Historica Canada Education Portal

Rocks, Ice, and Everything is Sometimes Nice

Overview

This lesson plan is based on viewing the Footprint videos, The Brier and Eddie Werenich. In Saskatchewan writer W.O Mitchell's novel, *The Black Bonspiel of Willie MacCrimmon*, the main character says, "You could say curling is as much for the spirit as for the flesh." Such is the feeling for a game consisting of a flat icy surface and coloured rocks. This competitive spirit has infused Brier champions like Eddie Werenich. The game may be frustratingly tedious to some, but there is no denying that the ice and the rocks form part of the granite linking small town Canada with world class champions.

Aims

To increase student knowledge of the communal nature of the sport of curling; to increase student consciousness of the history of Canadian success in curling; to increase student appreciation for the pioneers of curling in Canada; to examine the accomplishments of some of Canada's curling champions in their historical context; to explore how Canadian curlers have defined themselves on the international stage; and to critically investigate the subjectivity of a sport partially based on artistic markers.

Background

Curling has its own language, one that Canadians are quite literate in. It is a sport with a leveling lingo. While you can find curling rinks in large cities, the majority of Canadian curling clubs are found in small communities. In*Burned by the Rock*, *Toronto Sun* columnist Jean Sonmor identifies the egalitarian nature of the sport: "In curling rinks you see vivacious stay-at-home grandmothers in intense conversation with slick male accountants. On the street, they inhabit different worlds but here, in the club, they are buddies." The sport forgives the less-than-athletically inclined. It's a "thinking person's game" that celebrates strategy.

Perhaps its popularity is also born from the social warmth that is fostered off the ice. The early rules of the Montréal Curling Club, later renamed the Royal Montréal Curling Club, stated that the losing party was to pay for a bowl of whiskey toddy, which was to be placed in the middle of the table for the enjoyment of their opponents. So in a country whose history is in large part defined by the enmity between language groups, the sport of curling is a common community connector from coast to coast to coast.

The origins of the game, however, are contentious and often rely on etymology as evidence. In his 1811 book, *An Account of the Game of Curling*, Reverend John Ramsay of Gladsmuir, Scotland argued in favour of its Continental beginnings. His research into the origins of curling words such as bonspiel, brough, colly, curl, kuting, quoiting, rink, and wick led him to conclude that they were derived from Dutch or German. Claiming that most of the words were foreign, he drew the conclusion that the origins of curling must be found in continental Europe.

The famous historian Reverend John Kerr contested Ramsay's views and

campaigned in favor of Scottish beginnings to curling. In *A History of Curling*, published in 1890, Kerr questioned, "if Flemings had brought the game to Scotland in the 1500's, why did Scottish poets and historians make no special mention of its introduction before 1600?" He also saw no proof that many of the terms were Continental, explaining that many were of Celtic or Teutonic origin (examples: channel stone, crampit, draw, hack, hog, skip, tee, toesee, tramp, and tricker).

Whatever its origins, curling became a religion in Scotland. The first handwritten record of what could be reasonably be identified as curling dates from February 1540, when John McQuhin of Scotland noted down, in Latin, a challenge to a game on ice between a monk named John Sclater and an associate, Gavin Hamilton. And records from a Glasgow Assembly of Presbyterians in 1638 accused a certain Bishop Graham of Orkney of succumbing to the temptation of the ice. His sin? "He was a curler on the ice on the Sabbath."

By the eighteenth century curling had become a common pastime in Scotland, and Scottish immigrants carried their passion across the ocean. A seventeenth century French Canadian farmer was startled by its appearance to New France: "Today I saw a band of Scotsmen who were throwing big iron balls like bombs on the ice; after which they cried 'soop, soop,' and then laughed like mad; I truly think they are mad." A bomb was an apt description. Some curling romantics claim that in the aftermath of the fall of Québec City in 1789, the sports-starved 78th Highlanders melted down cannon balls and made kettle-like curling irons.

The colonial backwater of Canada offered one distinct advantage over the homeland – Scotland enjoyed only a few weeks of good curling due to weather. As one Scottish curler noted on 25 February 1853, "the water coming through the ice was rather troublesome." Canada however,

offered far more days of ice-covered ponds. One Scottish immigrant was not impressed though; complaining of the cold, he asserted, "it does not follow that where there are plenty of men, water and frost, there will be curling."

So while the Scots in Scotland worried about keeping the ice cold, Canadians in Canada struggled to keep themselves warm. The solution for both was the covered rink. By the mid- to late- nineteenth century, curling rinks could be found in Montréal, Toronto, Hamilton, Ottawa, and Winnipeg. At the turn of the century, most Canadian curling clubs had moved indoors.

When the Scottish curling team toured Canada and the United States in 1902, they were clearly envious of the evolution of the game in the New World:

"It is not simply in the quantity of frost they have that our Canadian children are so happy. Their advantage as compared to ours is that they can attend to business all day, and adjourn to the rink in the evening.... In the majority of cases they can have every kind of comfort in their retiring-rooms, and can either play or do the plate glass skip business, i.e., criticize those who are playing."

Seven years later, Canadians went to Scotland to reciprocate the expedition. Teams from various parts of the country were on the tour, but it wasn’t until after the First World War that a national championship was considered. Despite this promising show of enthusiasm, nothing was organized until 1927. In the 1920s, George J. Cameron, the representative for Macdonald Tobacco in western Canada, convinced the company to put up the trophy and prize for the Manitoba Bonspiel. And what was the prize? The tobacco giant provided for an all-expenses-paid

trip to eastern Canadian cities for a series of goodwill curling matches.

Company president at the time, Walter M. Stewart, believed sports fit neatly into the Macdonald Tobacco Company's philosophy. The name of tournament came from a brand of Macdonald tobacco known as Brier. Advertisements claimed a national reach: "Everywhere! Brier smoked by more men than any other brand in Canada. It's the tobacco with heart."

On 1 March 1927, at the Granite Club near the intersection of Yonge Street and St. Clair Avenue in Toronto, the first rock was thrown for the Dominion Curling Championship for the Macdonald's Brier Tankard. Eight curling associations had been invited to compete in the new venue, billed as "the largest single covered expanse of artificial ice on the American continent."

As the Roaring Twenties transitioned into the Dirty Thirties and the Great Depression, Canadians hunkered down with winter sports to take their minds off economic woes. The voice of Foster Hewitt's nation-wide broadcasts of hockey linked the country through the airwaves, while curling linked people town to town. Canada's first curling star was Winnipegger Gordon Hudson. Known for his accuracy and popular with fans, Hudson and the Manitoba team impressed with their powerful sweeping.

Since then, the heroes of Canadian curling, their equipment, and the times have changed. The 1955 Brier saw the Saskatchewan rink of the Cambells (Garnet Campbell, Don Campbell, Glenn Campbell, Lloyd Campbell) take the tankard. Ten years later, the Braunstein brothers from Manitoba faced anti-Semitic taunts in Saskatoon, but prevailed in the finals against British Columbia. The Richardsons were dominant in curling between 1959 and 1964.

One of the younger curlers who watched the Richardsons win all those championships was a Benito, Manitoba native named Eddie Werenich. "I followed the big names such as Matt Baldwin and the Richardsons as they competed each March," Werenich wrote in the Forward to Bob Week's book, *The Brier: the history of Canada's most celebrated curling championship*. What made the Brier particularly tempting to Werenich was its accessibility:

"Like every young curler, I thought there would be nothing better in the world than to play in the Brier. And unlike the Stanley Cup or the Grey Cup, there was something appealing about it because I knew I had a chance to make it there. Even though I was from a small Prairie town, I could follow a long road and eventually get to the greatest curling event in the world."

Escaping Europe before the beginning of the Second World War in 1939, Werenich's Ukrainian parents immigrated to Benito as grain farmers. The agrarian life in which Werenich grew up may help to explain the ice in his veins when he faced competitors on the curling rink. He was nicknamed "the Wrench" because he ratcheted up the pressure on the ice, and often abraded other players and curling officials off the ice.

At age 10, Werenich was introduced to the game, and after finishing high school he moved to Toronto. A rough farm boy in a big city, Werenich eked out a living. In 1972, he joined up with Paul Savage. Savage, raised in suburban Toronto in an upper-middle-class neighbourhood, met his opposite in Werenich. The two often clashed on the ice as teammates, but managed to take each other to the Brier in 1973. They lost in 1973 and it took a decade before the pair would return to the Brier with a new rink to taste victory.

In 1979, the Macdonald Tobacco Company withdrew its sponsorship after fifty years and the Macdonald Brier Tankard was retired. When Labatt Breweries became the Brier sponsor in 1980, it introduced a gold Labatt Tankard.

In 1983, after years of acrimony between the pair, Savage and Werenich reunited to create what was known as "the Dream Team." Finishing with a 12-1 record, the Ontario squad hoisted the Labatt tankard at the Avonlea Curling Club in Sudbury, Ontario.

That year, Werenich followed his Brier championship with his first world championship. Repeating the victory his idols, the Richardsons, managed over the Scots in 1962, Werenich's rink took the gold with a victory over the visitors from Scotland at the Agridome in Regina. Seven years later, with a new rink, Werenich won his second world championship in Vasteras, Sweden.

The "Wrench" has been the face of Canadian curling for more than twenty years. Despite his occasional animosity towards teammates, opposing players, and the curling establishment, for Werenich the game and the Brier are about friendship amongst people passionate about the game: "It doesn't matter what you do, where you come from or whether you're watching or playing; once you are there, you are a curler and part of a special fellowship."

Across the border from Benito, Manitoba is the town of Biggar, Saskatchewan, a town that claims, "New York is Big But This is Biggar." Located in Biggar, the Sandra Schmirler Olympic Gold Park honours the woman who skipped her team to Canada's first Olympic gold medal in women's curling.

Born on 11 June 1963 to Art and Shirley Schmirler, Sandra was introduced to the game of curling at the age of eleven. After high school, where she helped win two provincial curling championships, she completed a physical education degree at the University of Saskatchewan. She then skipped her team to six provincial championships. Next, the Schmirler rink won three Canadian championships and three world titles in 1993, 1994, and 1997. Schmirler followed these victories with a win at the Canadian Olympic Trials, giving her team the opportunity to represent Canada at the Nagano Olympics in 1998.

In Japan, Schmirler's rink finished first in round robin play with a 6-1 record and went on to win gold. Canadians could readily identify with Team Schmirler – Sandra Schmirler, Jan Betker, Marcia Gudereit and Atina Ford – a group of friends and mothers from the prairie heartland.

Tragically, at the height of her young career and just two months after the birth of her second daughter, Schmirler was diagnosed with cancer. A fighter to the end, she lost her battle with cancer on 2 March 2000 at the age of 36.

Canadians across the nation mourned the loss. These Canadians were farmers, fishermen, stockbrokers, mothers, fathers, sons and daughters. The mix was as diverse as the country, and as diverse as those who take up the game that Schmirler played with precision and passion.

Activities

1. The language of sport

Burned stone. Button. Counter draw weight. Flipped out. Hacks. Hog line. Pebble. Split-raise. Wick and roll. These are all words and phrases used in curling. And like many sports, to play the game is to speak a distinct language.

Students are to locate another sport with its own language and find the origins of those words. For example, why is the blue line in hockey blue? Why is a score of two under par in golf called an eagle? And what is the history of the bull's eye in archery? Once students have compiled a list of at least five words, they are to present their findings to the rest of the class.

2. Breaking down the rules

The more you understand the rules of a sport, the more enjoyable it is to play and watch. In groups of two or three students, present a component of the rules of curling to the rest of the class. Depending on the size of the class, each group is to select specific issues to teach the rest of the class.

3. Appropriate sponsorship

At one time, many sports facilities were named after teams or cities. In the United States, there was the Boston Garden in Massachusetts, and Tiger Stadium in Detroit. Many sports stadiums in the United Kingdom are named after locations. Wimbledon is in Wimbledon. The Manchester United football team plays at Old Trafford, named for the area where the stadium is located. Today, typical naming traditions have changed. Boston Garden, home of the Celtics professional basketball team is now the Fleet Center, named after a bank. Canseco Fieldhouse, home of the

Indiana Pacers basketball team, is named after an insurance company. In the United Kingdom, an increase in commercial sponsorships has resulted in Reebok Stadium, and Bradford and Bingley Stadium (savings and loan). In Australia, there are ANZ Stadium (regional bank), North Power Stadium (power company), and Aussie Stadium (Aussie Home Loans). Closer to home, the Forum is now gone, and the Montréal Canadians played first in the Molson Centre and now in the Bell Centre.

As the history of the Brier attests, there is a long narrative to corporate sponsorship. Clearly there are advantages to the infusion of cash allowed through such funding. Nonetheless, how appropriate is it for a sport to be associated with a tobacco or alcohol company?

Students are to write a 250-word letter to the editor of a local newspaper. The letter should argue for or against the (theoretical) sponsorship of a local team by a company that sells a product that adversely affects one's health.

4. Curling celluloid

Photographs illustrate the emotions of both the photographer, and the subject of his or her work. The camera lens may view the world impartially, but the photographer constantly judges.

The Curling Canada website provides a thorough history of the sport, including a link to a Library and Archives Canada feature where students can find historical photopgraphs of the sport. They can also look around the Curling Canadawebsite or the Canadian Curling Hall of Fame for more contemporary images. Ask students to identify markers that help contextualize the photographs. Is the photograph in colour? What are the curlers wearing? What other parts of the photographs help place the

image in a specific time? What do these photographs tell us about the time? In groups of two to three, students are to stage a series of photographs from a specific Brier or Tournament of Hearts. That is, students are to imagine that a group of photographs have recently been unearthed at the National Archives in Ottawa. The "newly found" photographs depict the exploits of Canadian curlers of the past. Students must remember to contextualise their photographs, illustrating the time and place to make them as authentic as possible.

5. Curling quiz

In groups of four (in reference of the number of players on a curling team), students are to produce ten questions (as in the number of ends in a game) about the game of curling. Each group is to take turns asking a question. One point is scored for a correct answer. As well, one point is awarded to the team asking the question if no other team answers correctly. After 10 questions (ends), each of which should be recorded on the board, a winner is crowned with a trophy, the name of which could be determined by a class vote.

Resources

The Brier - Footprint

Eddie Werenich - Footprint

Ed (the Wrench) Werenich Returns to Curling

Brier - The Canadian Encyclopedia

Curling - The Canadian Encyclopedia

Curling Canada

The History of Curling

Canadian Curling Hall of Fame

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Russell, Scott.*Open house: Canada and the magic of curling*. Toronto: Doubleday Canada, 2004.

Scholz, Guy. *Gold on ice: the story of the Sandra Schmirler team*. Regina, Saskatchewan: Coteau Books, 1999.

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