

Curling, a cool sport that rocks

Carolyn Webb – The Age
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A cold northern winter sport is thriving in our hot and dry land.

PICTURE lawn bowls on ice and it's a good start to understanding the sport of curling. The Victorian Curling Association's weekly meets involve drinking, socialising and talking strategy, before getting down to business.

There's four in a team competing against another team and the object for each player is to slide a 20-kilogram round rock down the ice towards the bullseye rings. Players' frantic sweeping of the ice in front of the moving rock can cause it to go further, and sweeping methods and the way the rock is thrown can make it "curl" around opponents' rocks - hence the name.

Monday night's two-hour training session was a triumph for the Association after a recent setback. Last June, thieves stole 58 curling rocks valued at \$14,500 from a storage trailer. Co-ordinator Steve Hewitt still wonders what anyone would do with 58 cheese-wheel shaped lumps of granite.

Formed in 1984 by eight homesick Scots and Canadians, the Association has suffered from irregular rink time and sometimes poor ice conditions at Oakleigh and Bendigo rinks.

It has a new home at Icehouse in Docklands, and the Icehouse owners, ING, have imported 96 new curling rocks from Canada.

Already Icehouse's central location has attracted new members, including Bruce Freshwater, 36, who grew up in Edinburgh next to a curling rink but never played it.

"It's only when I moved to a hot, dry country that I've decided to have a go. The irony is not lost on me," said Mr Freshwater, an IT consultant.

"It never seemed cool when I was a teenager, but later I watched it and it fascinated me. I like the idea of the tactics involved, the strategy. It's not just about getting the rocks as close to the middle as you can all the time, it's about positioning them, kind of like chess."

Curling was invented in Scotland and is considered a national sport there and in Canada; many VCA members are immigrants from those countries. Steve Hewitt, 52, is an Australian who married a Canadian. He met his wife, Lynn, in Italy in 1984 and one condition of her coming to live in Australia was that she be able to play curling.

Hewitt did more than join the Victorian Curling Association. He represented Australia when curling was a demonstration sport at the 1992 Winter Olympics and is now a leader in the sport.

Now Steve and Lynn's son, Dean, 15, is a keen curler as well. The family that curls together, stays together.

Victorian Curling Association meets at Icehouse, Docklands at 8pm on Mondays.
www.curlingvictoria.org.au