Ready, set, curl

By Terry Davis, Daily Pebble Editor

Hosting its third national championship in less than a decade, the city of Kalamazoo came out in strong support of the athletes Saturday night as the 2019 USA Curling National Championships kicked off at Wings Event Center. Olympic gold medalist John Shuster started on a strong note with a 9-2 win over Sam Strouse's young team in front of a full crowd. Strouse, the youngest skip in the field at 18, scored a deuce in the fifth end to get back into the game after Shuster's side scored three points in the opening end. The game was broke open in the sixth, however, as Shuster's side scored four more to the scoreboard and followed up by stealing two in the seventh to end the game.

“For me, I just want to make sure I get a really good read on the ice, and I put the broom down that gives my team the best opportunity to make shots,” Shuster said. “So, we’re just going to try to keep our thumb on exactly what the ice is doing and try to keep executing. There’s a lot of really good teams here, really good players here, so we just have to keep executing and we’ll be just fine.”

Scott Dunnam’s squad met all of its goals in a lopsided 9-1 victory over Steven Birklid’s Seattle-based rink.

“Tonight’s main goal was obviously to get a win but to pick up on the ice because it’s nine games,” said Dunnam, 25, who is skipping in his second men’s national championship. “We had to learn as much as we could tonight. We were a little shaky at the beginning but thankfully it got better and better with each end. It was a good first game.”

Dunnam (Dresher, Pa.) and his team of Cody Clouser (Berwyn, Pa.), Don Piche (Traverse City CC), Olympic Gold Medalist John Shuster and Mark McElwee (Lansing CC) celebrate the opening stone of the 2019 Nationals.

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Youth very prominent in 2019 field

By Collin Wood, Daily Fiddle Staff Writer

When skip Sam Strouse discovered his team’s first draw at the 2019 USA Curling National Championships would be against John Shuster and his 2018 gold medal-winning team, Strouse knew his first-ever men’s nationals appearance was going to be off to an arduous start.

“When we saw that, we were like, ‘Oh, wow, that should be a tough one,’” Strouse, 18, said. “Our goal is to stay in it for a while. We’re definitely trying to win but not sure how realistic that is against Olympic gold medalists. Definitely trying to learn a lot, see what they do, stuff like that.”

Strouse’s team, Team Strouse, won bronze this season at the Midland Open Bonspiel prior to coming to nationals in Kalamazoo, Mich., which is just over two hours south of Strouse’s home in Midland.

“When we saw (Kalamazoo) got the bid for nationals,” Strouse said, “we were like, ‘Oh, that’s great,’ because we definitely wouldn’t have this kind of support system if it were somewhere else.”

Team Strouse is one of the youngest teams this year at Kalamazoo. Of the five curlers on the team, all but one are making their men’s nationals debut in 2019.

“It’s kind of wild coming in here,” Strouse said. “The setup is incredible. I’ve been at national events, but this – the blue carpet, the cameras – just the way it looks is a new experience for me. Yeah, I’ve met these guys before, but I’ve never played against them. It should be a pretty wild experience.”

Among this year’s field are eight Olympians and five world championship medalists. Despite curling against the nation’s most triumphant curlers, Strouse feels no pressure.

“We’re here for a learning experience,” Strouse said. “We’re here just for the experience. It’s kind of fun playing the whole underright thing. We’re not expected to win any games. If we play well, we’re pretty sure we can win two or three.”

On the women’s side, Alaska native Ariae Traxler, 19, looks to lead her team to a podium finish in her women’s nationals debut.

“I’m not super nervous as I thought I would be,” said Traxler, who is the second youngest skip in this year’s field. “I’m really just fixated on having fun … I’m just all about having fun right now and getting to play my idols I grew up seeing and playing some Fairbanks people who are going to be here from Alaska. That’s going to be fun.”

In her sixth appearance at junior nationals, Traxler’s team took home bronze last month in Minnesota and placed fourth at the Women’s Challenge Round, helping Team Traxler earn a special selection to women’s nationals this month.

“I feel really good,” Traxler said. “Getting that bronze at Junior Nationals was a good mindset coming into this. It was going to be something else if we didn’t do well at juniors coming into this. I think getting that medal and having a few wins under our belt is good.”

// COMPETITION SCHEDULE

Today, 8 a.m.:
Sheet A: Brundidge vs. Ruohon len
Sheet B: Corbett vs. F enner
Sheet C: BIRR vs. Dunnam
Sheet D: Birkld vs. Strouse
Sheet E: Shuster vs. Sinnett

Today, 12 p.m.:
Sheet A: Traxler vs. Sinclair
Sheet B: Podoll vs. Rhyme
Sheet C: Christensen vs. Dubberstein
Sheet E: Seneker vs. Roth

Today, 4 p.m.:
Sheet A: Birkld vs. BIRR
Sheet B: Sinnett vs. Brundidge
Sheet C: Ruohon len vs. F enner
Sheet D: Dunnam vs. Shuster
Sheet E: Strouse vs. Corbett

Today, 8 p.m.:
Sheet A: Christensen vs. Rhyme
Sheet C: Roth vs. Sinclair
Sheet D: Traxler vs. Seneker
Sheet E: Podoll vs. Dubberstein

STANDINGS & RESULTS

MEN’S STANDINGS:
Brandon Corbett 1-0
Scott Dunnam 1-0
Mark Fenner 1-0
Rich Ruohon len 1-0
John Shuster 1-0
Steven Birkld 0-1
Todd BIRR 0-1
Jed Brundidge 0-1
Chase Sinnett 0-1
Sam Strouse 0-1

DRAw 1 RESULTS:
Shuster 9, Stou se 2
Dunnam 9, Birkld 1
Fenner 8, Brundidge 4
Ruohon len 9, BIRR 5
Corbett 8, Sinnett 6

// AUTOGRAPHS & SELFIE STATION

Today: 11:45 a.m.-12:15 p.m.
Team Sam Strouse and Team Jed Brundidge

3:45-4:15 p.m.
Team Kim Rhyme and Team Ann Dubberstein

The Kalamazoo Pipe Band (top) entertained fans during the opening ceremony of the 2019 National Championsh ips. Team Corbett is led out by volunteers (center). Courtney Schmidt, chairwoman of the United States Curling Association Board of Directors, declares the 2019 Nationals are open.

Photos by Rich Harmer