

# Features



Marsha Hunt/Herald

After a teammate hurls a curling stone, sweepers briskly sweep a path in front of it to increase its speed by melting the ice to create a slightly wet, slippery surface.

PITTSBURGH

## Wanna-be Rock stars

*Olympics fuel surge of interest in quirky sport of curling*

By John Zavinski  
Herald Director of Graphics  
& Technology

Speed skaters flew by half-noticed on the large-screen TV in a local tavern as my girlfriend and I joined some other couples for drinks on the second night of the Winter Olympic Games.

Eventually, the conversation turned to the Games.

"What's that one weird sport," one spouse asked, "the one with ..."

"With brooms?" I responded. "Why, you are speaking of none other than the honorable sport of curling, which combines the best aspects of bowling and housekeeping." I then continued with how I'd become a fan during past Winter Games and looked forward to watching the current competition.

Little could I have imagined that two Saturdays later I would find myself on the ice, broom in hand, learning the game in person.

My familiarity with the quirky ice sport goes back to childhood, where the dozen channels on our cable system in Warren, Pa., included one or two from Ontario, Canada, where the sport is second only to hockey. On Saturday mornings, between cartoon shows, one channel would invariably show grainy, black-and-white coverage of curling competition – some kind of game involving ice, throwing something and old men with straw kitchen brooms sweeping madly, perhaps to create some kind of air whoosh. My brothers and I paid it little heed, waiting instead for Rocky and Bullwinkle to come on.

But nowadays I can't seem to get enough of seeing it, especially since it's only on TV every four years. I find it addicting; I spent every evening during the Games catching up on hours of recorded coverage while appropriately quaffing

mugs of imported Molson beer. My digital-video recorder peaked at 98 percent full and overwrote most everything else I had saved.

While the United States men's team took a bronze medal in 2006, this year neither the men's nor women's team were worthy of anything more than lead or zinc, both finishing with pathetic 2-7 records in preliminary play, which melted any hopes of even competing for the gold.

Heck, I could do better. Apparently that was also on the minds of nearly 1,000 others who during Olympics weekends swamped the Pittsburgh Curling Club's learn-to-curl nights at their home ice at the Robert Morris University Island Sports Center on Neville Island, west of Pittsburgh.

I headed there last Saturday for the second of two nights aimed "to get as many folks on the ice as possible during the Olympics," as the club community-outreach coordinator Dan Bliss wrote by e-mail before the event. It would have been hard to get more people onto the ice.

For those who had been glued to Olympic coverage, the event had traits of those fantasy baseball or guitar camps, where you get to be something of your dreams.

The line of participants snaked through the ice complex, and it took two hours to reach the head of the line for a half-hour of ice time. Club members passed out candy and, as if they were Canadians, apologized profusely for the delay.

Once at the head of the line, small groups got a quick overview and were led in stretching exercises.

Then it was off to the ice in groups of seven to 10. We learned how to deliver a rock by pushing off from the "hack" – a track-like starting block – with our left foot slid-

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Curling club members lead newcomers through some stretching and warmup exercises before hitting the ice. Curling uses upper-body strength for vigorous sweeping of the ice and leg and arm muscles in throwing rocks.



John Zavinski/Herald



John Zavinski/Herald

Curlers use their brooms to signal a shot target in the bull's-eye-like "house" that curling stones are slid toward from about 100 feet away at the other end of the ice.



Marsha Hunt/Herald

Above, The Herald's John Zavinski concentrates as he prepares to "deliver" a curling stone. The shot was more successful than his first attempt moments earlier (at left), when he landed spread out flat on the ice after failing to hold the proper leg and feet positions.

Sunday,  
March 7, 2010

**The Herald**

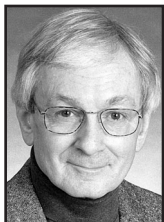
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TV grid .....C-5

*Unusual, archaic words are rarely used but remain in the lexicon*

ENGLISH HAS hundreds of thousands of words in its lexicon, as witnessed by the Oxford English Dictionary, the definitive dictionary of the English language.

Many are obscure or unusual. How many of the following words do you recognize: lygerastia, oculopania, qualtagh, scoleophagous, tibialoconcupiscent, virginity, abacinate, batrachophagous, cheiloprocitic, and my favorite unusual word: zenzizenzizenc? Some obscure words crop up



**Jack Smith**  
*A Word with You*

only in crosswords and sometimes in the mouths of insufferable people who like to show how smart they are. Chances are you have never encountered any of them

Some have a familiar ring. The sound of virginity, for instance, would lead most of us to its meaning: "masculine qualities in a woman." Or, tibialoconcupiscent, which holds in it the common word concupiscent, which means "strong sexual desire." Put tibialo in front of it and you get "having a lascivious interest in watching a woman put on stockings." No doubt you know what it means when someone says, "My boyfriend has a foot fetish." If he had a lip fetish he would be cheiloprocitic. I am surprised that lygerastia is an unusual word, for its meaning is certainly not unusual: "the condition of one who is only amorous when the lights are out." If you practice oculopania, you are guilty of "letting your eyes wander while assessing someone's charms."

The "z" word above strikes my fancy because it has many repetitions of the final alphabet letter. I wonder, could its inventor have had a speech impediment? In mathematics it refers to "a number raised to the eighth power." (Hmm, don't you think it should have not six but eight z's?)

Some unusual words might make you wonder why we need them. For example, abacinate means "to blind by putting a hot copper basin near someone's eyes." Someone who eats frogs is batrachophagous; one who eats worms is scoleophagous.

Some unusual words might make you wonder why we need them. For example, abacinate means "to blind by putting a hot copper basin near someone's eyes."

The creation of new words, neologisms, is ongoing. We invent words as we see the need, or we do it for fun. Take octomom, for example. Who knew we would need a word for a woman who gave birth to octuplets? Will it drop into obscurity a generation from now? The New York Times, Sunday, Dec. 20, cited the word apokalypse, no doubt borrowed from apocalypse, as "undue worry in response to swine flu."

Many obscure or unusual words were in common use at one time. We label them archaic. Archaic words are old forms that survive in our understanding but are not generally used today.

Perhaps the best-known archaic word in English is thou, the old singular form of you. Shakespeare's plays, as any bewildered school boy or girl will attest, are full of words

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## Rock stars

Olympics fuel surge of interest in curling  
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ing on a shoeprint-shaped Teflon slider. Never stand straight up on the slider, we were warned. You'll fall flat on the ice.

The crouched position was supposed to rest one fifth of body weight on a broom tucked under the left shoulder and the rest on the 42-pound granite "rock" that we were sliding.

My first attempt landed me flat on my face – my girlfriend laughing hysterically nearby while trying to take pictures. I failed to keep my left leg perpendicular to the ice and behind the rock. A later attempt during a mini game was more successful.

The mini game was preceded by shaking of hands and wishing the opponents "good curling." It's a gentlemanly sport like golf – no trash talk or trying to distract your opponent as in a basketball foul shot. During the Olympics, the sold-out crowds exceeding 5,000, many new to the sport, had to be cautioned to restrain their noise.

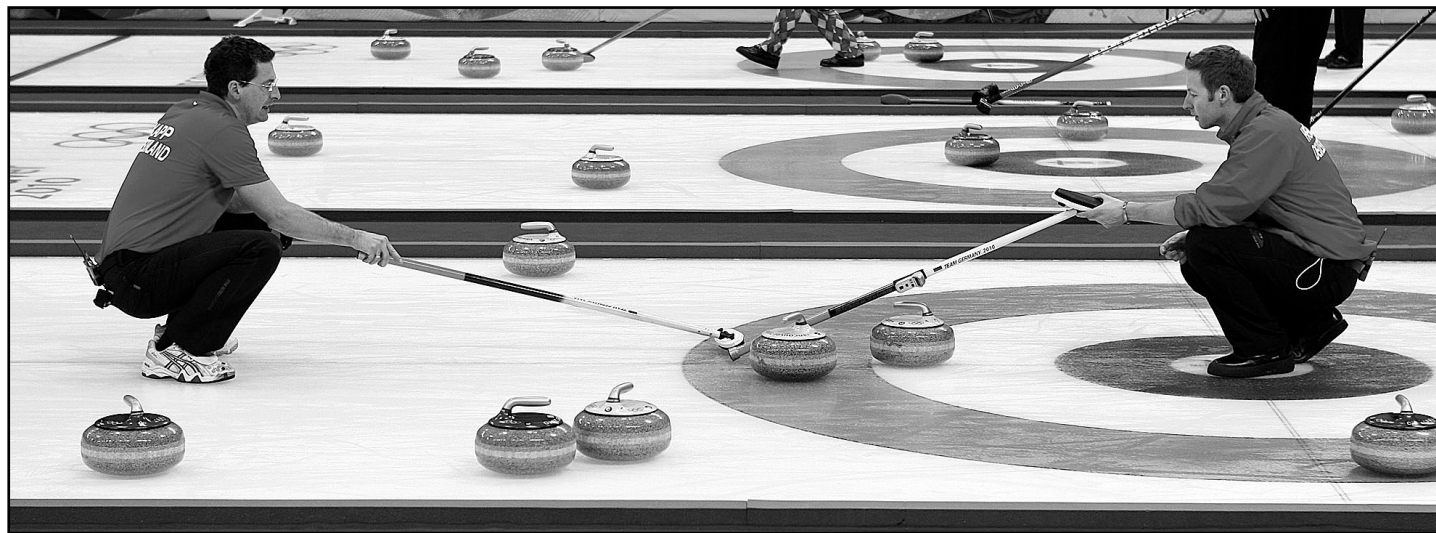
For those who would pooh pooh curling as unworthy of being called a sport, my two days of aching rib-cage muscles begs to differ. The aerobic burst of ice sweeping left my out-of-shape, 51-year-old body panting for air; think rapid snow shoveling of a hillside parking lot.

Sweeping involves a broom. More of a mop, really, what appeared to be a dry canvas-like nylon pad, not bristles or, in the old days, straw.

The sweeping friction of a moving rock ever-so-slightly melts the ice to let the rock slide faster and straighter.

The "curling" part, by the way, comes from the technique of launching the rock with a bit of a twist so that it spins slightly en route, eventually arcing into a different path, often behind other "guard" rocks.

In the Olympics, players miraculously swept to control



Germany's Andy Kapp, left, and Daniel Herberg, discuss a shot in a match against China in men's curling at the Vancouver 2010 Olympics. As it stands, the two rocks with light-colored handles would each score a point for that team because they are closer to the center of the target rings than any of the darker-color rocks.

the moving rock – to teammates' shrieks of "Yup... yup Yup YUP!" or "Hurry, hard!" – somehow watching the direction to the target while gracefully stepping over previous rocks.

For us, it was all we could do to launch a rock. There was no time to try to teach direction, force or curling. En route, a club member went outside the rules and occasionally nudged the missile on its way with his foot.

My team lost 1-0 in the abbreviated game. I was proud to be able to answer the question of who won and why.

Meanwhile, I've got the fever. If I can get over the falling-on-my-face part, this could be a workout and hobby I can learn to love. So I signed up for future, smaller classes and think I'll pursue joining the club when the season resumes in the fall.

In the meantime, I still have days' worth of recorded Olympics curling to savor, something that, like a comet, won't return to the airwaves for four years.

*The eight-year-old, 130-member Pittsburgh Curling Club holds periodic newcomer events and league play from fall through spring. Web: pittsburghcurlingclub.com; e-mail: learn2curl@pittsburghcurlingclub.com*

U.S. Curling Association: [www.curlingrocks.net](http://www.curlingrocks.net)

## Just what the heck is curling?

It looks like shuffleboard on ice. But curling is much more. Add a little bocce, the physics of billiards and the strategy of chess.

The U.S. Curling Association says it began in 16th-century Scotland on frozen lochs and marshes. It emigrated with the Scots to Canada around 1759 and to the United States around 1832. It's particularly popular today in Canada and the upper Midwest.

Teams of four take turns sliding what look like 42-pound granite tea kettles across a 146-foot sheet of ice. The surface is specially prepared with sprinkled water droplets that freeze into a raised, pebbled surface. This reduces friction between the curling rocks and the ice.

The added factor curling has over shuffleboard or pool is that once a rock is thrown, teammates with brooms can accelerate it as needed by sweeping vigorously in its path. This melts the ice ever so slightly, giving a faster ride.

The target is a 12-foot bull's-eye of rings at the far end, known as "the house." The goal is to land a stone as close as possible to the center, or "button." Eight or 10 "ends" (innings) constitute a game, which takes about two hours. Teams alternate with each player throwing two rocks.



With her team's sweepers at the ready, USA's Debbie McCormick delivers a rock during a women's curling match against Russia at the Vancouver 2010 Olympics. Both U.S. teams performed poorly this year after the men had won bronze in 2006.

Some knock others around or out of play like billiard balls, others are planted as "guards" to protect rocks in the house behind them. To get behind a guard, the player adds a slight twist during delivery. The gentle rotation eventually causes it to "curl" off the straight trajectory.

Only one team scores in each end. The team with a stone closest to the button gets a point for it and any other stone in the house closer than their opponent's closest stone.

Fortunes change in an in-

stant. One well-aimed shot can knock out several others, with a sharp, hollow pop sound.

Strategies include deliberately not scoring with the last rock thrown in an end if you can't get two or more points or letting the other team only get one point, because the team that scores in the current end gives the other team "the hammer" – last at-bat, so to speak – in the next end.

Curling became an Olympic sport again in 1998 after a brief appearance in 1924. There also are leagues for wheelchair-bound curlers.

## Unusual

Rarely used words remain in the lexicon  
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that have gone out of use. "Alack, I am afraid they have awaked, and 'tis not done" (Macbeth, Act II, Scene II). "Up, gentlemen: you shall see sport anon." (Ford to Sir Hugh Evans and others, The Merry Wives of Windsor).

More often than not, we guess the meaning from the context. According to one count, Shakespeare used sixty-two words we consider archaic today.

Everyone of a certain age has words that to a younger generation seem old-fashioned, such as flibbertigibbet (a silly scatterbrained person), tomfoolery (foolish or nonsensical behavior), and hullabaloo (a great noise or commotion). According to the web site "Word Spy," hullabaloo began its life as the word halloo, meaning to urge or incite with shouts. Then, by a process called rhyming reduplication, the balloo part was added to form halloo-balloo, which eventually morphed into hullabaloo.

We know that words common to speakers of a language living in one country may be obscure to speakers of that language living elsewhere. As Oscar Wilde put it, "We have everything in common with America nowadays except, of course, language."

*Jack Smith is a retired high school and college English teacher.*

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