

Australian curlers ponder what might have been

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HALF a point, a low barrier and a gulf separate Hugh Millikin from calling himself an Olympian as he watches the curling competition here from the bleachers, and he admits that it is torturous. Millikin has been skip of the Australian team since it was formed 20 years ago, and led Australia to a points tally on the world standings that would have seen it romp into the Olympics in other years, but this quadrennial was 0.5 of a point light.

The hollow he feels is made deeper by the fact that he was born in Vancouver and grew up in Ottawa, prime curling country, and curling has become a star attraction at these Games, playing to packed and sometimes rowdy houses every day and night.

"We worked so hard to get there, and we were so, so close," Millikin said. "It is frustrating. We've beaten every other country in the world, including Canada and Scotland." The brotherhood of curlers empathises. "They all know how much pain I'm in not being out there," Millikin said.

The odds were prohibitive, yet Millikin's team nearly defied them. The team has to go to New Zealand where there is a dedicated curling facility to practise, and when they can to Canada for short, intensive sessions. It is costly and time-consuming. At one stage, all of the Australian team worked for Millikin's computer software company, which at least made getting time off work easier.

Australia's opponents in the Asian region are New Zealand, which owns the ice, and the quasi-professional Chinese, who Millikin says live and train full-time in Canada, Japan and Korea, for three months at a time.

There were setbacks. More than a third of all the curling rocks in Australia were lost when thieves stole the refrigerated truck they were kept in at Docklands. They have not been recovered.

Points from championships accumulate over an Olympiad, and the top 10 qualify. At the end of the 2008 world championships in North Dakota, Australia was 11th. Among the teams it beat in that tournament were Sweden and Denmark, who both qualified for the Olympics. The suspense was sustained until the last day, and a little afterwards. "We were always hopeful," said Millikin, "maybe of a positive drug test!"

Millikin, 52, followed his mother into curling at 10, and in 1986 won a Canadian mixed championship. Two years later, he left to travel the world, got to Australia and never left. He lived in Sydney, but would fly to Melbourne each week after discovering a Monday night curling competition in Oakleigh. Australia's inaugural curling team, formed in 1990, consisted of Millikin, two other Canadian expats, and an Australian, John Hewitt.

Millikin has been to nine world championships, and in 1992 was skip of the Australian team that curled at the Albertville Olympics, where it was a demonstration sport. It was an experience that tantalises him still. Australia's curling community has grown to about 200. Millikin said Olympic exposure had been crucial.

"Now when I say I'm a curler, people know what it is," he said. "They don't think it's something I do with my hair."

Millikin rejoices that Australia has a new rink in Melbourne's Docklands. Soon, he will go to Russia for a world mixed pairs championships. Russia will remain on his mind, as the host of the 2014 Winter Games.

Incidentally, Millikin said he had tried lawn bowls, but was wretched at it.