

Lake of Menteith curlers: We'd be crackers to play on this

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IT WAS to be a once-in-a-lifetime event, organised in defiance of the all-pervasive health and safety culture. In the end, though, the weather got the upper hand.



Cracking ice and a watery surface may have put paid to plans for a Grand Match, but a few hardy curlers continue to play on the Lake of Monteith yesterday. Picture: Robert Perry

Plans to contest an unofficial Grand Match involving thousands of curlers from across Scotland were defeated by thawing conditions yesterday.

The game was arranged following last week's decision by the Royal Caledonian Curling Club (RCCC) to cancel the official meeting due to safety concerns.

Rising temperatures, however, put paid to the alternative fixture, dubbed the People's Grand Match, with only a handful of enthusiasts braving treacherous conditions on the Lake of Monteith.

Curlers expressed disappointment yesterday after the elements foiled efforts to stage one of the rarest events in the Scottish sporting calendar.

While temperatures at the loch near Aberfoyle were as low as -12°C and the ice was 7in thick at the weekend, by yesterday afternoon, temperatures of about 4°C had left the playing surface awash.

"As soon as there's so much water on the ice, it becomes unsafe," explained Neil McGuire from the Port of Monteith Curling Club. "There were cracks appearing on the ice."

Scott MacDonald, manager at the Lake of Menteith Hotel, said that, by lunchtime, there was 1in to 2in of water on the ice.

"The snow has really been starting to melt on the surface and it's making it very, very slippery," he told The Scotsman. "We recommended to people that they should not go out. We can't be sure of the integrity of the ice.

"The match is a once-in-a-generation experience and it's a real shame – it would have been great to see," he added.

The Grand Match, or Bonspiel, has been staged only three times since 1945. It was cancelled by the RCCC following objections from police and emergency services, which in turn left it impossible for the sport's governing body to obtain event insurance.

The decision irked enthusiasts, and a campaign on the social networking website Facebook soon had hundreds of supporters.

Yesterday, scores of curlers ventured out on the Stirlingshire loch, but their efforts brought scant rewards.

Curling stones created bow waves, such was the volume of water on the surface.

Among those hardy souls taking part was David Drysdale, the Edinburgh student who initiated the Facebook campaign.

"Despite the poor conditions, there are about 60 people out on the ice, with several improvised matches going on," he said yesterday. "The ice is still strong underfoot, despite being covered with a layer of water in most places."

He added: "I'm not totally disappointed because I think our day will come soon. The lake will freeze over again – it could even happen again this year."

The last Grand Match in 1979 was won by the north of Scotland, while the Edzell Curling Club won the Challenge Trophy for the highest average majority of shots.

This winter's events mean the Angus-based club can rest on their laurels for a while yet.

"It's a shame the match couldn't go ahead but it means Edzell can still call themselves the outdoor world champions," joked club member Mike Ferguson.