

Managing Your Arena Curling Club

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I am a three term president of two different curling clubs. That's right, I've done the insane not once, not twice, but six times. (I'm not implying that every curling club president is insane but sometimes it does help if they are.)

When I say two different clubs, I also mean two clubs as far apart on the curling club spectrum as you can almost really go. The first was an eight sheet Canadian curling club with about 1300 curlers, over \$320,000 in revenue (14 years ago), more than 20 leagues, at least that many bonspiels and a full staff. The second was the Pittsburgh Curling Club at the end of its second season with 34 members, one lousy two hour ice slot at a local arena and no money.

Both clubs are a whole lot of work from a president's perspective but obviously they are different "kinds" of work. In my opinion, the arena club is more time consuming and, depending on the geographic location of the arena club, can be more difficult. Why? Because arena clubs are not just training and developing curlers, they are also training and developing instructors, ice makers, draw masters, event organizers, administrators, league coordinators, fundraisers, a board of directors, promotions, sales, communications, etc. etc. In short, they are organizations in training.

Now, the above list is really not much different from what a dedicated curling club must constantly strive to do. The difference is of course that dedicated clubs generally have an established pool of members who have knowledge and skill in the sport of curling - and many of those will have some previous experience in various aspects of club operations. By extension, those arena clubs that have experienced curlers as members may also benefit from any previous know-how those members have obtained as volunteers in other curling organizations. Knowledge of either curling or how curling clubs "tick" will definitely accelerate the learning curve and development of an arena curling club.

Here is a basic model for how an arena curling club may be managed to achieve both growth and development. First, we must separate the club into two parts which I will call the "back half" and the "front half".

The "Back Half"

The back half of the club is the ice area. It is everything we would consider to be on the ice side of the viewing glass in a dedicated club. It includes the entire ice conversion process and all ice making equipment including stones. The bulk of the workload of the back half includes "building" the curling play area prior to every session. The club's primary ice maker(s) reside there. They are focused on developing and streamlining processes for cooling stones, safely and carefully moving stones and equipment to the ice surface, then just as carefully tearing everything down at the end of the session for efficient storage until the next time. The ice makers also endeavor to achieve the best possible ice surface for curling. They develop and evaluate the steps involved in converting the arena's hockey ice to curling ice. Much of the "keenness" of the ice surface is definitely within their control. They invent, build or recommend for purchase any equipment they determine will improve any part of the storage, building or conversion processes. They document procedures and train other club members to increase the club's expertise in this area.

Some of the environmental factors affecting keenness or speed of the ice are not within the control of the club's ice maker(s). These would include factors like humidity and ice temperature. In addition, how "level" the ice surface is for curling is definitely outside of their control. To improve in these areas, they must work with the arena's ice technicians and zamboni drivers. There is learning, training, and communication required between the club and the arena here. Some of the meeting, planning and preparation will have to be done outside of, or between, curling sessions. If there is both desire and cooperation on each side of this working relationship,

arena curling clubs can achieve amazing results in the quality of their curling ice - certainly enough for club members to learn the game and have fun.

The “Front Half”

The front half of the club is the people area. It is the warm room and everything we would consider to be on the warm room side of the viewing glass in a dedicated club. It includes instruction and training and all the “off ice value” we can offer our participants, visitors, spectators, members and volunteers. The bulk of the workload of the front half does not happen at the actual curling session but rather in the days, weeks and months prior to any scheduled session, league, or event. For arena curling clubs, or any curling club for that matter, *attendance does not just happen*. The front half must plan, organize, schedule, promote and communicate. They must evaluate how effective their methods of communicating with their respective communities are and how well that translates into numbers of people actually coming to learn how to curl. They must decide the purpose of each curling session and plan for how they will fill each available ice spot with participants – then execute that plan. Nothing should be taken for granted. Each session stands on its own merit and should be looked at from every angle including expected attendance, volunteer requirements, and projected revenues and expenses as well as any opportunities for additional revenue generating activities. What pre-session efforts will be required to fill any open ice spots? Possibilities might include newsletters, websites, newspapers, database development or some other type of program. Identify things that work, develop patterns of success, then stick to them.

Each session, arena clubs should ensure they “build” the warm room area for their curling club just like they build the ice area. Most likely, the warm room will also function as a classroom, pro shop (merchandise), announcement and information center, display area plus a shoe changing and storage area for personal belongings. The warm room should be friendly and fun - a hub of activity. The club’s lead instructor(s) and other session organizers reside there. The direct benefits enjoyed by every curling club with an organized instruction program are 1) increased number of members and 2) increased revenues. Successful clubs have several Level I USCA Instructors and perhaps even a couple of instructors at, or working on, Level II. These instructors are focused on greeting people, providing information, starting the instructional program and leading participants through it in an organized and professional way. Instructors may also assist with planning and promotions, to help ensure that Learn to Curl events are well attended.

The instructors and volunteers should also be prepared with options for how the new curlers may come back and spend more time with the club to try curling again. Some participants may take advantage of sparing in a game or joining a short novice league while a few people will make the leap and become members right off the bat. However, understand that although we may love the sport of curling, not everyone else will feel the same way. Generally, we know that we will have to show from 10 to 15 people how to curl, for every one new member we get. So the name of the game is getting the people through the door to try it. From those we will meet some who want to continue to learn more about the sport and our club. We invest time and effort into helping people improve so they want to continue participating as members. Above all, we keep our clubs fun – curling has to be fun.

The front half of the curling club ensures that plans are in place and confirmed for our expected group. Any one session may include league curlers, people learning to curl or a combination of both. Our efforts prior to the session guarantee our attendance is usually very close to what we expect. Because everybody knows their job – and many know more than one, we are also very good at handling the unexpected. Yes, this is a lot of work in the beginning but with experience we are able to organize and manage amazing numbers of curlers and activities even though we don’t have our own facility - yet.

Watch out for when we do.