

## **Tales from sheet nine** (May 2009 issue)

*By David Garber*

Just turned 60 on Shakespeare's birthday, so it's time to stifle any dreams to win the race for most curling world championship appearances. As of this writing, my tally is -- zero. I'll keep trying but the odds get longer each season.

If you are in the same boat as me, dear reader, there is hope! Based on current trends, I'm looking forward to the World Curling Federation instituting more world championships for us to dream of as we age: "Super Seniors Worlds" (60+); "Svelte 70's Worlds;" "The Age of Guile Worlds" (80+); "Legacy People's Worlds" (over 90); and finally, Century Worlds (100 and over). Furthermore, to increase our odds of success, each age group should have events for stick, no stick and mixed doubles.

As for me, if I somehow manage to last for a few more decades, simply weathering like cedar to a silver gray, eventually the shortage of eligible athletes should enhance my odds. If I expire, what of it? I'll never miss another shot!

### **How big should a board of directors be?**

In my experience, the U.S. Olympic Committee staff and volunteer board is comprised of talented, motivated, honest people. But they are not immune to jumping on bandwagons, sometimes when the band is out of tune. In the past several years, the USOC has adopted the popular notion that non-profit boards should be more corporate in nature, with nine to eleven members, mainly comprised of independent directors (athletes elected by athletes, by federal law, must have at least 20% of USOC and NGB board seats). Advocates argue that small and independent boards will deliver lower administrative costs and other efficiencies. I respectfully disagree with this notion, for several reasons.

Small boards comprised mainly of "independent" directors are much more susceptible to the influence of a powerful board chair. This can be OK if the chair is, say, Mr. or Ms. Terrific. But ask investors in the stock of Enron, AIG and many banks and hedge funds what they think of corporate-style boards.

The USOC had some organizational turmoil about five years ago, and saw board change as a solution to those problems. Unfortunately, in my opinion, the new board organization has resulted in the marginalization of National Governing Body influence (the NGBs are USOC members). NGBs have the primary responsibility to develop their sports and train future World and Olympic medalists. In the days when the USOC board was over 100 members strong, it surely was ponderous and inefficient in some ways. But the former presence of NGB representatives on the USOC board, who were expert in and passionate about their sports, acted as a check and balance system, to avoid concentrating power in any one area, and protected the smaller NGBs.

Some folks will point to good Olympic medal performances to say that the new system works better. Again, I beg to differ. The variable in the Olympic Winter Games was, under the old system, and is, under the new, provision of more money to athletes and athlete development

programs. Podium funding helped the USA to a record performance at Salt Lake City in 2002. Performance funding continued that success in Torino in 2006. The effective notion is bigger money, not smaller board size.

Today's USOC board seems less interested in the welfare of the NGBs. Smaller sports bodies especially depend on the USOC for funding athlete programs. This is logical. The U.S. Congress granted the USOC a monopoly on the use of the Olympic rings for marketing purposes. Smaller NGBs cannot use the Rings to generate marketing dollars. The Widget Company must pay millions to sponsor the USOC, but if they wish to pay a few thousands to sponsor USA Curling, they can't mention the Olympic Games, or use the five rings (with some exceptions that have relatively minor revenue impact).

The USOC's independent directors cannot be expected to have the sports expertise and passion that the members of the former constituent-based board had. The USOC has been (gently so far) pressuring the USCA to reduce its board size from the high twenties to about ten, and even at that, with a majority of independent people (i.e., no connection to curling). There is surely nothing wrong with having some independent directors, who can bring new perspectives as well as connections to prospective sponsors. Having said that, I believe board reduction and elimination of most curler board members would hurt the USCA.

Expenses are not the issue, since USCA directors pay their own expenses to attend the two annual board meetings (disclosure: the USCA pays for directors' coffee and donuts at breaks!). The USCA is small, with a small staff, and USCA directors do a lot of the work of the organization—finding event sites, promulgating rules, representing the USCA at many events and gatherings, helping to develop new clubs, and much more. A smaller, more “independent” board will not, in my opinion, make the USCA appreciably more efficient or effective, but it would inevitably reduce the level of the critical volunteer commitment necessary to run our NGB.

### **Vancouver**

I hope readers are looking forward to watching the Olympic and Paralympic Winter Games in Vancouver, either in person or on NBC. Curling has three teams of excellent athletes and very nice men and women. Their support staff is talented, from the Athlete Development Director to the Team Leader and the three coaches, plus several specialist people. Most Olympic training and Games expenses are funded by the U.S. Olympic Committee. I'm optimistic for all three of our teams (i.e. medals!), even though the podium battle gets harder each season, because the world's curling nations are improving each year. That's good for curling. Wherever our teams finish, they will be fine ambassadors for U.S. curling, and good subjects for what promises to be two weeks of exciting TV curling next February. The Paralympics will be several weeks later and unfortunately will likely get little or no TV exposure.

The Olympic Winter Games have been a boon to curling clubs' membership growth in the United States. Many clubs are planning now for Olympic season open houses to capture some members who get interested during the 80 or more hours of televised curling. Check with your club's leadership to see what's in the recruiting hopper. Enjoy your off-season!