

Olympic hopefuls still seeking a brush with fame

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EVERY four years, at Winter Olympics time, thousands of Australians find themselves perplexed by scenes of people on ice throwing large stones, then using brooms to furiously sweep a clear path for them.

What few people know is, these people are actually engaged in sport. A rather odd looking sport, yes, but also a very popular one.

That sport is curling and it's big in Europe, North America and parts of Asia. It is particularly popular in Canada where, along with ice hockey, it is one of the most commonly played, and watched, sports.

But even less well-known is that Australia has its own curling team, and over the past week has been competing in the world curling championships in the US. Australia finished sixth, its best result in world championship competition, and is now in a strong position to claim a spot at the next Winter Olympics.

The team is made up primarily of expat Canadians, and captained by former Canadian curling champion Hugh Millikin, who moved here in the late 1980s.

There is one Australian-born member of the team, Melburnian Steve Hewitt, though it took another Canadian — his wife — to introduce him to the sport.

Millikin has lived in Australia for the past 20 years, and has dedicated much of that time to developing a competitive curling team here. It has not been easy.

When he first arrived here in 1988 he heard about a group — Scottish and Canadian expats, with a few Australians — who had put together a curling club in Melbourne.

"I thought, oh well, maybe I'll go down and see if they have some good players and maybe we can put a team into some international competition," said Millikin, speaking after a day of competition in the world championships. "So I phoned them up and I said 'Are you guys interested me coming along as coach and we could put a team together' and the woman laughed at me ... she just could not believe that I was that stupid!"

But he persisted, and two years later had an Australian team in the world championships.

Australia's curlers face more obstacles than just a lack of awareness at home. There's also the complete lack of curling facilities.

"We can't get together and practice," Millikin said.

"What we do is we get together for a family barbecue, or we get together and watch some DVDs of curling games and that's it. We have gym training sessions that we try and stick to, but ... there was no actual curling going on," he said.

Now in their 18th year of international competition, the Aussie team is doing surprisingly well for a group of guys whose practice is limited to the couple of weeks they can afford to spend in curling countries ahead of a competition.

They finished this week equal fifth in the world rankings with the US and Germany, narrowly missing out on a spot in the play-offs for the world title.

But, Millikin said, the past week was just another step on the path to the main game — a berth in the 2010 Winter Olympics in Vancouver.

"If we can get to the Olympics in 2010, get some more people involved in the sport, get the sporting bodies to realise that there is medal potential here and get some funding behind us, then we can actually get a curling facility built, and that's really where the game is going to take off," he said.

This story was found at:

<http://www.theage.com.au/articles/2008/04/12/1207856925637.html>