

Scottish Curling-Ice Group

PROBLEMS ON-GOING

What is a POG? It is a problem curling-ice technicians face all the time that has proved very difficult to solve. It is usually a problem that has been or is being caused by someone else, usually a curler or a committee member, usually because they are unaware that they are doing so. It is the purpose of this report to present the problems to the curling world in an objective and constructive manner, in the hope that awareness will contribute towards a solution. Most of the material was gathered during an informal post on the Ice-Makers' Forum of InTheHack.com.

Hands and knees

The knees make the worst marks. It is possible to tell simply from the size and shape of a hole left in the ice surface who had left it there, and after many a club game there will be several of them all roughly in the same place. Hand marks too are distinctive, often only from one finger but it could be the whole hand or even half the forearm. Ironically the knee marks are not usually a problem to stones because they tend to be behind the backline, while the hand marks will be guaranteed to deflect a stone that finds them. Also, knees will be covered in clothing that will absorb the water from the melted surface to leave only a hole, while hand marks will leave the water behind to freeze into unwanted bumps on the ice surface. Many conscientious technicians fill these in every day and cut the surface level again. Such damage is, after all, an insult to their hard work and dedication. Other technicians have grown tired of the endless bending over holes and leave them there, simply cutting the surface smooth and allowing the curlers to play over their own damage. After all, if the curlers didn't want holes in the ice they wouldn't put them there.

Perhaps if curlers could see the amount of work technicians invest in their welfare they would be more considerate. The fact is that the work goes unseen and unappreciated. Curlers call it "in the spirit of the game" when they finish balanced on a knee, watching the progress of their stone for the best part of twenty seconds down the length of the ice – it only takes a few seconds to melt the ice, but they don't know that. Wearing a knee pad or gloves might not be comfortable, or "what for", but it would certainly help.

There is only one known solution to this problem: education. Take a large dose of patience, mixed with liberal amounts of understanding, psychology and a thick skin, and approach the curlers with the most decent smile that can be glued to the mouth. "Please, sir/madam, do you realise that you are damaging the ice with your hand/knee? I'm afraid you are, and it will not only ruin your game but also the games that follow. Please try not to do it." Do this every time the offender is spotted, with ever larger smiles, and hopefully the customer will get the message.

Clothing and footwear

Woolly hats, fleece jackets, jumpers and trousers WILL shed fibres on the ice, and there is no escape. This stuff WILL cause pick-ups, it is only a matter of time, and a beautiful stone will be wasted. Why curlers do not understand this is beyond the comprehension of curling-ice technicians, who know only too well the amount of dirt collected every day after the previous games.

Outdoor shoes WILL bring in dirt and – unseen but even more important – salts that WILL affect the ice surface. One tiny grain of sand is enough to chip a precision blade, and one sole covered in salt from the pavement outside can contaminate a very large area of the ice surface. Once the dirt has frozen to the surface it can take a long time, and some serious endless bending, to remove prior to the cutting routine, while the salt will go unseen and will only be removed through time.

Although this POG is becoming less of a problem as curlers invest in better clothing and appropriate footwear, it will never go away. The worst offenders will be new curlers or corporate outings and of course a group of kiddies on a birthday treat, and education is the only answer. Explain, educate, beg, whatever it takes, and remember to do the same for the next group, and the next, and the next.

For those club curlers of long-standing bad habit, collect the snow from one sheet of ice and melt it down in a container. Strain this through a percolator filter and open the paper to dry. Laminate the flat paper with its dirt in plastic and pin it to the notice board for all to see, along with an explanation of where it comes from. Evidence is a powerful tool, use it. Then ban (yes, ban, as in not allowed, forget it, no way) outdoor shoes, or shoes that have been worn outdoors and not cleaned. All curlers should have shoes dedicated to the shrine of curling ice, kept clean and in good condition and used only for wear on the ice.

For those curlers who have invested in the real thing, teflon sliders and everything else, be sure to explain to them the harm teflon can cause to the ice surface if the edges are not smoothly rounded. Also explain to them about static electricity that turns teflon into a magnet for carpet fibres.

Damage

Never mind the hands and knees or the teflon, what about the brushes and cues and balancing aids and stones and falling objects from pockets – the curlers don't have a hope, they are GOING to damage the ice simply by standing on it! And that is the problem, we are dealing with water in a delicate balance of temperatures with everything conspiring to damage it in some way.

The clips holding the pads onto a Hammer are the worst for scraping the ice surface, scattering thousands of fragments all over the sheet of ice, and the sheet next door, and soon throughout the rink. Other pads and brushes can do the same, the harder the material the more the potential, and this simply cannot be allowed. Who is to blame here, the curlers or the manufacturers? It doesn't matter who is to blame, simply fix it, don't do it, if anyone wants curling to be a game of precision then the equipment must be suited to the purpose of such a game. Those who wish to curl the old way on an outdoor pond, go find an outdoor pond with sufficient depth of ice and enjoy. A modern curling rink with a modern ice surface deserves modern equipment in good order that will not damage the ice beyond the reasonable. And those skips who have a habit of whacking the ice with a corner of a brush, leaving a white mark of crushed ice to remind them where there is a line with draw, need to realise that modern curling ice draws the same everywhere and needs no guidelines. If you can play the brush, that is.

On sticky outdoor ice and poor indoor ice there is good reason for a hefty backswing delivery that clunks divots out the ice surface. On modern curling ice, keen and smooth, the backswing delivery is no longer required, and even the strike game is negative play. Look after the stones and be careful not to use them as hammering implements. Nowhere in any respected rulebook of curling is there mention of extra points for breaking a stone, or using the hacks to launch them onto the sidewalks, or blasting them through the end board, the walkway, the wall, the room next door, the other wall, all the way into the car park. Modern curling is a game of skill and finesse, and that is in the rulebooks.

Curlers seem to believe that the ice is as durable and strong as the teflon they slide on. Many a warm object is left to lie on the ice, stopwatches at the ready, to see how long it will take before the ice melts. This could be a measuring tool, a delivery cue, a target they wish to aim at – most commonly it is a curling stone that has been removed from the ice by one player for whatever reason, while the next player does not know the reason and wants it back on the ice. By now the stone is too warm and will melt for itself a neat hole, which will soon freeze its surplus water with surprising efficiency to glue the stone to the ice so well that it cannot be moved. Never mind the damage to the ice, just imagine the damage to the stone when it is literally broken from this bond.

Danger

A curling stone travelling at speed has the same momentum as any other object weighing nearly 20kg, yet these stones are hurled down a sheet of ice with reckless abandon. Even experienced curlers care very little who might be at the receiving end of such a missile, never mind the scattering of other stones towards the neighbours. Beginners especially should not be allowed to mess with cannonballs, they'll only kill each other.

Take then the complaint from ice technicians that curlers will play a stone down the ice, aimed at the unaware technician, who is still pebbling with his back to the action. A stationary stone is quite sufficient for the technician to trip over, let alone a travelling stone, and the consequences cannot be described as funny. It's not the technician we are worried about here, it is the mess made by the spilling water from the pebble can!

Many curlers are in the habit of playing practice stones before the technician has finished his work, without realising the dangers involved. During competitions or busy schedules there is little time between games and the technician is already stretched to get his work done, yet curlers persist in stepping onto the ice, sliding out gracefully down a sheet without pebble, or a sheet with unfrozen pebble, or a sheet with a busy ice technician in the way. Surely no curler should be allowed onto the ice before the technician has finished, and has announced that he is finished! Curling-ice technicians be advised: should a curler step onto the ice before the work is done, simply step off the ice until he decides what he wants to play on. Ice technicians on, curlers off; curlers on, ice technicians off.

Another serious and dangerous problem is liquid. Too many curlers like to place their drinks, whether in tins, bottles or even glasses, near the edge of the walkway. One kick and it's spilt, and any liquid on ice is as slippery as can be. The liquid might mercifully be spilt onto the walkway and not affect the ice, yet it will still be as slippery when it is collected by the shoe of a player just before he steps onto the ice.

To illustrate the level of ignorance amongst curlers and the public alike, invite the Health and Safety to identify the dangers in a curling rink. Odds are they will identify everything that is not a problem, while totally ignoring the stones and the ice, those two essentials to a game of curling and the most dangerous.

Lack of time

Curlers do not seem to realise that they come to a curling rink to play on curling ice, which is now a product of science, knowledge, expensive and important equipment and of course many months of hard work and dedication. Never mind the heat and cold, the wet and dry, wind or rain, sun or snow, the humble ice technician has to provide curling ice of unbelievable consistency every day for every game. Because most of his work is usually done in private, seen only perhaps by a cleaner or a member of the administration side, this work effectively does not exist to curlers. They only appear on the scene shortly before the start of their game when the ice technician is having a well-earned rest. In fact, the work is so unimportant that even scheduled maintenance time is booked off for rentals or outings – after all, no-one is using the ice, it must be available.

A small restaurant that can seat 32 people will have staff in place to cope with 32 people. Once these have eaten, they are replaced by another 32 people. After a few hours the staff will be very tired and will go home to rest, returning the next day to start all over again. The staff will not reuse dirty dishes before they have been cleaned, nor will they serve left-over meals. They will not work from 0600 to 2400 and will not allow customers into the premises before the scheduled time. Should an extra booking materialise they will be consulted, extra staff will be found and scheduled work will be rescheduled. People who order steak will get steak, not chicken or fish, and if they order a rare steak they will expect to be given a rare steak. However, in a curling rink there are still curlers who will accept cold porridge or stale bread without a hint of complaint. Why? Because there is no time to do better, put up or shut up.

The time problem has several components. Installation, where the ice is installed from the beginning until it is fit for curling, can take as long as three weeks. It can be done in a week, but the result will not be the same, while two weeks will do for a concrete floor and good equipment. Yet it so often happens that a technician is given a few days to do his best, more or less around the clock, and then he gets the blame if the ice is not up to scratch. Installing ice properly is a time-consuming business requiring patience, skill and much hard work, and every line that goes in less than straight will be there for at least eight months – give the ice technician every opportunity to do the job his way and get it right, every mistake will be there for all to see. If an ice pad is not installed correctly and properly it will not be level or consistent, and it will be very difficult to make it so afterwards.

Then there is the maintenance. Done properly on a daily basis this job takes about two hours as a minimum, and with two technicians on duty all the maintenance can be dealt with in this time including the basic cleaning. The place will look the part, the ice will be very good and the customers will know that the rink is being looked after. Usually this work is done in the morning before ten when there is no-one else on the premises, yet everyone expects the technician to also answer the phone, accept deliveries and deal with any other problem that might arise. Not easy, at the best of times.

And what about flip-over ice, where a skating pad has to be transformed into curling ice between the hours of 2300 and 1000. The time is so tight that one technician will have to flood in the middle of the night while another will start as early as possible in the morning, with only a few hours to do the work normally done over a few days. It is extremely difficult to produce curling ice from skating ice in less than a day, yet there are many technicians who have to do this every week as routine – no wonder that they often fail and invariably lose all appetite for making good ice.

Finally there is the normal preparation before and between games to ensure that all customers will receive the same quality ice. A sensible schedule would provide an hour before the start of the evening sessions with some fifteen minutes between all games, yet this is seldom available. Suddenly it's non-stop curling from 1730 to 2400 and if the ice goes flat it's the fault of the technician, who was never given the time to do anything about it. Ice is unstable and easily damaged, and the damage after three full games can only be considered as serious, yet there is insufficient time even the following morning for any repairs of significance.

There is an argument that ice only makes money when it is used by curlers, therefore pack them in and good luck to them. The curlers pay for curling ice, not frozen water, and in a restaurant an endless stream of customers will simply have to wait until their table is ready before they can place their orders, no matter what the clock says.

Complaints

Curling-ice technicians are taught to listen to all complaints. 90% of these will be invalid and senseless, while the other 10% will be worth noting. This can be considered part of the job, because the technician will learn from it and improve his skills. Yet curlers are very quick to find fault, it is in the nature of the game, and they are equally quick to complain to the wrong person for effect. If the skip doesn't give them joy they'll try the secretary, the president or the chairman, and more often than not the funny line they found in the ice does not exist but has more to do with a flawed release. If the ice had been properly

prepared (see Lack of time, above!) the pick-ups were being caused by the players and their own dirt and damage, yet the ice technician gets the blame. The worst and most common complaints are the muttered words behind an ice technician's back about poor ice, usually by the losing team who doesn't have the decency to talk to the man face to face.

The POG that received the most comments, many in private as well as on the website, was the tendency for committees and their members to have private meetings in the comfort of the board room to discuss all and any problem, with no reference to the technician who can fix it. A curler might complain about the ice, the committee will take it on and "deal with it", and absolutely nothing will be done except a sarcastic remark to the ice technician if he can be found. Bookings will be accepted without consulting the technician and rob him of his maintenance time, or without even informing him, and suddenly a group of curlers will want the very ice he is working on for the evening session.

And then there is the know-it-all brigade. It can be confidently stated beyond dispute that no curling-ice technician knows it all. It can also be stated, with equal confidence, that very few curlers know much about curling ice, yet so many of them happily assume that they know more than the technician does. In rare cases this could be true, but the fact is that curling ice is a very complex business and throwing one fact at it does not do away with the other hundred equally significant facts that can and will influence the behaviour of curling stones on a sheet of ice. Telling a curling-ice technician how to do his work is a dangerous business best avoided, because a quiet and private discussion will achieve more.

Conclusion

The problem is really very simple. A good curling-ice technician who knows his job will have a good rapport with his curlers and few complaints. On the other hand a technician of less experience will be focused on his work and do his best, but will not yet have perfected his routines and organised his workload, and he will be vulnerable to all possible complaints. Because he works in relative isolation with very few people to refer to when he has a stumbling block, he will not be in regular communication with those who have a complaint, so the problem quickly escalates.

Curlers and committees should note that the making of curling ice is not easy, and all technicians have much to learn. They need support and protection, help and investment, and very good – but positive – communication. Only by appreciation of his hard work and his unique position in a curling rink will he feel motivated to try even harder. By helping him (no hands and knees, no dirt, no damage, no danger) he will feel valued, and the curling ice will improve, the curling will be good and the curlers will be happy.

Curlers go to a curling rink for curling ice. If everyone works together, they will get curling ice of a high standard; if they do not work together they will have to make do with frozen water. Committees and curlers do not make curling ice, the curling-ice technician does, and he needs all the help and support he can get.

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