

What a decade for curling

By **Bob Weeks**, The Globe and Mail - Sunday, January 3, 2010

The Changing of the Guard

While the Olympics welcomed curling back to the fold as a full-medal sport in the past decade, it's been over the past 10 years that the Games has taken over as the brass ring for curlers. While the Tim Hortons Brier, the Scotties Tournament of Hearts and the Ford World Curling Championships are still highly sought-after titles, top curlers now eat, sleep and sweep with the Winter Games as the top goal.

Biggest Surprise Victory

At the 2002 Olympics in Salt Lake City, unheralded British skip Rhona Martin played a perfect last-rock draw to defeat Switzerland and win the gold medal, giving the Brits their first Winter Games gold since skaters Torvill and Dean in 1984. More than six million fans tuned in at home to catch the historic moment.

Most Memorable Name

Markku Uusipaavalniemi, skip of the Finnish team that won silver at the 2006 Games, gained the nickname U-15 for his lengthy surname. He's now a member of parliament in Finland.

Fastest Learners

In 2004 Wang Bingyu led the first team of Chinese women curlers on a visit to Canada. Playing against a team of senior-aged, club-level curlers in Vancouver, the squad was beaten badly. Fast-forward to 2009 and the Chinese women are now world champions and gold-medal favourites in Vancouver.

Most Memorable Game

No contest here, it's the 2004 Brier final. Mark Dacey's stunning comeback against Randy Ferbey's Edmonton four might be the most memorable curling game ever. The Nova Scotia team rallied for three points in the 10th end to capture the Canadian men's final by a 10-9 margin and sent every reporter in attendance into a mad scramble to rewrite a story about a game that almost everyone thought was over.

Best shot

Jennifer Jones last rock to win the 2005 Scotties Tournament of Hearts is known in curling circles simply as The Shot. With the game and the Canadian title on the line, Jones was looking at an Ontario rock belonging to skip Jenn Hanna buried on the four-foot. Her only hope was to redirect her stone off on an outside rock belonging to Ontario. She made it, took four and won it all.

Story of the Decade

A group of top curlers went on a two-year boycott of the Brier to try and gain a share of the championship's proceeds. The fight was divisive, negative and downright nasty. Players on both sides of the argument pointed fingers and called each other names, but what came out of it has changed curling for the better. The creation of the Grand Slam series, the legitimization of the players' association and the recognition by the Canadian Curling Association of the power of the player (using them in marketing campaigns, for example), means it was the so-called Slammers that came out on top.

Mistake of the Decade

Former CCA chief executive officer Dave Parkes and the board of the association made the disastrous decision to award curling coverage in its entirety to the CBC, leaving long-time ally TSN behind the glass, so to speak. CBC moved many games to a little-known cable channel and had a disorganized schedule that left viewers scrambling to find the games and fuming when they couldn't. The resulting legal problems to get out of contracts cost the CCA big bucks and, coupled with a bad championship season, resulted in a financial hole, which has since been erased.

Team of the Decade

Hard to choose the best here. It could be Randy Ferbey's foursome, which won four Briers in five tries. Or rival Kevin Martin's team that dominated competitive curling. It could be Brad Gushue's underdog rink from Newfoundland and Labrador that, aided by Russ Howard, 50, won the gold medal at the 2006 Olympics. Or it may be Colleen Jones who won four women's titles in the decade. Take your pick. They're all worthy.

Best addition to the Game

The creation of wheelchair curling, allowing disabled people to compete at both the grassroots and elite levels. It's become one of the most popular events at the Paralympics.

Best Quote

In 2004, the World Curling Federation announced it was going to split the men's and women's world championships into separate events after having run them jointly since 1991. Fearing a lack of fans for a solo women's event, Colleen Jones lamented: "We're going to have to curl naked to attract any fans."