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Tales from Sheet Nine

by David Garber

Wausau plans new eight-sheet facility

It seems that the Minnesota Monopoly of Eight Sheet Curling Emporiums may be broken next season, if the energetic folks at the Wausau Curling Club have their way.

Before we report on that, how about a nostalgic review of big facilities dedicated to curling (arbitrarily defined as six sheets or more)? One whopper (defunct for decades) was the 48-sheet “Big Four” club in Calgary, boasting 24 sheets on each of two levels. Imagine memorizing the ice and rocks at that place. Maybe the power scraper was invented there by a Popeye-armed ice maker tired of hand-scraping?

In the U.S., some will recall the stately brick 12-sheet club at Duluth (on the second floor, over a hockey arena, no less), a victim of urban renewal, long since replaced by the superb eight-sheet DECC facility.

Superior’s old six-sheet club, near the base of the long bridge to Duluth is but a memory, although on stormy days one can hear echoes of young Bud and (the late) Strummer’s “sweep” calls resounding in the nearby clouds. The second floor club room at that joint evoked the pool hall in *The Hustler* and, ‘cuz smoke gets in your eyes, you can recall guys who looked like Gleason, Newman and Scott playing gin rummy, having a drink and talking smart after a hard-fought game at that storied building. Anyway, that’s how it looked to a wide-eyed 20 year old at a late-sixties Wisconsin district playdown, in his first game against the world champions, leading off, and so nervous that during his first shot, he hit himself in the head with his own brush. (To clarify, that would be me.)

Here’s a quick inventory of the “big” U.S. curling-only facilities: Duluth, Eveleth and St. Paul (8 sheets); Hibbing (7 sheets); and six-sheet facilities at Bemidji, Fairbanks, Madison and Utica. This writer has never missed a shot at Fairbanks, but has had the distinct pleasure of missing many, and making some too, at the other seven curling palaces.

Which brings us back to Wausau. Since the 1940s, the Wausau Curling Club has been housed in a fairground building in Marathon Park. Each fall, the members dutifully tidy up after the animals and get set up for curling. By the time visitors arrive for, say, the biggest high school bonspiel in the nation, the place looks great. To squeeze in five sheets, each sheet had to be narrower than regulation, and each house less than the full 12 feet. (One always had a ready excuse when a few inches short of the rings there!)

Wausau has always been a great place for a bonspiel and fellowship. The club has always been a national leader in supporting scholastic curling. Now, as reported by multiple media sources, the club will soon be housed in an eight-sheet, modern, bright, energy-efficient facility.

We contacted Wausau Curling Club leaders Cal Tillisch, Cory Sandquist and Perry Grueber to ask them if the recent publicity, which extended to Yahoo News and other national news outlets (even bigger than the *Curling News!*) was true. Would Wausau have an eight sheet curling

facility in use for the 2012-2013 curling season? Yes, barring unexpected setbacks to a very complex project!

Sandquist is club president; Grueber is the club's PR chief. Tillisch co-chairs the project's fundraising committee with CPA Jeff Stubbe, and doubles as chair of the building committee. Tillisch is a real-estate attorney, which he says has been handy knowledge for this giant real-estate project. He and spouse Marcia are national curling champions and long-time local curling boosters. Sandquist has curled since he was a kid, Grueber for just five years, but had limited immunity and rapidly developed a case of the curling virus. Together, their skills and enthusiasm make it evident why the massive project will succeed.

"We budgeted \$3 million for this project," Tillisch states, "but agreed to keep publicity low-key until we had raised two-thirds of that figure." Grueber adds, "We agreed we would not operate with significant long-term debt. We want to keep the cost of curling affordable for Wausau area residents." At press time, the committee has firm commitments for \$2.4 million in support from Wausau area foundations and individuals.

The Wausau Curling Club has over 500 curlers, including 170 high school curlers. There is considerable unmet demand that eight sheets can satisfy. For example, in a recent media interview, a high school athlete said that more practice time availability was needed to raise the team's competitive level. More sheets will mean more practice time.

The plans call for Olympic-sized 16-foot wide sheets, laser-leveled concrete base, and six-foot carpeted walkways and easy access to the ice, not only for general roominess but to fully accommodate wheelchair curling. Modern energy efficiencies should keep energy use for eight sheets at or below the level for the current five sheets.

Sandquist likes the opportunity to further serve the Wausau community. "We think of the new facility as a civic feature. Events like the Badger State Games and other bonspiels generate important economic activity."

The club owns 15 acres near Grand Avenue, just south of central Wausau. A soccer group owns an adjacent 45 acres. "With complementary seasons, we expect synergy from cooperation with the soccer folks on subjects like parking areas," says Tillisch.

All three spokespersons stated that the club is very enthusiastic about hosting national and international events at the new facility, "from national to world championships and Olympic selection events," says Sandquist.

To contact the committee for more information, including a brochure with a map, a list of major financial supporters and more background, and/or to make a tax-deductible donation, browse www.cfoncw.org (Community Foundation of North Central Wisconsin, look for Wausau Curling Club Building Fund); or call Cal Tillisch at (H)715-848-4045, (O)715-849-8100, ext.5; or email fundraising@wausaucurling.org. Wausau Curling Club, Inc. is a tax-exempt, 501(c)3 organization. Fund raising vehicles include a Wall of Honor for donations of \$2500 and up, and 12 inch Terrazo floor tiles in the new lobby at the \$300 (one line, 22 characters) and \$600 level (three lines).

The publicity continues: Tillisch, Sandquist and Olympian Debbie McCormick will be interviewed on Wisconsin Public radio Thursday, December 8 between 5:00 and 6:00 p.m.