

Recruiting and Retaining Arena Curlers
*A Preliminary Analysis of the Experiences
of Arena Curling Clubs in the United States*

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Members of arena curling clubs from across the country responded to an informal inquiry from USA Curling regarding their experiences recruiting and retaining curlers. With approximately 40 responses of varying length, some basic themes have begun to emerge. These include the importance of ongoing, coordinated marketing efforts; the benefit of offering adequate training opportunities for new curlers; the advantages of creating a sense of community within the club; and the need to develop a solid working relationship with the host arena. While a single recipe for success did not emerge, we anticipate that clubs will be able to learn from the experiences of others and strategically incorporate this information into their current recruitment and retention efforts.

Prior to delving into a discussion of the findings, it needs to be stressed that building and maintaining an arena curling club is hard work. There are no simple fixes for struggling clubs. One respondent summed it up with the following statement, “Building an arena club is one of the most difficult things there is to do – short of qualifying for worlds. Seriously. It requires hours and hours of thought and effort.” While there are numerous factors that can work against success, including cost and competition for ice time, burnout or loss of key club members, and lack of training and support, responses show that many arena clubs are determined to beat the odds and, not only survive, but become vital components of their host rinks and communities as a whole.

Recruiting

Getting the Word Out

To create awareness about opportunities to try the sport, arena curlers must reach out to the broader community. Members of arena clubs have participated in parades and festivals, passed out flyers at professional sporting events, presented to local community groups, managed Facebook campaigns, and created opportunities to attract local press coverage. As anticipated, some efforts yielded better results (e.g., more inquiries from the community, greater attendance at open houses) than others. The following discussion summarizes this information with an emphasis on approaches that appear to be working for clubs¹. While topics

¹ Since a number of these themes lend support to the recommendations presented in the “Building Membership Momentum” articles written by Sandra McMakin, clubs may benefit from reviewing these and other articles, which

have been categorized for ease of discussion, several clubs stressed the importance of establishing and maintaining an ongoing, coordinated marketing effort using a combination of these approaches. For example, if a newspaper article drums up excitement about curling, but the club's website contains hard to find contact information or outdated league schedules, potential curlers may get frustrated and lose interest. As such, each aspect of a club's marketing campaign must be considered in the context of the whole.

Local Media

A number of clubs have successfully partnered with local media, including television, newspapers, and radio, to publicize events. A respondent from the Fort Wayne Curling Club noted, "The news stations in cities the size of Fort Wayne are always looking for interesting things to fill time on the news. In the 1.5 years of our existence, we have probably been on the TV and radio no less than 20 times. A good way to ensure press coverage is to find a way to make friends with the local stations. We had the benefit of a family member of one of our members [working as] a producer for the local news, but other [relationships] can be developed...." A respondent from Curl San Diego concurred. She wrote, "When promoting an event it is important to get the [club's] name out there in every outlet you can think of. TV, Radio, Print, and Social are great outlets and usually free press." Thus, in addition to more mainstream options, clubs could consider approaching public access television stations or communications departments at local colleges and universities. One respondent noted, "Curling was a unique assignment for some of the sports crew of our on-campus tv show...and they have run a few articles in the school newspaper. This has led to some students doing freelance articles in local magazines or papers."

Some clubs strive to come up with interesting events in order to attract more press coverage. During the past two years, the Fort Wayne Curling club hosted a wheelchair clinic with Steve Brown (National Wheelchair Coach) & Jacqui Kapinowski (2010 Paralympic Team), a summerpiel, special needs curling, pond curling, and a clinic taught by three-time Olympian and World Champion, Debbie McCormick. While special events can help attract attention from media, the unique nature of curling and its participants is often enough to warrant a variety of human-interest stories. One club noted, "We promote our club as a family friendly group and cater to couples and have managed to stay consistent between 45-55 members...." Articles about children/parents/grandparents playing on the same team, couples curling on Valentine's Day, or families attending out of town bonspiels together could easily emerge from such a club. If the press does not seek your club out for these types of stories, the club could try presenting

can be found in the "Files" section of the Arena Curling Discussion Forum.
(http://sports.groups.yahoo.com/group/arena_curling/files/Membership%20Growth/)

ideas to the press. As it may take some persistence, clubs should not be discouraged if their ideas are initially rejected.

Local media should also be informed about open houses and other opportunities for the public to participate in the sport of curling. One respondent noted, “We had about 4 news spots advertising learn to curl events, and each ended up with a waiting list and we were able to attract many attendees as members by making the on-ice experience as fun and fast-paced as possible.” In addition to submitting announcements for broadcast on the local news, many clubs submit announcements to community newspapers. The event details are often listed free of charge in the calendar of community events.

Website and Social Media

Several respondents mentioned that new curlers often discover their clubs through a web search. A respondent from the Orange County Curling Club stated, “Many hardcore members (including myself) came from searching [online] for curling in the area. Our webmaster has been laser focused on maximizing our search profile.” To optimize effectiveness, the site should be professional, user-friendly, and geared towards providing information that new curlers want to know. This includes, but is not limited to, up-to-date contact information, including email links to key club members (e.g., membership chair); dates/times of available training sessions; how to make reservations for open houses or training sessions and what to expect; basic rules of the game; and discounts or other benefits for league members during their first year. In addition to attracting new curlers, the website can function as a community bulletin board for returning curlers to check draw times, find out about area bonspiels, and get contact information for possible subs (personal information should be included in the Member’s Only section).

Since the internet can be an effective recruitment tool, some clubs have expanded to popular networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter. One respondent noted, “We really try to update our Facebook at least once or twice a week with what is going on with the club and when the next sessions will be.” While these sites can be helpful, it is important that they remain relevant, up-to-date, and professional. If club members do not have the bandwidth or interest in maintaining such web pages, clubs should consider focusing their efforts elsewhere. A poorly maintained social networking site has the potential to dampen the interest of the curious.

In addition to informing local media outlets about open houses and other learn to curl opportunities, clubs can post events on free websites such as Craigslist and Yelp. Community events websites are also often free of charge and have the potential to reach large numbers of local residents. Curling clubs located in areas with larger population bases may benefit from advertising curling lessons on group coupon sites. A respondent from the Charlotte Centre Curling Club noted, “I’d also suggest trying Groupon or LivingSocial if those are in your city, depending on your ice availability and cost. You’ll only make about 25% of your normal [learn to

curl] fee, but the exposure will generally be huge. If you've registered as a non-profit org, they may offer to take a lower commission.”

Networking

While local media outlets and the internet have the potential to reach thousands, one of the most effective ways to recruit curlers can be through word of mouth. One respondent wrote, “Many of our recruits are friends or coworkers of existing members.” At least one club has instituted a rewards program in the attempt to motivate members to encourage others to curl. “We have also just instituted a policy that if a member brings a friend who joins, the member will be rewarded with \$20 of Club Bucks. Club Bucks can be used for Club merchandise, i.e., t-shirts, beer glasses, coffee mugs or a pickup session.” One respondent stressed that close friends and family, who may tire of being asked to curl, are not the only people with whom club members can discuss the sport. Discussions about curling can happen anywhere, with the staff in a restaurant or while attending social events.

Several clubs have also achieved positive results through networking with expatriate groups. One club member wrote, “What we discovered...is that the Ex-Pat Canadians had a couple of networks set up amongst themselves. One is an email group called Can-South and the other is a meet up group that gets together to do things (like meet at xyz bar to watch a hockey game). Once we tapped into that, they started pouring out of the woodwork. I have to believe that most cities have an existing network of Canadians.” Internet searches may help other clubs determine if there are similar groups within their communities. USA Curling also has a partnership with the Canadian Expat Network through which clubs can advertise in their Annual Resource Guide.²

Curl San Diego stressed the importance of networking with a variety of groups within the local community. “We launched our wheelchair curling network last year. We reached out to USA Wheelchair Curling and have received nothing but support. It does not stop there though. It is possible to promote such networks with [other groups].” While potential targets could include existing sports organizations, seniors, or college students, clubs have not yet reported much success recruiting new members from service groups (e.g., Lions Club, Kiwanis, etc), scouts, or church groups. One respondent wrote, “We often get calls from Boy Scouts and church youth organizations who want to bring a group out for a curling activity. We don’t seem to have a lot of luck directly recruiting new members from these groups, but I like to think that may have more to do with [other activities children are involved in] than lack of interest in curling.”³

² To learn more, contact Sean Mitton at sean@canadianexpatnetwork.com.

³ As arena clubs typically have little choice of ice rental time, it may be particularly difficult to find slots that work for children and teens. Moreover, youth may generally be intimidated if all leagues are geared towards adults.

Host Arena

Several club members mentioned the importance of advertising in the host arena. One respondent noted that his club has “good coordinated marketing at the arena (flyers in the lobby, link on their website, banner in ice area).” Another club stated, “We try to keep business cards with our curling time in stock at the rink so people there for other events can take one or read about curling while waiting for kids to finish practice.” As building membership benefits both the curling club and the host arena, some rink managers and employees help to get the word out about the sport by proactively speaking to other clients and rink guests about curling opportunities⁴.

Open Houses/Introduction to Curling Classes

In addition to making people aware that the club exists, it is important to provide opportunities to try the sport. Some of the most common ways to do this is by scheduling open houses or offering introduction to curling classes. While experiences varied from respondent to respondent, several themes have begun to emerge. Traditional open houses, where members of the public are encouraged to drop-in without an appointment, appear to be less successful than more structured recruiting efforts. Most of the respondents who classified open houses as effective recruiting tools offered some form of structured learn to curl sessions. These ranged from half-hour lessons where attendees, often in groups of two to four people, are taught the basics of delivering a stone to classes lasting several hours. In the latter case, attendees are often given the opportunity to play a few ends of a game at the conclusion of the session⁵.

To effectively staff for these training sessions, clubs recommended requiring reservations, typically accompanied by a minimal fee. A respondent from the San Francisco Bay Area Curling Club noted, “I believe that clubs should always charge for attendance at open house events. This is our official club policy, and I believe it is the best approach for these reasons: 1) participants perceive more value in a product they pay for rather than receive for free, 2) paying for an introduction mentally prepares people to pay for a league or a lesson, 3) the revenue is financially beneficial, or even necessary, for arena clubs. Tickets to our open houses cost \$15 (less for groups) and are available through our website. Attendance has not been negatively affected by instituting this charge.” The cost for these learning opportunities varies, depending upon the length of the class and the cost of ice rental, with most respondents reporting around \$10-\$30 per person. Some noted special rates for groups or families.

Although a number of websites, including San Francisco Bay Area Curling Club’s

⁴ Since the rink’s willingness to allow advertising may be contingent upon the club’s relationship with management, it is important to make efforts to cultivate a solid working relationship. See the “Relationship with the Host Arena” section for further discussion on this topic.

⁵ Rotating newcomers through stations staffed by club members (e.g., sliding, sweeping, throwing stones) can be an effective way to introduce many people to the sport in a limited amount of time. Some arena clubs mentioned structuring open houses in this manner for post-Olympic crowds.

(<http://www.bayareacurling.com/intro-to-curling>), allow prospective attendees to make reservations and pay for classes online, clubs do not need this capability in order to effectively provide a reservation system for learn to curl opportunities. Alternatively, advertising materials can instruct prospective attendees to email or call the club for reservations. Once reservation requests are made, clubs can follow-up with relevant details, including confirmation of date and time, location and basic directions to the club, appropriate attire, etc.

Several respondents also stressed gathering contact information from all Open House attendees. One club suggested establishing an email list including everyone who has ever expressed an interest in curling, especially those who have tried curling, but have not yet become members. Since “blast emails” can be easy to ignore, another respondent suggested that phone calls should be made to all attendees to thank them for attending and ask about their interest in continuing with the sport. A follow-up phone call from a club curler could make a difference in the attendee’s decision about whether to further pursue his or her interest.

Training

A number of respondents mentioned that they had difficulty integrating new curlers into established leagues. Some also found many interested in the sport were hesitant to sign up for a full season after attending a single open house or learn to curl session. In response to these issues, a respondent from Curl San Diego noted the club’s success with instituting a short beginner’s league. The respondent noted, “This is especially useful directly after a [learn to curl] to attract attendees to continue their education and play competitively with people at the relatively same skill level. Making a short league makes it more affordable to attract people who are not sure if they want to jump in all the way to a main league where the competition can be more intimidating. This is the means to get them ‘hooked.’” Another respondent noted, “...we intend to offer a development program of 4 weeks duration to teach the game. It has been noted that new players do not always mix comfortably with seasoned teams and this keeps them among novices longer until they are better trained. It is also half the cost.”

Some clubs have partnered with other organizations, such as local continuing education programs, to offer beginning curling classes. In such instances, the continuing education program typically advertises the course, registers students, and pays a member of the curling club a set fee to teach the class. Although the curling club may bring in less revenue than it would if it hosted an event on its own, advertising for the class has the potential to reach a broader audience. Clubs with high hourly ice rental rates may consider limiting the number of people so that the class can be offered simultaneously with league members playing regularly scheduled games on other sheets.

In addition to offering beginner training leagues for the general public, a number of clubs have found success developing similar opportunities for specific groups. Six respondents mentioned efforts to recruit students from local college campuses. A member of the Cache Valley Stone Society noted that the club tried many approaches to recruit new curlers, including

media coverage and traditional open houses. However, “[w]e had our best success in linking up with our local university to teach a 1-credit course for students. We set it up so the students curl at the same time as our league.... We usually end up with about 50% of our league comprised of university teams and they have a ball.” In a similar vein, the Oklahoma Curling Club mentioned that they are in the process of developing a four-week university league to fill two sheets during the second half of their eight week spring session. They intend to run a training program open to all new curlers during the first four weeks of the session.

Since most colleges and universities have budgets for student activities, it is possible for some schools to subsidize student participation and/or provide transportation from campus to the arena. When recruiting college students, it is particularly important to keep the type of campus in mind. Students attending primarily residential campuses, for example, are likely to leave town for holidays, winter break, and spring break. Scheduling a league around their campus calendar, including avoiding curling on final examination weeks, may help attract more students. When attempting to offer a class or intramural activity in partnership with a university, it is also important to understand university requirements. For example, clubs may need to be prepared to offer a certain number of hours of instruction or even written assignments. In addition to being fun for students, to help increase the likelihood that the university will be willing to partner with the club in the future, programs should be well-organized and professional.

Creativity and persistence may be required in clubs with limited ice availability to offer training opportunities outside of scheduled open houses. One respondent described phoning league members each week to confirm their attendance. When league curlers were not available, she asked people who attended open houses, but were not ready to commit to a league, to substitute. While allowing a prospective curler to sub in a league can be an effective recruiting tool, it is important to ascertain whether league members will be willing to constructively mentor newcomers throughout the game before assigning them to a specific team.

Other Events

Even though corporate events, private parties, charity functions, and bonspiels were not typically mentioned as effective means of directly recruiting new members, they were frequently mentioned as ways to raise revenue for the club and/or increase the club’s visibility within the larger community. To help stimulate interest from corporations, for example, the Ogden Curling Club forged a relationship with the local Convention and Visitor’s Bureau. Bureau staff regularly informs organizations hosting sales meetings or conventions in the area about the service. Attendees usually comprise a mix of local employees and out-of-town guests. Another club suggests, “It’s worth approaching the local Chamber of Commerce and offering to do an event for them as an ice-breaker/networking event with a featured speaker at the arena...they can get reps from many companies to attend.” During such sessions, the club

provides information about team-building opportunities and other possibilities for curling parties (e.g., an alternative to the traditional holiday party or summer BBQ).

While corporate events can be structured like a two-hour learn to curl, non-traditional team-building exercises are options when hosting large groups⁶. Regardless of the format, it should be remembered that most attendees are not interested in learning the intricacies of the sport. They are there to have fun. As such, one respondent stressed the importance of getting attendees on the ice as quickly as possible. Another noted that these types of events need to be well-organized and instructors should have a professional demeanor. Small things, such as outfitting instructors with club nametags and similar jackets can go a long way toward building club credibility in the eyes of local professionals.

Participation in fund-raising events sponsored by Parks and Recreation Departments, schools, or charities can also be an effective way to get the word out about curling. One club mentioned partnering with the YMCA for a corporate challenge “where teams from corporations in town compete in a variety of events.” The Green Mountain Curling Club teams up with a local charity for a “curling challenge” each year. “[It’s] a 1 or 2 day affair. Think 40+ teams of novice curlers that have curled 0 to 1 times. We teach in about 45 minutes, then let them play several ends and, eventually, there is a play down. Although we donate our time and equipment, this does generate a curling ‘buzz’ and keeps curling relevant in our area. Last year, the charity made 40K+ on this event.”

In addition attracting attention from the local media, interclub bonspiels have the potential to raise funds for the club. The Pittsburgh Curling Club, for example, hosts a well-attended bonspiel each year over July 4th weekend, with up to 48 teams. They often have a waiting list for slots. The Fort Wayne Curling Club has also been very successful in hosting a summer bonspiel with 40 teams during their first year and 60 in the second. Although running a bonspiel of this magnitude can attract media attention and make money for the club, it is hard work. Several respondents also stressed that bonspiels should be run like major events with established budgets and marketing plans.

Retention

Sense of Community

While many clubs put a great deal of focus on recruiting efforts, retaining curlers from year to year is also critical to success. One respondent noted, “[I]t is important to retain every current member. During a league that has long lag times between games, people can easily

⁶ For more details on hosting large groups, see article entitled “Curling Competition,” which can be found in the “Corporate (Teambuilding) Event” folder in the “Files” tab on the Arena Curling Discussion Forum. (http://sports.groups.yahoo.com/group/arena_curling/files/Corporate%20%28Teambuilding%29%20Event/)

forget about us or get sidetracked once the league is over if there is not another league or other event right behind it to keep them engaged until the next league starts.” To help retain curlers, a number of respondents stressed creating an environment in which new members are embraced by the curling community.

Although developing a feeling of community may be difficult for clubs renting arena ice, it is not impossible. It starts with simple things. One respondent noted, “it’s important to know everyone by name.” The Triangle Curling Club goes a step further. They provide everyone who joins a league a club name tag and orientation book on the first night. In addition to helping new members look like part of the group, it lets them know what is expected. Such reference materials could include contact information, answers to frequently asked questions (e.g., where do I put my belongings when I’m on the ice?), rules of the game, curling etiquette, key terms (e.g., hog line, house, hack), and/or how the league works (e.g., recommended time to arrive prior to game, how to get a sub).

Broomstacking

Broomstacking, a social get-together after each game, is an integral component of building a curling community. While some arenas have snack shops or bars, other respondents mentioned frequenting a local diner, pizzeria, or bowling alley to socialize. The Circle City Curling Club regularly broomstacks at a local RAM Restaurant & Brewery. As RAM is a sponsor of USA Curling, the club works with management to “have them post info about us.” These get-togethers provide newer curlers with a less formal atmosphere to get to know more experienced members on a personal level. While some respondents mentioned broomstacking was difficult due to available ice times, such obstacles may be overcome with some creativity. If, for example, leagues are scheduled after 8pm, club members might try getting together for a potluck dinner or appetizers before games. To encourage participation, responsibilities for hosting, organizing, or providing food could rotate between teams. While this does not need to occur every week, regularly scheduled get-togethers can help set the tone for the club. As new curlers may be hesitant to attend if they don’t feel a personal connection to the rest of the club, phoning or inviting them in person may be a more effective means of securing their attendance than relying on emails to the entire club. The form that broomstacking takes matters less than the end result, which is club members getting to know each other and forming friendships.

Volunteering

In addition to being a critical component of running all arena curling clubs, volunteering can help new curlers feel more like a part of the organization. One approach to encouraging curlers to volunteer is incorporating a volunteer section into the new member or renewal application with check off boxes for available options (e.g., marketing, ice prep crew, bonspiel committee, etc.) Once someone marks a box, it is very important that the club follows up with him or her. If not, new curlers may think their assistance is not wanted and shy away from helping in the future. Another approach to recruiting volunteers is identifying individuals who

might fit well in certain areas. It can be hard to say “no” to an in-person request, especially if the task is not overwhelming. Getting people involved in the club is not only an effective way to make them feel like part of the larger group, it can also take some of the burden off of the club’s “key players.”

A number of clubs discussed the fact that they give special awards to recognize volunteers. A respondent from the San Francisco Bay Area Curling Club noted, “Volunteerism is essential to any club, arena or not. Volunteers should be acknowledged and rewarded when possible.” Another club has a Member of the Year Award. Their entire membership votes on “who they thought the best member of the club was over the last year.” In addition to recognizing the experienced curlers who handle the majority of tasks in the club, contributions of newer curlers could also be recognized. A Rookie Volunteer of the Year award might be something for which new curlers could strive to win.

Making Curling Fun

In order for people to continue with the sport, curling needs to be enjoyable. A member of the Pittsburgh Curling Club wrote, “Our primary focus is to make curling fun. If your membership isn’t having a good time, they’re not coming back.” In an attempt to prevent newer curlers from being frustrated by “too many games that are blowouts,” the club works to balance skill levels in a single ladder league with four divisions. Several times throughout the season the top two teams in each division move up and the bottom two teams move down. This is designed to promote more interaction between teams, keep the playing field balanced, and satisfy the need for different levels of competition within the limited hours the club is able to curl each week.

Another component of having fun participating in the sport is improving shot making and overall understanding of the game. To help mentor newer players and keep the focus on training throughout the season, one respondent suggested that a club’s most skilled players be assigned to developing teams. As an alternative, clubs may bring experienced trainers in once a year to host a skills workshop and/or encourage curlers to become certified instructors. Clubs with experienced USA Curling certified Level II Instructors could arrange for interested members to have their delivery taped before a game, after a game, or during an open house. After the delivery is taped from several angles, it can be analyzed and discussed off the ice. This promotes conversation about curling outside of normal league play.

Interclub Play

Experiencing the larger curling community is also an important component of curling culture. Clubs can facilitate interclub play by arranging friendlies (sometimes referred to as challenge cup spiels) or encouraging experienced members to invite newer curlers to attend bonspiels. Friendly competitions are typically one-day points spiels between two clubs. While a trophy is often at stake, the overarching goal is to establish interclub camaraderie and provide newer members with curling experience outside of their home club. A respondent from the

Pittsburgh Curling Club noted, “We have, for about 6 years, taken a bus trip to the Rochester Curling Club for a one-day event and encourage our new curlers to attend. We minimize the cost and use this as an opportunity to show our new members what curling can be when played on [dedicated] ice.” Another respondent noted, “Once they play on dedicated ice once, they get it!”⁷

In addition to friendlies, numerous respondents noted the importance of attending traditional bonspiels. One respondent wrote, “We promote attendance at bonspiels. Those of us that regularly attend spiels are encouraged to place a new member on our teams and introduce them to the competitive and social aspects of curling. The skips recognize that a beginner can drop the overall skill level of your team, but a club member who attends a bonspiel is much more likely to remain in the club.” Representation at bonspiels can also help spread the word about the club and can be used as a very effective networking tool to “attract other clubs to your arena, get advice, and leverage contacts.”

Investing in Equipment

Two respondents suggested that curlers are also more likely to stay in the sport once they purchase equipment, and more likely to purchase equipment if they have a chance to try it out first. One noted, “[o]nce someone invests in a pair of curling shoes or a broom, they are probably going to stay with us.” Since some curling retailers have the ability to bring equipment to the club, clubs are encouraged to contact them to schedule a visit (e.g., Brooms Up Curling Supplies, Goldline Mobile Pro Shop, Steve’s Curling Supplies). Scheduling an equipment vendor during a league night or other curling event, such as a bonspiel, will encourage people to drop by and browse.

Internal Communication and Social Events

Similar to the recruiting process, the benefits of strong communication do not end once someone signs up for league. As previously mentioned, a club’s website can function as a community bulletin board. This includes up to date league assignments and schedules, contact information, and sub lists. While effective electronic communication is important, it is no substitute for personal interaction. One respondent stated, “arena clubs need to learn to pick up the phone.” Another respondent explained that his unofficial policy is to call people who have not shown up for several league sessions. He noted, “It is possible that family problems, or other issues entirely unrelated to curling, kept them away. Others may have lost a job making it difficult to pay dues or session fees.” Working out alternative payment plans or giving a discount for a minimum number of volunteer hours may be something for the board to consider in an attempt to keep enthusiastic curlers facing difficult circumstances active in the

⁷ While playing on dedicated ice can be a positive experience for new curlers, it does not come without risks. Arena clubs within reasonable commuting distance to clubs with dedicated ice run the risk of losing players, as more experienced club members may become frustrated by discrepancies in ice conditions.

club. In cases where exceptions are made, the respondent recommended keeping all such considerations between the board and the individual.

Since league schedules in arena clubs are dictated by ice availability, seasons may be somewhat sporadic. As one respondent noted, “Hockey tends to rule!” Since hockey is frequently the backbone of many ice skating rinks, curlers often “are left to grab...left over ice times...” Several respondents stressed that it is especially important for communication to continue with members during the off season. The old adage, “out of sight, out of mind” aptly applies here. Clubs have successfully used picnics, golf outings, charity events, lawn bowling, bocce, etc., to keep people engaged during the off season.

Relationship with the Host Arena

While most responses from arena curling club members showed passion for and commitment to successfully growing and maintaining their clubs, numerous respondents expressed frustration with available ice times, quality of ice, high rink fees, and less than ideal places to store stones. One respondent stated, “The relationship with the arena can make or break the club.” Another club representative noted, “we had over 200 people at our open house [following the 2010 Olympics] that we could not capitalize on due to arena difficulties.”

The Charlotte Centre Curling Club’s approach to interacting with rink management is to “work them like a business contact.” An integral component of this approach is designating one person as the rink liaison. The rink liaison takes the owner to lunch once a month. Instead of communicating primarily through email, the liaison makes regular attempts to stop by the manager’s office to talk. The club also encourages members to make use of the rink outside of leagues. The respondent noted, “We skate there, we recommend it to people we work with, and we promote the place.” The club also regularly engages in broomstacking at the arena bar. “[W]e make sure that the Curling Club is [the bar’s] best customer. We out drink all three men’s hockey leagues. Bar revenue is HUGE for a rink. It’s a key factor in them wanting us to be there.” In return, the rink shows them consideration in the form of promotion (e.g., actively trying to recruit curlers from other sports) and use of ice for pick-up curling during times when the sheet has not otherwise been reserved. During pick-up sessions, the club is not responsible for renting the ice. Instead, attendees pay the rink a set fee per person. Since the arena lets the club know about the availability far enough in advance, the club has also been able to schedule instructional sessions during these timeslots. For the Charlotte Centre Curling Club, these additional curling opportunities help keep them going strong socially during times when no league play is scheduled and allows people who have been to an open house, but have not yet committed to a league, to gain more exposure to the sport.

While a strong relationship with arena management may not solve all of the recruiting and retention challenges faced by arena clubs, it can certainly enhance day to day operations. Arena management may also be more willing to display curling information on bulletin boards,

hang banners in the arena, post information about the curling club on the rink website, or even work to improve ice conditions when club members make concerted efforts to forge a positive relationship.

Conclusion

While common themes found in the responses to USA Curling’s original inquiry regarding recruiting and retaining arena curlers have been discussed in this analysis, it is not intended to be a complete and comprehensive guide on the topic. Instead, it is one way for arena clubs to begin to learn more about the experiences of others. As USA Curling and other groups around the country work to learn more about how to successfully manage arena curling clubs, further discussion about these and other topics is highly encouraged.