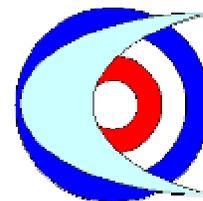


Scottish Curling-Ice Group



THE CIRCLE FILES – Last Words

This is not a report that I have wanted to write, and I have struggled to write it. Unfortunately we have fought for many years against very high walls to make progress and I did not do it alone, and the wishes of the others must be given due consideration. They wanted me to write this down, to record the facts, to set the record straight and let the truth be known. This is why the report has been written.

Every report dealing with a sequence of events must start at the beginning, which for me goes back to about 2000. It became clear that Forest Hills Curling Rink would close unless they could find someone to keep it open, and no-one would have anything to do with it. From my umpiring days, of which there were many, I had come to meet many ice technicians, and when some of them agreed to help me I took on the job. Scott Henderson taught me enough to get going, and he was followed by Steven Kerr and Andy McGlynn, with more expert advice from Shorty Jenkins. These people are first class, of a breed, with a quality I have always admired. Somehow their help enabled me to survive and proceed to develop my knowledge. After spending twenty years renovating gardens and estates, solving practical problems and working in all weathers, a curling rink made a welcome change.

At the time there was much disquiet amongst ice technicians about the way they were being treated and were expected to make quality ice at their own expense for national competitions. At the first Curling-Ice Conference (CIC) at Forest Hills this matter was discussed by a very enthusiastic group of technicians, and within the day the Scottish Curling-Ice Group (SCIG) was formed to deal with these problems. At the next meeting of the Scottish Ice Rinks Managers Association (SIRMA), who were the people behind the problem, we presented our case and our objections, and there was immediate uproar.

SIRMA was formed before my time, and ice rink managers duly attended the AGM every year in different venues to do very little. All rinks duly paid money to them as well, which was used for making ice at competitions, or importing ice technicians who could, and hopefully we would all learn from them. SIRMA was not popular or respected and had no constitution, and the minutes of their meetings were seriously restricted to the minimum. So what happened? Under guidance from David Hird it became the Scottish Ice Rinks Association (SIRA), created a constitution, established Working Groups and set forth to change a few things. Nothing really changed, SIRA is still the same, but it soon became very clear that the SCIG would not be welcome.

Meanwhile I was experiencing problems with my ice at Forest Hills. I had no equipment to do the work, the plant was forever breaking down, I couldn't keep the surface level, the advice I received didn't work and I was going nowhere fast. By 2001 I had earned enough money to start buying my own equipment to include pebbling gear, an Ice King and so on. To improve my knowledge I went to Fuessen in Germany, where I didn't learn much and said so, which didn't go down well. My neck was only saved because I came to an agreement with Leif Öhman to help him write a new manual for ice technicians -- he had the knowledge and I had the writing and editing skills from publishing books. Back to work, another CIC, much enthusiasm amongst Scottish ice technicians and for once some hope for all of us.

My first task for the manual was to study all the previously published material on the subject and, after a few months of careful evaluation and elimination, I was left with less than one page worth of usable and reliable information. I was in trouble. Fortunately Forest Hills was not very busy and I had time to experiment, and gradually Leif started sending me files in Swenglish to decipher. There was slow progress, and all my family saw of me was my back at the computer -- no doubt Leif was in the same position. In those days file transfers on the internet took time, but we managed by doing these overnight and hoping the computer would disconnect when finished.

Meanwhile there was another meeting of SIRA, where the suggestion was made to produce a manual for Scottish ice makers. My own opinion was that we should wait until the WCF published their new manual that I was working on, but to my surprise no-one knew about it. In fact, a member of the WCF there and then told me that the WCF was not producing such a manual -- he had obviously not been told! I took the precaution of securing an agreement of editorial independence from WCF members who did know of the manual and from then on I simply said nothing. At the next CIC I was astonished by reports that ice technicians in some areas had been banned from dealing with the SCIG or even speaking to us, but of course emails from home computers could not be stopped and we all knew what was going on.

After a year's work I went back to Fuessen with the rough draft of our progress. Some of the data was already being used during the courses and made a significant improvement, while new equipment was also being made available to help us learn more. Leif and I agreed on the details of the manual's production and ironed out many of the technical anomalies, so preparing the way for a serious effort at the final draft. On my return I bought some technology to better monitor parameters within the rink, and slowly but surely all became clearer.

Around that time I received a letter from David Hird (SIRA) asking me to clarify my position – it appeared that there was a conflict in interest between my membership of the SCIG and the SIRA Working Group for Ice, and we were effectively being asked to shut down the SCIG and "come on board". We had an SCIG meeting to discuss the matter, and to a man the members refused to close down. We were learning hard and fast, we were making serious progress, we were finally getting somewhere, while they were not. We made the decision to continue as we were, maintain our independence and offer all members confidentiality of identity. The reason was not that we wanted a secret society, it was because we did not want a political society – we did curling ice, not politics. When I informed David of our decision I was invited to a private meeting with SIRA, which Scott attended with me, where we probably made more enemies than friends. It was becoming increasingly clear that there was a substantial group of people involved in Scottish curling who did not want what we could offer, simply because we would be independent of them.

Producing a manual and providing curling ice on a daily basis is not easy, and the other technicians were just as busy and couldn't help much. During the winter of 2003 the manual was completed, edited, reformatted, re-edited, printed and delivered to the WCF in Perth, but I don't remember much of it. I was still in a daze of exhaustion when Celia and I arrived in Gävle, Sweden to give Leif his copy in person, and it would be several days before I recovered. During those days I met many good people and had many wonderful discussions about all matters curling. As the Worlds competitions started more people arrived from all over the world, and also more from Scotland, and an astonishing thing happened: suddenly no-one wanted to speak to me. Both Celia and I noticed it instantly, it all happened in a matter of hours, at the same time as the arrival of two Scottish individuals. We survived the week only thanks to the courtesy of some RCCC members, and we were very pleased to get away from there. I know who the people are who caused this to happen, but it is not my way to embarrass others and, at the time and since, the knowledge of curling ice was and is more important than politics and personal enmities. The manual *Curling Ice Explained* (CIE) had not been publicised and it would take a few months for the curling world to obtain copies. On the Canadian website In The Hack (ITH), which I followed from a safe distance, comments appeared which criticised CIE even before it had reached Canada, forcing me to join the debate. Did I use a different name? I couldn't, I had to speak for what I had helped to create and live with the consequences. The extraordinary outcome was an international discussion on ITH, looking at virtually every aspect of curling ice, which I believe has never happened before or since. We had somehow opened the flood gates and the information simply poured out. Unfortunately not much of the information was accurate and very little of it had been tested other than in one rink by one person, so the learning had to start all over again.

During the first year following the release of CIE we did more definitive experiments at Forest Hills than ever before. While CIE contained all the necessary scientific information regarding curling ice that we could find, it did not contain information that we knew was valid but had not tested or could not prove. We went through all the data in CIE and proved that it was correct in four separate venues, simply to validate the data and put our minds at rest. We had the IcePOD (Precision Overhead Device) made, a device that cannot lie if used correctly, to be able to test the level of an ice pad within 0.01mm over five metres – suddenly we were able to tackle any other data and very quickly discover what was true or not. This enabled us to develop the Cutting Patterns, study heights and temperatures of different pebbles, measure the effects of airflow over the ice in strange areas, and even measure the contact area between stone and ice simply because we were able to create a perfectly level ice surface. Also, during that year, the internet improved to the stage where it was possible to communicate quickly, internationally, and have a record of the communication. I could ask for information on a small aspect of curling ice and technicians from all over the world would send me their data, which probably taught me much more than I ever taught them. The problem was that we could not make the data public in an independent way, which led to the creation of our own simple website that could publish our reports and give everyone access to the information. To my knowledge the SCIG website is one of the most respected sites of its kind in the world, not because we know it all, but because we have gathered the information, tested it and made it available.

A third and very important development that year was my contact with Dr Martin Chaplin, who had created a website on Water and still maintains it for London South Bank University. When I first visited the site I was totally overwhelmed, so much so that it took many months to study before I could begin to understand some of it. Finally I contacted him and asked for help, which he gave in the most generous and scientific way (by email, of course!), until he too had to admit that our work was too specialised for him to help more. But he had answered all the important questions and cleared the fog, as it were, helping us to understand the complexities of the water we worked with every day with a new and total confidence. He helped us to crack it, and I will always be grateful to him.

By 2006 we had progressed from virtually nothing to a very knowledgeable position and were sufficiently confident that we could address any problem and quickly find a solution. We had developed working systems based on science and knowledge that not only simplified our work, but enabled us to make very, very good curling ice. We had become specialist curling-ice technicians and had proved that making excellent ice is in fact easier, quicker and cheaper than anything else. The single biggest remaining problem was the control of the parameters, because there wasn't a rink in Scotland – or even the world – that had been specifically designed to provide quality ice for curling. I knew that Leif too was working on this problem and was making good progress (which later resulted in several new curling rinks in Sweden), but he operated in a different environment, different politics and different sources of funding. We would have to design our own rink and try to build it somewhere.

The Circle was a simple concept that would have several bonuses. We would have a facility where the parameters could very quickly be manipulated and evaluated. We would be able to hold courses and train technicians to a high standard. We could give Scotland a facility that would be ahead of everything and, once all the doubts have been dispelled, provide the prototype for new curling rinks in Scotland and elsewhere. We accepted that we would still be learning largely from our own mistakes, but at least we would be learning and progressing. As Scott always said, curling ice is a permanent university-degree course, and that was a challenge we all relished.

At that time, over several years, there were efforts made to build a Centre of Excellence. We had discussed this with Mike Hay on many occasions because we believed the Circle could well provide such a facility, but the political world was ahead of us. Because of the friction between the SCIG and SIRA I decided to stay out of that and simply continue to develop the Circle plans, until it finally became clear that the Stirling effort had collapsed and there would be no COE. Instead there would be the National Curling Academy, somewhere, and the political temperature rose to new heights. Again I decided to stay out of it, until it became clear that Forest Hills would close for good, when I realised that we would have to enter the fray and at least explore every option.

By this time we had done a tremendous amount of research into materials and structures. We had travelled the country and much of Europe in search of valid information, and learning how others were dealing with much the same problems. Not surprisingly there was very little information available on the definitive curling rink, but we were sufficiently experienced and thorough in our work to be sure that we were finding accurate information and were developing a valid design. We really couldn't afford to be wrong, so we made sure that we were right. The stage was eventually reached, around the time when the NCA was being talked about, when we knew how to build the Circle – all we needed was somewhere to build it with money to pay for it.

Several areas were investigated, but none were ideal. Steven, Andy and I were having a meeting in Kinross one day and out of idle discussion we came to the conclusion that Kinross would be a more suitable area than most. The old walled garden next to the curling rink would in fact be ideal, which we duly measured and produced plans for. But would the owners, Montgomery Hotels, be interested at all? A meeting was arranged with Jamie Montgomery to find out. His first reaction was reserved, but not negative, and he was happy for us to proceed with the plans. At the second meeting he was more enthusiastic and was beginning to understand what the NCA/Circle concept could mean for Kinross. By the third meeting he agreed that we should put a combined bid forward to the RCCC. Unfortunately he was by now having private meetings with others, and without telling us, and soon he was singing a very different tune.

In 2005 a strange thing happened. Thanks to my assistant, Jed Bancroft, whom I had trained up to standard, I was again able to volunteer for umpiring. When offered the job of Chief Umpire for the Scottish Masters at Greenacres, I was happy to accept and finally have a few days "off", away from ice making. When I arrived at the rink the ice technician was pleased to see me and asked several questions, which I was equally pleased to answer. He also asked me to demonstrate the cutting pattern that we were all using by then and, as there were no curlers in the rink, I agreed to show him. To my surprise I was soon informed that Richard Harding wanted me off the premises. He was of course up to his ears in problems dealing with Paisley, but even more to my surprise the RCCC supported his decision and asked/told me to leave. Jed was surprised to see me back in time to clean the ice, but so professional is he that he never batted an eye.

This incident opened my eyes, not only to Richard's negative attitude to curling ice, but also the RCCC attitude towards who might be considered to be doing the right thing. I had done nothing wrong, but it was deemed that I had "helped with the ice" and somehow interfered with Richard's establishment. Needless to say, I resigned as an umpire and a member of the RCCC and until they apologise, I shall never participate again. As for Richard, I could not care less, because not all the people can like all the people all the time – I considered myself to be a professional and still do, and at the time the competition was more important than I was. However, the memories of treatments past came flooding back, and unfortunately Richard was always somehow in the vicinity.

So, when Jamie started having private and secret consultations without their partners in the bid for the NCA, it came as no surprise that he had met with Richard, amongst others, and also with the RCCC. Before we knew it Jamie had scrapped our careful plans and imposed a six-sheet rink, with the full support of the RCCC, and they had no shred of supporting evidence that it would actually work. We attended the meetings, tried to discuss the important issues, asked for business plans and costings, but they had already decided to build whatever they wanted, whichever way they wanted it, with whatever money they could find. We knew it had very little hope of succeeding, but they were simply not prepared to listen. By September 2008 things came to a head, with Kinross in direct competition with Gogar Park Curling club's plans at Ratho.

This is a portion of the first paragraph from an email Jamie sent me:

.....after a great deal of discussion over the last few weeks, we have decided to submit our final submission for Kinross to be considered as the future site for the National Curling Academy on our own and not in collaboration with SCIG.

And this is what he told the Fife Herald soon afterwards:

The Kinross bid originally included the Scottish Curling-Ice Group, but Mr Montgomery told the Fife Herald they had "agreed to part company" about two months ago, having differing visions about the project.

To avoid splitting hairs here, he was lying, because we never agreed to part company and were instead doing our very best to understand what they were trying to build and how they were going to pay for it, and how we could help them do it. In retrospect I will admit that I could not and cannot support their plans without knowing the details, and without seeing the full business plans to support their projections.

By this stage we had done all the work we could. We knew how to build it, the floor, walls, roof, drainage, floor space and access. We know how to refrigerate it, dehumidify it, heat it and clean it, all at the best possible costs and efficiencies. We knew how to run it, promote it, produce the best ice at the least expense and secure its long-term future by passing on all our knowledge to the next generation. In all these cases they simply had a better idea, and it could only have come from people who were telling them what they wanted to hear. Two years later they have already spent well over £100,000, very little of it their own money, and they have made very little progress, and everyone is wondering why.

After the email from Jamie I asked for a meeting with Colin Grahamslaw, then CEO of the RCCC, which he agreed to. Present also was Willie Nicoll, not Chairman then but now. They had nothing to say. I asked what had happened, told them our position, said whatever I could think of, but silence was the only reply. They offered no explanation, no apology, no sign of consideration, they simply sat there. This I still cannot understand. Meanwhile Steven was being approached by members of the new Kinross Curling Trust asking for information, our information, on how to build a curling rink. I must point out that we have never made this technical information public, simply because there had never been a need or the time to prepare a comprehensive file, and after the expulsion from the project we made the decision not to make the information public because – in the wrong hands – it could be misused or corrupted and we would be held responsible.

Meanwhile the Scottish Curling Forum (SCF) had been created, and of course we had joined it and used it to promote our cause of building the Circle. It was difficult, because so much information I could not make public and we also never wanted to damage anyone else's attempts to build a curling rink. Then I was made a moderator and had to be even more even-handedly careful, but on balance I relished the opportunity to bring matters to the fore and allow others to find fault or decide for themselves. This they certainly did! The SCF was – and is – I believe where the RCCC and KCT made their biggest single mistake: they refused to communicate. In this modern era, where virtually all communication is on the internet, they decided to remain secretive and even scathing of the SCF. Those days of meetings behind closed doors with minutes that are never accurate and seldom published are over, the people want the truth and they want it out in the open. Time and again I warned Jamie, the RCCC and even Sportscotland, don't forget the people, because the people pay for curling and the people are important. Leave the people behind and you will have nothing, and now they have nothing.

With the expulsion duly done and the Circle out the door, I had to make some serious decisions regarding the neglect which I had inflicted upon my family. For many years they supported me in my efforts in curling, helped with the ice, made up the numbers in a team, played the pipes, looked after themselves when I was off again. The expulsion hurt them as much as it did us, and I hadn't noticed, but now I did and it was not pretty to see. Celia gave up umpiring and curling, Annie swore she would not curl again, Jessica declared the same. They had gone through the process with me, had suffered with me, and it was pay-back time. We decided to sell the house, pay off our debts and move to Angus, where at least we could look after Celia's parents and give the girls more of a chance to stabilise. This is where we live now, with no interest in the rinks at Forfar, Aberdeen or even Dundee, and with no interest in curling other than a monthly meeting with the SCIG and my continuing interest in curling forums. Make no mistake, I still love the game and I still make ice on the internet through helping anyone who bothers asking the questions, but the wounds are raw and will take time to heal. I can only hope that my family will forgive my determination and that their wounds will heal sooner.

What happened, happened. That is life, it happens. If there is something that sticks with all of us, the SCIG, my family, even the forums, it is how it happened. We did nothing wrong, we did our best, we all worked very hard for a game we believed in, a good and fair game, and we were simply binned. Dismissed. Not a word, just an email to say "end of". This is wrong and will always be wrong, because people who do their best deserve at least consideration and at better or best, reward for their efforts.

Should anyone ask why the proposed NCA for Scotland is struggling to be built, this is the answer: it has no product to sell. The plans as they are offer nothing to the loyal curler, no clubroom, no dedication to the customer, no quality ice, no sense of belonging. The Circle was designed to do all those, so they binned it. What they plan to build instead is a mystery to everyone, and it doesn't matter, because it will never be built, and if it ever is it will never have a product that people will pay for to ensure its future.

*John Minnaar
6 October 2010*