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Competitive curling: Governance or operational matters?

As discussions across the U.S. Curling Association (USCA) community continue about the new By-Laws up for member consideration, the rights of competitive curlers have become another recurring topic.

The USCA Governance Task Force, established by resolution of the USCA Board of Directors, was charged with reviewing the organization's structure and coming forth with recommendations for a clear policy setting role for the board and its committees. The Task Force members include Chris Sjue, Jerome Larson, David Carlson, Jim Pleasants, Kent Beadle, Ann Swisshelm, Richard Maskel, Beau Welling, Andy Anderson, Leland Rich and Bob Pelletier. This group approached its objectives with the belief that the point of governance reform is to create a solid foundation upon which the USCA, as a national body, may build a world-class organization, both on and off the ice.

The governance reform and proposed By-Law provisions are intended to address the perceived and real impediments to the USCA excelling. These impediments include, without limitation:

1. Convolved lines of authority between the Board, its officers, and the CEO and staff;
2. The overlap of policy and operational concerns at the Board level;
3. Under performance in raising funds from independent sources;
4. No direct voice and vote in the governmental affairs of the USCA by those who are paying the member dues, the curling clubs and the curler members of those clubs; and
5. Elections to national policy setting positions based solely on regionality when the USCA is to serve curling nationwide from a national perspective.

Just as the nation's curling competitors are judged by their performance on the ice, the organization itself is judged by the marketplace. If the USCA staff doesn't serve the needs of the constituency, if the organization fails to be relevant to its members, then it has no membership and thus no funding. These are factors any Board must consider in weighing and establishing policies and goals of the USCA.

High Performance programs and the participating competitive athletes are but one segment of the constituency of the USCA. High performance itself is not a governance issue; it is an operational issue. The reformation of the By-Laws of the USCA addresses basic governance issues, not the details of how to administer competitive programs.

A substantial reason why the U.S. Olympic Committee (USOC) responded with concerns about the current USCA governance is the failure of the USCA to clearly distinguish governance from operational issues. The USCA Board of Directors has been actively engaged in operational issues. This is not in keeping with corporate governance best practices.



The USOC also perceived the USCA to be failing to follow the corporate best practice of clearly delineating lines of authority. During the annual preparation and presentation of the annual USCA High Performance Plan, the USOC began to question who was actually in charge and exercising the authority to make final decisions regarding the High Performance Program – the volunteer Directors or the paid High Performance staff (hired with USOC dollars).

The USCA Governance Task Force established at the direction of the Board approached its work with the understanding that By-Laws are intended to be the foundational document setting forth the basic governmental structure and policies of the organization. How competitive athletes and their programs are chosen and implemented is not a basic governmental issue, it is an operational issue.

The rights of competitive athletes of a National Governing Body (NGB) of an Olympic sport in the United States are set forth in federal law, the Ted Stevens Amateur Sports Act, as administered by the USOC. This law states, among other things, that competitive athletes must have a minimum 20% representation on all NGB committees dealing with high performance programs and the spending of USOC resources on these programs. The athlete rights do not include guaranteeing any specific method of selection of a team, however, or how teams are to be coached/managed, or funded. These are operational details which may and do change as circumstances warrant from year to year.

While the many high performance program details are operational, competitive athletes in the USCA do have substantial input into team selection procedures, the overall High Performance Plan, Olympic Trials formats, and so on. Under the leadership of High Performance Director Derek Brown, the USCA maintains a commitment to receiving input from athletes and other advisory group members, while maintaining authority over these operational decisions.

The USCA believes that the proposed governance reform will implement best practices to enable the USCA to excel as an NGB. By excelling as an NGB, USCA will provide the best operational support to all of its constituencies, of which competitive athletes are one.

For the above reasons, the undersigned USCA Governance Task Force Members fully endorse the proposed By-law changes, which we believe will further position the USCA to continue to build a world-class organization.

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