

Curling Is In Full Sweep at the Plainfield Curling Club

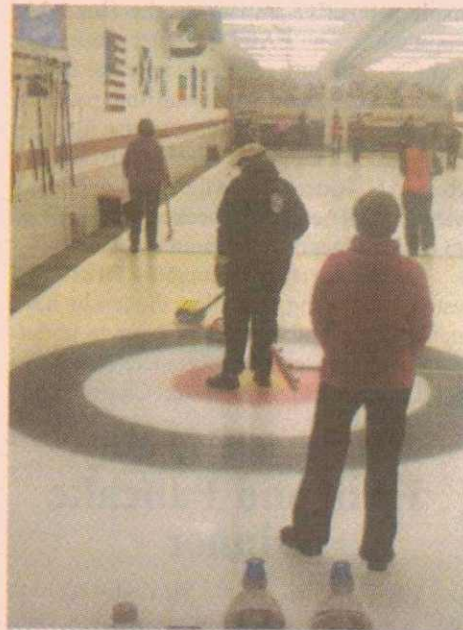
By Michael Vandenberg

This past weekend, I was lucky enough to go to the big game. I watched the teams compete against each other, and it was a blast to watch. It's a complicated sport with a rich history dating back many years and it has legions of loyal fans. But I'm not talking about football. I'm talking about my visit to the Plainfield Curling Club in South Plainfield, New Jersey's only one of its kind.

Curling is ancient in the world of sports, having started in 16th century Scotland. Similar to shuffleboard, it has gained significant notoriety since 1998, when it was added to the Winter Olympics. Teams of four take turns sliding a 42-pound granite stone across the ice sheet, with the goal of getting it past the "hog line" and to the target, or "house". While the stone is sliding, two players sweep the ice with a modified broom. Doing this slightly warms the ice enough to manipulate the movement of the stone. The bottom of the stone is indented, meaning that only a razor thin, circular edge of the stone touches the ice.

Seen it before on television and think you can jump right in? Not exactly. Curling is a lot harder than it looks. One member said that in his first lesson, "the instructor mentioned it would take about five years of training to become a skilled player. I thought he was exaggerating, but he was actually about right". What seems easy is actually a game of intense strategy, and the tiniest decisions have the biggest consequences.

Few know this better than Dean Gem-



mell, a member of the club who plays at the national level. His team placed third at the Olympic trials for Sochi, a defeat he calls, "awful. Completely awful." They needed one more win to be in the playoffs, and one loss was because the opposing team made a 1 in 50 shot on the last stone. "The difference between winning and losing at the highest levels of curling is extremely small," Dean said. "We lost two games when we were on the wrong side of the inch."

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Speaking of the club's members, Bruce Belschner kindly showed me around during my visit. The club was started by a few players from Canada in 1963. With no curling clubs in the state, they began playing at a skating rink in South Plainfield. The problem was that type of ice has the wrong surface for curling. (Curling ice must be flat, at a temperature slightly below freezing, and is often "pebbled" with frozen droplets of water for a very specific consistency.) They decided to build their own club with ice dedicated just to curling. Built almost completely with their own money and effort over a span of two years, the Plainfield Curling Club opened in 1966.

What surprised me most about my visit was the club's atmosphere. There are round tables and a bar when you walk in, and people talking and having a good time. There are then windows to see the two curling sheets stretching back towards the pig mural-covered back walls (a reference to the hog line). A women's "bonspiel", or tournament, was taking place, so the ice was full with curlers in action. Everyone has a warm personality and is more than happy to chime in on their



favorite sport.

Bruce himself calls it "the greatest sport on the planet," and it's not hard to see why. There is a sense of comradery that is unmatched in other sports. There are no referees; players are expected to call their own mistakes. When the bonspiel is over at the club, opposing teams sit at the same table and even complement each other on good shots. Bruce said that usually, "The winners buy the losers drinks, and the losers buy the winners drinks as well." Dean has loved the sense of community that exists in the sport ever since he started playing at a young age where he grew up in Canada, where curling is the national pastime. "I am great friends with former opponents and former teammates," he said. Being on a small team helps too. Dean added, "There is the dynamic of teams of four players, creating bonds that other sports do not."

Interested in giving it a try or learning more about the Plainfield Curling Club? Check out their website at njcurling.org. Good curling!

If you have an idea for a future sports-related article, email the author at mv3191@gmail.com or call 732-968-1615.