

Building Membership Momentum – Laying the Foundation (Part I of II)

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In a previous issue's article entitled "Managing Your Arena Curling Club" we discussed how "attendance does not just happen" at most curling events. Whether it's an open house, a Learn to Curl session, or sometimes even regular league, curling clubs must work hard to keep people coming through their doors to try the sport while introducing them to their organizations. This is especially true for newer arena clubs working to build their membership base.

This article describes how to put in place simple but effective goals and principles as the foundation for building and managing your curling organization. By laying a solid foundation for how your club will operate, you should be able to increase participation at all curling events as well as gain momentum in other areas such as membership growth and financial stability.

Defining Efficiency

Regardless of the type of curling event we are talking about, efficient use of all club resources should be an important goal of every curling club – this applies to both dedicated and arena clubs. However, efficiency may be even more critical when it comes to arena curling clubs because the limited amount of ice time available to most arena clubs tends to make that time very precious. Efficient use of ice time and club resources includes all of the following:

- 1) a streamlined, effective process for ice conversion
- 2) maximized use of the ice surface capacity for each session i.e. putting as many people as we can on the ice each session.
- 3) well organized and respectful use of the club's volunteer resources
- 4) a businesslike approach to club management resulting in the following evidence the club is making progress:
 - a. attendance numbers at curling are stable and growing
 - b. membership is growing
 - c. club operating activities show revenue streams that are growing
 - d. the club's financial picture is improving including its ability to meet financial obligations – such as payments for stones and other assets
 - e. the club's position with its arena is becoming stronger as it demonstrates both the viability of curling as a sport and as a revenue growth area for the facility

Each of these can have specific goals with simple ways to measure and track the club's progress in meeting those goals. It's pretty straightforward to track paid attendance at curling sessions and chart whether numbers are going up or down.

A Word About Contracts

In a future article we will cover the most popular types of contracts or ice time arrangements currently in effect between arenas and curling clubs. For right now, let's just assume that we could be talking about any one of the following four scenarios:

- 1) The club pays an hourly fee for ice time.
- 2) The club and arena have negotiated an arrangement where the club pays only per participant. This produces a "riskless" arrangement for the club as it doesn't matter if there are 5 people or 45 people out on the ice for any given curling session - the arena accepts whatever the receipts are for that day. Many arenas are willing to "subsidize" fledgling curling clubs in this manner in order to help the sport get off the ground. Remember though that the arena will eventually expect to see results in the way of increased participation and revenues in return for this support – do not take this type of arrangement for granted!
- 3) The arena is willing to work with the club by providing some ice time for Open Houses at little or no charge to the club. This ice time is usually outside of the regular ice rental contract.
- 4) The club has the flexibility to book additional ice slots for Learn to Curl events in advance and is able to cancel these events without penalty if bookings do not meet expectations.

Guiding Principles

Okay, now that we've defined efficiency and we have some scenarios for ice arrangements that typical arena curling clubs can relate to, let me throw in a few "guiding principles" from past experience with different curling clubs:

Guiding Principle #1 – Curling has value. Well run curling organizations increase that value.

Giving curling away for FREE, or close to it, doesn't work. Here's the classic story: an arena gives a curling club a break on its ice fees by charging little or nothing for ice time to help it get started. The club in turn charges participants little or nothing to curl. The club's reasoning - once they have people "hooked" on the sport, the club will then be able to raise fees. Unfortunately, this actually "devalues" curling and the club inevitably discovers that it's very difficult to raise fees to realistic levels once someone has been curling for a period of time paying little or nothing.

Remember club efficiency as described above? Giving curling away does nothing to improve the club's financial situation or strengthen its position as a viable sport with the arena. But most of all, it completely ignores all the value created and contributed by the club's volunteers who have spent countless hours promoting, organizing and working at these curling events. All volunteers want their clubs to be successful - and they understand the need to pay for curling.

Consider, also, the typical market for ice sports. Looking at hockey, figure skating and curling, these sports tend to be relatively more expensive mostly due to the huge expense

of building and operating the actual ice facilities. Therefore, the target participant groups need to have the financial resources to purchase memberships as well as participate in other club activities such as bonspiels etc. These participants will generally expect a certain level of professionalism from the organization before they will even consider supporting it on a consistent basis such as joining a league. Curling organizations must always remember that they are in direct competition with any number of other sport and recreational activities for their participants. On the bright side, unlike hockey and figure skating, curling is a sport that can be enjoyed by virtually everyone throughout their lifetime. The depth of the sport is appealing to many because of its unique combination of skill, science and strategy. In addition, the variety of levels of competition available as well as the social, sportsmanship and etiquette aspects of the game will attract individuals, couples, families and other groups to join. No matter how small your club, a well organized, professional approach to introducing the sport to others will add value to their experience and will attract more people to join.

Guiding Principle #2 – Curling ice filled to capacity with pre-scheduled participants equals success.

Say it's your club's curling night tonight. Plans are in place and as you arrive down at the arena, everything is just as you expect. There are 24 curlers confirmed to participate on 3 sheets of league games. Two of the club's USCA Instructors are ready to work with 8 newcomers booked to learn curling tonight on the one open sheet. Club operations including the ice conversion process and warm room administration have been streamlined and are running like clockwork. Teamwork is the name of the game and the enthusiasm is infectious. This is one example of what a successful arena club looks like.

Face it... both drop-in curling and open house situations equal low expectations. The attendance bar at these sessions is nonexistent and the organization of these types of events is based primarily on hope. We hope that people will show up for our instructors to teach. We hope that our ice crew has not set up 4 sheets of ice for just a handful of people. There is a disconnect between our planned use of club resources and what we expect we will need – because we have no idea. For this reason, drop-in curling and open house events fail in every way as efficient uses of club resources (more on this later).

In fact, you might be driving even your die hard curling enthusiasts away by continuing with these types of events. How many times will people drive all the way to the arena to show up for drop-in curling only to find there's not even enough other participants there to have a game? How many times will your volunteer instructors answer the call to staff open houses only to sit around with nothing to do because participant numbers are dismal. Believe me, it will only take a few times like this and the attendance death spiral will take hold – and that is a hard one to reverse.

Guiding Principle #3 – There's much to learn about curling – enjoy the journey!

Curling teams, curling leagues, curling clubs, curling bonspiels, curling events – the curling world, there's so much to learn about curling! It's fascinating and exciting because no matter how long you've been involved with the sport, there's always something new to discover, a skill to master (or re-master), a league to play in, a club to visit and friends to be made.

Have patience! We can't possibly teach people everything they need to know about the sport of curling in one Learn to Curl session or even in one season. How many times does it take to politely explain to someone to be ready when it's their turn to throw – as many times as it takes! When building your club, identify things that work and maintain the flexibility to take advantage of opportunities as they arise – and have fun!

Same goes for club structure and organization. It takes time and patience to develop processes and systems that work. Directors need to talk to each other, learn from each other and work in concert to get everything moving together like an efficient machine. This is where it is invaluable to have the expertise of long time curlers and those who have been members of other clubs. They are able to bring the bigger picture of club organization to the table. What is the relationship between teams and leagues, leagues and clubs, clubs and regions and the regions to the USCA? Club development will inevitably lead down the path to learning and understanding these relationships which, hopefully, are then reflected in the vision and mission for these organizations.

Guiding Principle #4 – Make a point to build and maintain a good relationship with your arena.

Most arena owners and managers know very little about curling and, let's be clear, most facilities are privately owned, for-profit businesses. Many owners are willing to invest in curling in the beginning through reduced ice rates etc. but eventually they will expect to see a return on their investment. Obviously, curling's growing contribution to the arena's revenue is important. Another way is to ensure that your arena shares in the success of your club through increased visibility and promotion of that facility in the community. For example, when your club has the opportunity to be featured in a newspaper article, don't forget to mention the arena's name and give them a plug too. There are many opportunities for arenas and curling clubs to work together for the benefit of each other. Talk often and don't forget to show appreciation.

More on Open Houses

We're going to finish off this article talking more about the very popular, but extremely inefficient use of club resources – the open house. The following story is my own experience with open houses in the U.S. However, I have found that many other clubs have had experiences, and results, very similar to this.

To kick off one season a few years back, our arena club planned a series of open house events and decided to have one dedicated to high school students. In the weeks prior to the event, we visited all high schools in the area, got permission from superintendents to

distribute flyers (2500 in all), made announcements on school intercoms and posted the information wherever else we possibly could, including a local community newspaper and electronic TV bulletin board. The night of the actual open house, we had ice prep crews and instructors available and waiting to show all the participants we were “hoping” would come. How many high school students did we have show up that evening? You guessed it – zero.

That was the end of “open house” sessions for our club. Now, you can say that we didn’t promote it properly or that we went after the wrong age group. (I now firmly believe we should have focused on much younger participants i.e. 10 year olds. By high school, many kids are already too specialized into other sports and activities to take up a new one.) The bottom line was that NONE of our open houses ever really got consistent attendance. One session might have 3 people and the next might have 20. But you can’t build a club on that and you can’t expect your volunteers to keep giving their time for that either.

That was also the end of “free” curling as well, for most of our open houses were offered free of charge on ice donated by our ice arena. Note that the arena didn’t end it – we did. There was simply no proof that free curling actually encouraged anyone who really wanted to try curling, to come down and try curling – or rather, that a small admission fee would actually keep a potential new club member away. Think about it, if someone won’t pay \$10 to \$20 to come down and try curling with an instructor there ready to help them, what are the chances that he or she will actually lay out considerably more money to become a member? Not much.

In addition, we know now that we may have to show from 10 to 15 people how to curl for every one new member we get. This means that most of the people who come through our doors will not end up joining our clubs. Efficient use of club resources such as ice time and volunteer manpower then encourages us to look differently at this nonmember activity. If the activity is important but is very labor intensive on the part of our volunteers, then it should also contribute to the club financially. It’s easier to obtain volunteers for training events when they are able to see the direct results of their efforts in the form of revenue to the club’s bank account.

If your arena has offered to give you a block of ice time at no charge to run an “open house”, ask them up front if you could charge an amount, perhaps \$10 per person, as a fundraiser – say for your stone payments. Communicate with your arena management so they are aware of any large outstanding liabilities your club has such as purchasing curling stones and other club equipment. In most cases, arena managers will be willing to work with you because they want you to be successful too, and no stones equals no curling. Sometimes the club and the arena may split the receipts, sometimes the club may pay a reduced rate to the arena and keep the difference. It can all add up.

In the next issue of Curling News: Part II of Building Membership Momentum – Start Your Engines!

Question for you: What is your club's most valuable asset? (Hint: It's not your curling stones.)

To be continued...

Feel free to send comments or questions to Sandra at s.mcmakin@comcast.net.

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