff Lee, a University of Maryland graduate student in chemical physics.

Lee, 24, isn't big into sports - his only other sport is pool - but he has always had a hankering to try curling.

"The Olympics reminded me I was curious about it," he says, "so I finally came by."

Beside him, Chris and Anna Toscano of Columbia wear expectantly wary looks. They fell for curling four years ago when they happened to catch a few games on TV during the 20th Winter Games in Turin - "there was obviously a lot going on," says Chris, 36 - and came to an open meet for Johns Hopkins University alumni two weeks ago.

They both fell a lot, but that wasn't enough to dampen their enthusiasm.

"It's an excellent deal here," says Chris Toscano, an FDA employee. "You drop in, get some instruction, and get to play the game in a way that isn't intimidating at all. We thought we'd come back and learn some more."

And they do. Wray has each newcomer don a rookie's slider (a slipper-like shoe cover bearing the Teflon sole) on one foot, a gripper (heavy rubber sole for balance) on the other.

It's easy to fall, he warns, adding that you should step on the ice gripper-foot first - and always use your broom as a balance wheel.

Then comes the hands-on instruction. To make a throw, the player springs from the "hacks" and, ideally with a smooth forward glide, releases the stone before crossing the "hog line" 33 feet away.

To "curl" the stone right-to-left, one holds the handle in a two o'clock position, straightening the hand upon release.

Then there's sweeping. On most shots, once a player releases the stone, two teammates trot out front, ready to sweep rapidly back and forth with their brooms on command from the "skip" (the equivalent of a team's quarterback). That, Wray says, creates friction, which generates heat, which melts the ice just enough to hasten the stone's movement.

"Sweeping can add 15 feet to the distance of a throw," he says, and if done well, it can bend a rock's path to one side by a foot or two.

Sweeping also accounts for most of the sport's ample exercise. "Sweepers can travel two miles during a

match," Wray says.

Today's rookies gingerly try out the techniques, resulting in a spill or two.

As the veterans offer encouragement, Lee displays surprisingly graceful form, a hesitant Anna Toscano leaves several throws well shy of the target, and her husband - who offers plenty of power ("weight," in curling jargon) - pulls more than one toss wide left.

"I need a wheel alignment," he says jokingly.

Ready or not, though, a match beckons.

### **Hitting the target**

As Shirk and Wray set things up, the shape and form of a match comes clear.

Each team has four players in curling, led by the most experienced (the "skip"), who plans and calls out strategy for each shot.

A match has eight "ends" (curling's equivalent of innings). There is no scoring until the last shot of each end, when the team that has the closest rock to the button wins a point - and another point for every rock closer to the button than the other team's best.

Shirk and Wray create yellow and red teams, beginners matched against beginners and veterans against veterans.

The club holds instructional and playing sessions like this one several times a week throughout the season, which runs from late fall through April. Club officials expected a big crowd at their semiannual open house Saturday and hoped to add 50 to 100 members from the spike in interest caused by the Winter Games.

For now, though, Shirk wants to finish today's friendly match in style. The earlier players - novices and veterans alike - have left him with a tricky board.

His yellow team needs a point to win, and the red team's Irwin Freed, a Montreal native who lives in Columbia, has blocked Shirk's view of the house with deft placement of two red stones.

Knowing his foe, though, Freed has no delusions. "George lives for shots like this," he says, laughing.

The toss that seemed too slow to get to the far end is, in fact, perfectly delivered. Rotating slowly, Shirk's stone curls between Freed's two red ones, decelerating at just the right moment to come to rest on the button.

Freed shakes his head. "Nice curling," he says, extending his hand, and they all retire to the lobby for coffee, tea and Canadian beer.

### **More on curling**

For more information on the Potomac Curling Club at the National Curling Center, which is next to The Gardens Ice House at 13810 Old Gunpowder Road in Laurel, call 301-362-1116 or go to [curldc.org](http://curldc.org).