

## **Stronger, Higher, Homer? Simpsons go curling**

By **Jimmy Golen**, The Associated Press - Monday, January 11, 2010

Sweeping is a skill. Kilts are in fashion. The target is shaped like a doughnut.

It was just a matter of time before the Simpsons gave curling a try.

The dysfunctional television family will take aim at the roaring game this season when Homer and Marge head to Vancouver for the 2010 Olympics. In an episode due to air around the time of the Winter Games in February, the couple represents the United States in the semi-fictional event of mixed curling.

Stronger.

Higher.

Homer?

“We knew we wanted to do a show about the winter Olympics in Vancouver, and we wanted to get the Simpsons there as participants,” said Rob LaZebnik, one of the show's writers. “We liked the idea of a sport that you could do with your spouse, and all the issues that presents.”

“Plus, we're hoping we get free Olympic stuff.”

Several of the show's writers come from Canada, where curling is a popular winter sport, and the land of hockey and health care has taken its share of ribbing from the show. In a 2002 episode, Bart follows his girlfriend to the country Homer calls “America Junior” and winds up in a fight with his friend Milhouse that interrupts a curling match.

This time the show aims straight at curling, and LaZebnik said he can understand why those who love the sport would be concerned.

“When you hear 'The Simpsons' is going to do their take on your sport, you naturally get a little alarmed,” he said in a telephone interview. “But we ended up being respectful - I would say, even, surprisingly respectful. Both Homer and Marge take it seriously.”

LaZebnik said the writing staff was thinking of ways to work in an Olympic theme for an episode to air during the games, and they originally thought Homer's ability to remain inert would be an asset on a bobsled. Eventually, they came around to curling, putting Marge and Homer on the same team as Principal Seymour Skinner and his mother.

The Simpsons, it turned out, were naturals.

Homer's bowling skills translated to the curling delivery, and Marge's housecleaning made her a whiz at the sweeping that curlers use to help direct the stone down the ice. More wackiness ensues when the family gets to Vancouver and Lisa becomes addicted to pin collecting; it's also a good bet that Bart will create an international incident.

But the sport occasionally derided as “extreme shuffleboard” avoids a direct hit.

“The Simpsons is a comedy that's been around for 20 years. They make fun of everybody and everything,” said Brady Clark, who with his wife, Cristin, is an actual four-time U.S. mixed curling champion. “The fact that The Simpsons is even considering doing an episode on curling, it shows that the exposure is out there. To me it's a good thing.”

Olympic curling involves a team of four players - either all men or all women - who take turns throwing two stones apiece at a target known as the house. There is a two-person, coed version called mixed curling that is growing in popularity but is not an Olympic event.

“There's been a discussion about adding another discipline,” Brady Clark said. “It was my understanding that the IOC was receptive, but that they really want to limit the number of athletes.”

To get Marge and Homer on the same team, the show's writers used a little creative license to declare mixed curling a demonstration sport. Other details they tried to get right by watching curling on YouTube and talking to actual curlers, including the Clarks and Rick Patzke, the chief operating officer of USA Curling.

“I would trouble them with the most mundane questions about curling,” LaZebnik said. “It was the equivalent of asking A-Rod, 'Where do you stand in the batters box?’”

Patzke helped get the writers on the ice at one of the curling clubs in Southern California that popped up as the sport's popularity spiked after the Turin Olympics. Three of them are from Canada and had curled before, said LaZebnik, who isn't one of them.

“One said curling was the one sport you could do in high school where he could be with girls,” said LaZebnik, who is from Missouri. “It looks so easy, but it's quite difficult just not falling over.”

And that's the message curlers hope viewers will take away.

“Although Homer Simpson probably isn't the ideal athlete I would want to see representing our sport, I just think it's great exposure,” Cristin Clark said.

Patzke agreed.

“They're a comedy show; I expect they're going to have some fun with it. But they're going to respect the sport,” he said. “If people have a few laughs but they decide to come out and try it, maybe that will lead to good things.”

Although the curlers bristle at the notion that Homer could roll off the couch and reach the Olympics, Patzke prefers to think of him as an everyman who reaches the Olympics and doesn't forget where he came from. And like thousands of recreational or competitive curlers - including the Clarks, or 2006 Olympians Cassie and Jamie Johnson - the team is an extension of their family.

“Homer and Marge, they're the typical curlers in that they do an extraordinary thing, and they're still your neighbour next door,” Patzke said. “Curling's been around for 500 years; it hasn't ever been this star-struck sport. They're not like going to get lost in this whole 'Gee, I'm a big star' kind of thing.' They're still going to be your neighbour next door.”

Just don't expect them to return your power tools.