

# A TALE OF TWO CLUBS



Montreal Thistle – a curling club in transition.

*The role of the Business of Curling magazine is to help club executives understand our industry and how we do business. Unfortunately, each issue cannot be crammed with good news stories. In reality, there are stories of clubs shutting down or in serious financial difficulties.*

*This is the story of two such clubs.*

*If the walls of the Montreal Thistle could talk, the story she could tell of her proud history would be fascinating. Yet, tradition was no defence against rising property taxes, a suburbanization of the downtown core and the exodus of industry. The building now sits empty, the shouts of 'hurry, hard' a faint echo of her past. The 'For Sale' sign now hangs over the front door.*

*Atikokan's history may not be as spectacular; yet, this club was once the focal point of this Northwestern Ontario community. Atikokan does not have a population of three million, nor has the club been around for 156 years; however, it does have similar problems to Thistle. While there may not be a "For Sale" hanging over the front door, the club is perilously near closing.*

## The Montreal Thistle Curling Club A Sign of the Times

By Ann Drummie

**F**ounded in 1843, the Montreal Thistle Curling Club has undergone numerous changes throughout its 156-year history.

The club, which was rebuilt from a fire, has since moved into an indoor facility; built a new clubhouse when its land was sold by an

unscrupulous syndicate; incorporated artificial ice; permitted the participation of women and students; and incorporated a relaxed dress code.

In the early 1980s, the club reached its zenith with a full staff, curlers participating in national events, and over 250 members playing more than once a week in various leagues. Over the next two decades, however, Thistle's community changed. Large corporations moved away from Montréal; the City imposed a new business tax; society placed less emphasis on identity by club affiliation; professionals had more avenues for developing networks than the social club infrastructure; and increased interest in fitness created more options for the recreation dollar.

Appeals were submitted to the City regarding excessive taxation. Leagues were restructured to be more open and flexible, but some cost-cutting decisions resulted in adverse long-term effects. For example, volunteer or part-time bartenders were downgraded to casual employees – a situation that contributed to reduce overall sales and contributions. The demand for arranging orders and scheduling shifts contributed to increased anxiety levels of volunteer coordinators. Volunteer bookkeeping resulted in decentralized files, inconsistent accounts, and insufficient accounting information at the Annual General Meeting.

While the call for volunteers increased, members eventually found themselves unable to supply the demand. With increased volunteer burnout and turnover, and the absence of any long-term plan, the presidency became the proverbial "hot potato."

### A club in transition

The success of a curling club is traditionally quantified by its membership; however, this figure is often misleading. The number of members at Thistle didn't change considerably for a few years, but the members themselves did. They went from playing in three leagues a week to just one, and stopped frequenting the lounge until the early hours of the morning.

Reduced membership eventually sparked attempts to find those who were willing to make a six-month commitment. With increased desperation, Thistle resorted to traditional avenues – basic advertising and word of mouth – to attract these kinds of mem-

bers. A membership target was established with little potential for success, and even less that it would solve the current crisis.

There is little question that the club could have responded to the crisis sooner if the operation had been evaluated on a weekly ba-



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sis, addressing a number of issues, including:

- How many hours was the ice being used and for what?
- How many participants were on the ice?
- How often were guest passes being used?
- How many lessons were being given?
- How many hours was the lounge being used (compared to bar revenue)?
- How many club teams were entered in outside events?
- How many volunteer duties/hours were performed, and by how many volunteers?

#### A different approach

Through the Business of Curling program, the club finally redrafted its services. Thistle would no longer rely on the support of traditional curlers, but would promote a grass-roots campaign from which future long-standing members would rise. Research revealed numerous strategic options previously available, including moving the club, acquiring more land for parking, and building a concrete base. Unfortunately, all of these strategies were not feasible given the club's limited resources.

The initial business plan focused on what the club could actually do with its current resources. Internet pages and newsletters, four-week memberships, lesson packages, simplified curling fees related to ice time, promotional group party packages, and a local charity event were all initiated.

One year after its inception, the business plan highlighted essentials for the successful operation of an urban centre curling facility. They included:

- commitment from the City for leniency in taxation;
- a program to subsidize at least one employee with marketing skills;
- partners to support activities at our facility (City, YMCA, universities);
- sponsors to pay for a concrete base;
- renter(s) to share in the operating costs;
- curling associations to reciprocate the efforts of the other parties.

These essentials all hinge on recognition, support and negotiation from outside sources. As a private social club, however, Thistle had always experienced success without any "outside" assistance. There was no regular interaction at a decision-making level with any other curling club. For years, no one outside the executive had any clear sense of what was wrong.

Stakeholders essential to the club's survival should have been involved on a regular basis. The club needs people other than its committed members to believe in its role in the community. These people will help

champion its cause and compensate for skills lacking in volunteer boards. Contacting past members recently proved to be an invaluable source of emotional support.

Presently, there is a significant debt from previous years of operation. An overwhelming effort is required to put the essential pieces in place. The club is comprised of a small group of curling enthusiasts with greater priorities, including jobs and family. It has been determined, under the circumstances, that the wisest business decision is

to sell the major assets—the land and building. Plans regarding the preservation of Thistle's history and the proper distribution of club items are currently being discussed. There exists growing support to manage the surplus as a fund for training coaches and junior-development programs in Quebec. This is considered an exceptional way to maintain the club's proud name.

*Ann Drummie is the president of the Montreal Thistle Curling Club.*

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# A TALE OF TWO CLUBS



The Atikokan Curling Club – a mere shadow of its former self.

## The Atikokan Curling Club Little Falls Finds Big Inspiration in Future Developments

By Leslie Kerr

**A**tikokan is a community of 3,500 people, located in northwestern Ontario, 200 km west of Thunder Bay. The Ontario Power Generation, forestry and tourism industries largely support the community.

Little Falls Recreation Centre is the community's golf and curling facility. Built in 1975 with the assistance of Wintario funding, it houses a six-sheet curling arena and a nine-hole golf course, with a full-service restaurant and lounge, as well as a pro-shop, locker rooms and saunas.

When the centre opened, replacing Atikokan's old three-sheeter, membership and activity soared. There were leagues curling six out of seven nights and, after Christmas, every weekend was booked with a bonspiel. Over the next few years, the two mines, which were the major employers at the time, closed. The town's population of 5,500 decreased slightly, but was steadied with the construction of the Ontario Hydro facility. During the early 1990s, though, curling witnessed a rapid decrease in participation.

Today, the club exists with just one night of adult curling (12 teams), four teams of high school curlers, an afternoon league with 12 curlers, and a Junior Rockers' program with 25 participants. The survival of the curling club is questionable and the Little Falls Recreation Centre itself is in a state of financial crisis.

There are many theories about the decline in participation: busy schedules, other recreation opportunities, a decreasing and aging population base, less disposable income, drinking and driving legislation, and the shift schedules at the three main employers. Recreational curlers felt inhibited by their competitive counterparts, causing many to pursue other sports and hobbies. Most importantly, neither member recruitment, nor retention was being addressed.

Now that the future of the Centre is threatened, the Board must look at steps that should have been taken to prevent the current situation. The current Board, and indeed board members of the past, has agreed that Little Falls Recreation Centre must operate as a business. But the sense of directing has been met with little support. A business plan was developed, but not instituted. No budgets were outlined, and there was little long-range planning.

Recruitment and retention of members was almost non-existent. Decisions were made based on inaccurate financial records. Audits were not conducted and legal advice was not sought. Partnerships were not developed and the bylaws were outdated. Staff was assigned the task of running the Centre with no checks or balances in place to ensure effective and efficient operations. The Board was reactive, not proactive, and often complacent.

It was assumed that the Township of Atikokan would be there to assist if there was a major crisis. Not an unrealistic expectation, considering that it owns the building. In reality, the agreement with the Township was never signed when the Centre became incorporated, and neither party was sure of their responsibilities.

We as board members now have to make some decisions and plans for the immediate and long-term future and health of the Little Falls Recreation Centre. A complete financial audit has been conducted, and the bylaws

are being updated. Partnerships with the Atikokan Economic Development Corporation and the Township of Atikokan have been developed, and a memorandum of agreement with the Township is now being negotiated. This agreement will address such issues as cost sharing of major capital expenditures, responsibility for building maintenance and renovations, allocation of staff expenses for township employees working at the Centre, insurance coverage, and more.

Both parties will be aware of their joint responsibilities for the first time in many years. Assistance that we were unaware of from our respective curling and golf associations is being sought. Board members have been asked to make a serious commitment to the future of the Centre, and financial and operational checks and balances are being introduced.

The final message to other Boards is NEVER ASSUME. As a board member, you must be aware of, but not necessarily involved in, the daily operations. Always look to the future and plan. Ensure that checks and balances are in place, and do not be afraid to ask for assistance from partners and professionals. Communicate with the members, past, present, and future, to ensure that their needs are being met.

*Since this article was written in January, many improvements have occurred. The Board of Directors met weekly for three months to develop and implement operational policies, and oversee day-to-day affairs. Policy manuals are being written and brought into force. The Board and some members participated in a Business of Curling Phase 2 and have established three goals: the development of a staffing model to include the hiring of a manager; creation of a communication/marketing plan; and increasing memberships and outside rentals. A complete financial review was conducted and the recommendations of the audit are being implemented. The financial statements have been set up in a readable format, budgets are being struck for the upcoming fiscal year, and a five-year financial projection is being prepared. A Memorandum of Agreement with the Township is in the final stages of negotiation, and the Township has agreed to assist with the cost of repairing and replacing the curling plant that was determined to be unsafe for further use.*

*Leslie Kerr is the president of the Atikokan Curling Club.*





# Cashing in on the CCA's Curling Development Fund

By Danny Lamoureux

**T**he Canadian Curling Association's Curling Development Fund is here to assist curling clubs in generating more dollars for promotion, advertising and new programs for the next curling season. As part of its event management system for Canadian championships, the CCA has committed 10 per cent of the net profits generated by the Brier and the World Championships (when held in Canada) to this fund every year. The fund was established to assist in program initiatives at the grassroots or curling club level.

The CCA has established four parameters for the distribution of funds:

- Funds may be distributed on the basis of need.
- Regions may be given priority.
- Funds should be partnered with a Member Association financial contribution.
- Projects assisted by this fund will be consistent with CCA initiatives.

## Eligibility

Every affiliated\* curling club in Canada and each of the CCA's provincial or territorial member associations may make application to the fund. Curling clubs must first send their applications to their association. The reason for this re-direction is simple: to make each association aware of applications submitted by their members. Associations can neither veto, nor endorse any application. They simply make a copy and forward it to the CCA for consideration.

## Projects eligible for funding

The CCA will consider applications that focus on the following areas:

- projects that will have a significant impact on recruiting new members, or, that will contribute to retaining current members;
- professional help for novice and intermediate curlers, whether they are youth, juniors, adults and senior adults;
- advertising or awareness campaigns;

- training programs for board members, club managers, icemakers or volunteers (for example, the *Business of Curling* workshop);
- the purchase of little rocks;
- training of Level 1 or Level 2 Technical instructors;
- and certain expenses for summer camps for juniors or adults.

Notwithstanding these eligible projects, the CCA will also consider (and look forward to reading) projects with creative and innovative ideas. While a number of applications to date have indeed focused on these particular areas, they have failed because they were looking for funding to buy equipment for new participants. Or they were looking for hotel and travel expenses to send volunteers for technical upgrading. Or they wanted the fund to pay their club for ice time for instruction clinics. Or they were looking for help to pay to send kids to curling camps.

Additional products the CCA will not fund, include: capital expenditures (other than little rocks); for example, a new compressor or chiller, audio-visual equipment, high-performance initiatives for either juniors or adults, and expenses for training volunteers (we would prefer assisting in sending an instructor to you rather than sending the volunteers to the instructor).

Projects will be assessed on any or each of the following: innovation or creativity of project; actual need; the number of curlers and/or curling clubs impacted by the project; and potential long-term benefits to the sport of curling. Projects must also show that the club is committed both organizationally and financially, and that projects that may consider other partners will be treated favourably.

Each application must include:

- association sign-off and the CCA Short Form Survey;
- a detailed outline of the project's goals, objectives and strategies including a budget;
- a copy of the club's most recent annual financial statement;
- the backing of the Board of Directors with a motion outlining the commitment.

**Here is an example of an application from the Beresford CC in New Brunswick**

**that was completed correctly:**

*The Project Description and Goal:* Beresford wished to capitalize on the Canada Winter Games coming to their area in 2003 with a project to revitalize their junior program. They felt that through their partnerships with the CCA and the local Department of Municipalities and Housing, they could successfully mount a recruiting campaign in neighboring communities and local schools.

*The Objectives:* In the first year of their plan, Beresford wanted to recruit five per cent of the market or 50 children in the 8-13 age group, then adding another 10 children in the second year of the plan. Finally, the club would implement a junior program for 13-18 year-olds in the second year.

*The Strategies:* Beresford would market their program to the five primary and intermediate schools, including direct promotion to the children and their parents. They would promote and educate the Phys. Ed. Teachers, develop training and coaching programs for interested teachers and parents, and prepare an awareness campaign for the school boards. They want to train 10 coaches for Level 1 Technical and four coaches with Level 2 to ensure a coach-player ratio of one coach for every 3.5 kids. They also need to acquire junior stones. (Beresford was also looking for funding for brooms and sliders. The CCA denied this part of the application.)

*Project Budget:* Beresford's budget totaled \$14,800. The Development Fund ignored a \$1,000 request for brooms and sliders, reducing their budget to \$13,800. They had secured contributions from the club and other partners totaling \$9,200. The CCA's Development Fund agreed to contribute the \$4,600 required to meet their budget.

*Final Report:* Beresford will be required to file a report with the CCA's Development on the progress of their project sometime during the 2000-2001 curling season.

Application forms for the Canadian Curling Association's Curling Development Fund are available on our Web site: [www.curling.ca](http://www.curling.ca). For more information, contact us at 1-800-550-2875 or e-mail to [cca@curling.ca](mailto:cca@curling.ca). The deadline for 2001 applications is June 28, 2001.

\*affiliated club means a member in good standing of a Provincial or Territorial Member Association or an affiliated member of the Canadian Curling Association.

## National Curling Club Volunteer-of-the-Year Award

By *Danny Lamoureux*

**T**he Canadian Curling Association is pleased to announce the creation of the National Volunteer-of-the-Year Award to recognize hard working and dedicated individuals in our curling clubs.

The Business of Curling workshop program (all phases) promotes volunteer development and recognition as a vital component to curling club operations. We encourage our curling clubs to formally recognize volunteers at, for example, a volunteer appreciation night. This is the one of the more significant tools a club can use to retain and re-motivate their volunteer 'workforce.' By establishing a national award, we can set the benchmark for clubs across the country to create their own recognition programs.

The Volunteer-of-the-Year Award will be based on contributions from the previous curling season. For example, the winner of the 2001 award will be recognized for the 1999-2000 season. We are not looking to establish a lifetime achievement award, since that would preclude members who have been at the club for a short period of time.

The winner will receive an all-expense paid weekend trip to the Brier or Tournament of Hearts, where they will be recognized at one of the playoff games. The other finalists will receive a souvenir sweatshirt and will be profiled in this magazine throughout the year.

### Criteria:

Nominees will have made a significant contribution to the operation of the curling club during the previous curling season in any of the following areas:

- special events (i.e. bonspiels, socials, open houses, championships hosted at the club, anniversary celebrations);
- building renovations or upgrades (unpaid work);
- adult, junior or youth program development;
- fundraising;
- membership recruitment, retention and/or recognition;
- volunteer recruitment, retention and/or recognition;
- instructors (i.e. new member clinics);
- member of the board.

### A submitted nomination form will include:

- Name, address, employment, hobbies, Provincial/Territorial or CCA training (i.e. Business of Curling, technical, coaching), and/or other interests.

- Contribution as a volunteer and how that contribution impacted the curling club's operation (500 word or less). The essay will describe exactly how the curling club benefited, and must include measurable outcomes. For example: financial benefits, new members, new programs. The essay may also include such qualities as organizational skills, ability to motivate, quality of work and so on.
- Colour photograph (head and shoulders).
- Maximum of three (3) reference letters from the following (each 75 words or less):
  - the curling club president,
  - a fellow club member,
  - a friend, family member etc.
- The essay may be written by a member of the board, club committee member, club staff member or representative of the member association.

One finalist will be chosen from each of the following twelve regions: Newfoundland, Prince Edward Island, Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, Quebec, Ontario, Northern Ontario, Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Alberta, British Columbia, and Yukon/ Northwest Territories.

The deadline for nominations each year will be December 1st.

Nominations will be forwarded to the CCA office on or before the deadline (no exceptions) at 511- 1600 James Naismith Drive, Gloucester, On K1B 5N4

The winner will receive a final weekend trip for two of their choice to the Scott Tournament of Hearts or the Nokia Brier. The grand prize will include:

- round trip airfare for two from the nearest airport to the championship site of their choice, departing on Friday and returning Monday morning;
- hotel room for three nights;
- two weekend ticket packages for the event;
- a keepsake award;
- a souvenir sweatshirt;
- recognition during one of the playoff games;
- \$200 in spending money.

This award is intended for volunteers within our curling clubs. The following are ineligible to receive this award: paid staff, unless it can be shown their contribution was above and beyond the job description they are responsible to carry out; volunteers working on sanctioned national or international championships; member association volunteers at the zone, district, regional, provincial/territorial, national or international levels; and/or, course conductors outside of club-based programs.

For application forms, please contact Rachel Delaney at the national office at 1-800-550-2875, or by e-mail at [rachel@curling.ca](mailto:rachel@curling.ca).