

Murdoch aims to avenge 2006 near miss

By **James Christie**, The Globe and Mail - Thursday, January 7, 2010

Scottish curling skip David Murdoch shares a common bond with Canada's athletes in alpine sports. He may be the best in the world, but like Canada's best skiers, he can't prove that by staying at home.

Murdoch has to take his show on the road. "We're here two weeks, home for two and then back over for four, so it's always a challenge but it's something we accept," Murdoch of Lockerbie said yesterday as he evened his record to 1-1 at Sleeman Centre here in an event called the Swiss Chalet National, the second stop of the Capital One Grand Slam of Curling circuit.

If the handle for the event is a mouthful, so is the task. Murdoch, 31, is the two-time world champion (including 2009 in Moncton) and one of the Olympic favourites. Thursday, he beat 2006 Olympic gold medalist Brad Gushue of St. John's 4-3. Gushue won't have a chance to defend his Olympic gold at Vancouver, because the host country's colours will be worn by Kevin Martin of Edmonton. But Murdoch, who will represent Britain, beat Martin three times in succession at the worlds last April in Moncton.

Murdoch's team has been curiously unsuccessful in Grand Slam play, with a record of 1-6 coming into the Guelph event, but that stretch of futility wasn't apparent Thursday. His rink is a big-event team, and there's not much bigger on a curler's agenda than playing in Canada and playing at the Olympics.

The slow start in an Olympic season didn't dismay Murdoch, who is in a position of privilege as a full-time athlete, paid by UK Sport to play what most would consider a country-club game. But he's fully professional and has an athletic, hard, muscular physique, the antithesis of the old image of a pudgy, beer-drinking curler.

"We had a few things going on at the start of the season, with injuries and we were missing Pete [Smith, the team's second from Fife] as well. We're not going to beat ourselves up about it. A few things were going wrong at the time

"But now's a different matter. It's our final preparations for the Olympics and we're injury-free and we're focused. It's going to be a tough couple of months, but we have the games of our lives ahead of us now, and that's what we're really focusing on," said Murdoch, who finished fourth in Turin in 2006, losing the bronze-medal game to Pete Fenson of the United States.

Martin, who led Canada to a silver medal at Salt Lake City in 2002, is a four-time Brier champion and is the career leader in Grand Slam titles with 13 going into this weekend. But Murdoch has had his number of late.

"If there is a secret, then I won't be telling you," Murdoch said. "When it comes to the world tours and world championships, there's definite intensity to our team and we're starting to find a little bit of that now.

"We really play our best when we're in Canada and against the crowd, it really seems to make our team click. It's like a series against Kevin in big events now: We played each other, two days in the 2008 worlds and two days in the 2009 worlds and now the Olympics in 2010."

But the curling world is bigger than Canada now, even though this country is the stronghold of the roaring game and most of the world's top curlers are Canadians.

"It's going to be tough playing Kevin and his guys if they're in top form, but then so are the other teams. You got to remember you're only going to be playing Canada twice if you go all the way to the final

"You're starting to see the rest of the world play a very good game now. They're coming along playing the Slam events and the pro tour. The Canadians are still the benchmark but it's a one-off game and you never know what's going to happen."