

# Homeless, our curlers face a long and rocky road

**Brendan Cormick - The Australian**

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**IT is one of Australia's most baffling, unsolved crimes, at the centre of one of the world's most intriguing sports.**

The perpetrators of this heinous act deserve to spend their days breaking rocks in a chain gang if ever they are caught.

The unknown assailants stole the trailer of a truck in Melbourne in June, but it wasn't full of gold bullion, cigarettes or alcohol.

The refrigerated unit was filled with expensive rocks. They were not diamonds, but stones used in the Winter Olympic sport of curling. A third of the nation's stones were stolen, 58 in total, valued at about \$25,000.

They disappeared from the car park in the Docklands precinct next to Icehouse.

Some fool even sent an elaborate ransom note.

"I figure they are somewhere at the bottom of the Yarra," NSW Curling Federation member Ian Palangio said.

There are about 200 curlers in Australia, mostly in Queensland and Victoria.

The sport is on thin ice because it doesn't have dedicated venues, instead being played on ice rinks, where figure skating and ice hockey dominate.

Palangio says it is a chicken-and-egg equation.

Which comes first? It is hard to build numbers of competitors without a dedicated venue, and it is hard to build such a venue without the interest of competitors.

In Canada, curling is second only to ice hockey as most popular TV sport, but elsewhere it enjoys a cult following during the Olympics and for the next four years is overshadowed by ball sports.

"It has a spike during the Olympics, as we've noted, getting 50 emails a day from people inquiring where they can play in Sydney," Palangio said.

"Right now, it's too bad we don't have somewhere to play. The interest is really high, as high as I've ever seen it.

We're looking at ways to leverage the current interest and grow the sport and get it happening in more cities.

"The NSW Curling Association is made up of four people, so it's not that big. And we're the four players on the national team, so we know the membership pretty well."

Comrades of curling in Australia have their home club for competition in New Zealand.

Talk about being given the cold shoulder. They travel to central Otago, to a town called Naseby, which has the only dedicated curling facility in the southern hemisphere.

"We host our national championships in New Zealand. With the introduction of rocks at the Docklands in Melbourne, we're hoping it will be able to maintain ice there that will be competition-level and allow us to bring the national championships back to home soil," Palangio said.

ING Real Estate has generously purchased 96 reconditioned curling rocks from Canada, along with some brooms, grippers and balancing crutches to replace the stolen goods and give curling a local boost.

The national men's team missed out on a berth in Vancouver by 0.5 points. Only 10 countries could compete at the Olympics and Australia, which has beaten nine of the teams in the field over the past three years, qualified 11th behind the Swedes, who will play off for the bronze medal.

Palangio and his teammates in the national squad get a little funding from the Australian Olympic Committee, but cover most of the costs associated with competing, spending eight to 12 weeks annually travelling in New Zealand, Canada and Europe and acquiring ice time.

"For us it is a passion and a hobby and we do it because we love the sport," he said.

South Korea's and China's players are full-time professionals and getting better rates than hairdressers.

Their funding knows few restraints, they live in Canada and have Canadian coaches and they curl every day of the year, eight hours a day.

The Chinese women went from never throwing a curling rock nine years ago to winning last year's world titles.

Anyone handy with a broom and good at throwing things can apply those talents to an Olympic pursuit.

Having seen the Danes, Germans, Canadians, Swedes and others that have shed their jackets and scarves for a racy fundraising calendar in recent years, the sport beckons a mix of fit, athletic types and those with mental strength at competition level.

That said, anybody from the age of six to 86 can grasp the game and enjoy playing it for fun.

After dredging the Yarra this week, I've got some nice second-hand stones going cheap.