

Broomstick warriors declare war on world



Winter Olympics hopeful Paul Meissner slides the stone down the ice during a match at the Bendigo Ice Skating Stadium.

Photo: *John Woudstra*

Five mates who formed a curling team hit the road to Bendigo each week, hoping it's the first step to the Winter Olympics, Kate Hagan writes.

PAUL Meissner gets some strange looks when he strides through the city after work with a broom in hand to meet three curling buddies for their weekly road trip to Bendigo.

Proudly decked out in Curling Australia T-shirts, the four have their sights set on qualifying for the Winter Olympics — but first they have a few hurdles to clear. Not least is mastering a complex sport that requires strategy, precision, expensive rocks, pristine ice and an ability to withstand freezing temperatures.

The Bendigo Ice Skating Stadium is the only centre in Victoria that offers curling, and that is only one night a week. So Meissner and his mates — who discovered the sport at a come-and-try day two years ago — make the four-hour round trip to get a game.

They were narrowly beaten by the Australian men's side at the national curling championships in Bendigo last weekend. But with a busy year of curling in Canada and New Zealand ahead, Meissner's team is determined to establish itself as the next generation.

Before curling sessions at Bendigo, Victorian Curling Association members must prepare the ice, which involves covering it with a thin layer of water to fill in surface nicks made by skaters. They then sprinkle the lanes with fine droplets of water to create "pebbles", which make the rocks slide faster.

The rocks are 20 kilograms of granite and the best ones — sourced from the Scottish island of Ailsa Craig — can cost close to \$2000. The game was invented in Scotland in 1541.

Curlers place one foot in a rubber device called a hack, which provides traction, and slide forward with the other foot while pushing the rock forward along the ice. The aim is to get the rock about 45 metres down the rink to a target called the house — a bit like lawn bowls on ice.

The game is played with eight people, four a side, and the aim after playing 16 stones is to have one or more of your side's stones closest to the centre of the house.

Curling's most curious element is sweeping. The team skip stands in the house and shows the curler where to aim the rock, and once it has been thrown, shouts instructions to two remaining team members furiously brushing the ice with brooms.

The sweeping momentarily melts the ice, which reduces friction and keeps the rock travelling fast and straight.

About 20 people turn up to curl on an average Tuesday night in Bendigo, and 36 people contested the Australian championships over the weekend. Queensland fielded two men's teams, and Victoria and NSW one apiece.

Meissner's team were chuffed to beat the champions from NSW in Saturday's round-robin — but lost to Queensland in a sudden-death semi-final on Sunday. "That game (against the national champions), it all came together," Meissner said. "We played very well ... we even had a fair comeback against them.

"We were obviously disappointed that we didn't play as well against Queensland but overall we were thrilled to see that we're at the level where we can match it with Australia's best."

The winners — Hugh Millikin, Ian Palangio, Sean Hall, Steve Hewitt and Steve Johns — will represent Australia at the Pacific championships in Japan in November, where they could qualify for the world championships in Canada next April.

Only the top 10 teams from the world titles qualify for the Winter Olympics — a feat Australian men have not managed since securing a berth in the 1992 Games, where curling was a demonstration sport.

But Meissner and his mates, who met through university skiing, hope to change all that.

Guided by their skip and fifth team member Gerald Chick — who represented Canada as a junior curler — the team of Meissner, Vaughan Rosier, Daniel Green and Matthew Panoussi will have their work cut out, with their first task to beat an Australian men's side that spends most of the year training overseas.

The frustration for the team is having just a couple of hours of curling time each week. Other than emailing each other tips from Meissner's copy of *Curling for Dummies*, there's little they can do off the ice to develop their skills.

CURLING IN AUSTRALIA

- Curling was first played in the old Melbourne Glaciarium on one of the world's first artificial rinks.
- The club was disbanded in 1939, and the Australian Curling Association (current body) was not formed until 1984.
- It's now played every winter in Melbourne, with the season from March to November.
- Associations also exist in Queensland and NSW.
- The Curling Club of Australia was formed in Melbourne in 1933, with 1907 Wimbledon champion Norman Brookes the inaugural president.

<http://www.theage.com.au/news/sport/broomstick-warriors-declare-war-on-world/2006/07/25/1153816183095.html?page=2>

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