

Tales from Sheet Nine

By David Garber

Sure, U.S. curlers would have rather seen better Olympic curling results, none more so than the athletes themselves, their coaches and others directly involved in helping the teams. But I believe that the U.S. curling athletes and support staff worked very, very hard and tried their best to succeed. Let's look at the bright side:

- Our curling athletes represented themselves, the USCA and the USA honorably during a stressful period.
- Curling internationally was once again a big winner at the 2010 Olympic Winter Games. The TV popularity, attractive curling athletes, the noisy, jammed arena, even the Norwegian men's Argyle slacks, boosted public awareness of curling, and in a positive way, around the world.
- Our athletes, coaches, volunteers and staff are able, dedicated people who I am confident will, given time for reflection and planning, succeed in increasing USA's chances to meet international competition goals. This is a big job *because the standard of skill in curling is not only rising steadily, but more nations are becoming seriously competitive*. When the USA won its first world championship in 1965, there were only six nations vying for the men's title: USA, Canada, Scotland, Sweden, Norway and Switzerland. Today, 45 nations compete in men's, women's, university, juniors, mixed doubles and wheelchair.
- Once again, clubs around the USA are reaping the benefits of curling's presence in the Olympic Games with big crowds at open houses, with some attendees becoming new club members. My own club just increased its signed-up membership by 15% of total membership. At least one club charged a fee to get that first curling lesson, which helped control the numbers and actually paid all expenses for the open house.

It will be interesting to follow the inevitable debate about Olympic team selection procedures going forward. Here are some questions likely to be debated:

- Will the USCA continue with self-formed teams playing down to one winner?
- Will the Olympic team be selected by a head coach ala Herb Brooks and the 1980 USA hockey team?
- How will the role of U.S. curling coaches evolve?
- Will a USCA-selected and funded team be created, but be required to play down against the self-formed teams? (I like this option, a hybrid that allows for trying radically new approaches while retaining the concept of winning on the ice.)
- If a self-formed team wins the Olympic Trials, how much new outside control should be enforced? Can curlers avoid trying to fix what ain't broke, but polish what needs polishing?

Lastly, a suggestion for consideration: *The USCA should stop peer-seeding national round robin play in competition leading to worlds*. Seeding makes it easier for the top-seeded teams in the first half of a round robin, but in my opinion, seeding ill-serves the winning team because they get no such advantage at international level and may thus somewhat less prepared to be in top form mentally for the entire round robin. Also, it goes against long-time USCA policy, supported by the athletes, to make the nationals/Trials competition as much like the worlds/Olympics as possible (e.g., round robin plus WCF playoff format, "24-4" ice, arena venues).