

FINAL REPORT OF THE INDEPENDENT REVIEW OF THE  
U.S. CURLING ASSOCIATION HIGH-PERFORMANCE PLAN EXECUTION

Prepared and submitted by:

Cindy Slater

Assistant Director for Library Services

H.J. Lutcher Stark Center for Physical Culture and Sport

University of Texas Austin

## **Introduction**

In May 2009, the U.S. Curling Association (USCA) submitted a High-Performance Plan (HPP) to the U.S. Olympic Committee (USOC) that detailed a program designed to instill sustained international excellence within the US curling community.

Prior to 2009, USCA did not have a structured comprehensive HPP for its Olympic teams. The HPP was a new program requiring substantial changes in USCA's approach to Olympic team support.

Among other goals, the HPP called for USCA to win a medal in the 2010 Olympic Winter Games (OWG) and a medal at each of the 2009 and 2010 World Championships. Neither goal was achieved.

In April 2010, USOC and USCA asked Cindy Slater (author of this report) to be the lead examiner in an independent review process. The objective of the process was to develop a series of key learnings about the execution of the HPP, to understand what worked well and what did not, in an effort to build a better foundation for 2014 success. As a model for the process, the USOC and USCA provided the report of the independent review conducted by New Zealand Rugby Union in 2007.

The process entailed the solicitation of constructive feedback from key players in the HPP process (athletes, coaches, administrators, leadership and relevant outsiders) by an examiner with no direct ties to USCA or the HPP. Principle steps in the process included:

- USCA and USOC identified 32 key individuals to be interviewed
- The development and dissemination of a Discussion Points Memo
- Phone and face-to-face interviews conducted with all 32 individuals, most lasting 1-2 hours in length
- Compilation of interview notes reviewed and approved by interviewees
- Compilation and submission of the final report

All interviews were structured around getting feedback on the following five key issues identified by the USCA and USOC :

- Olympic Team Planning/Management/Support,
- Olympic Team Selection,
- USCA Leadership/Management,
- Olympic Winter Games: High Performance Plan,
- Olympic Winter Games: Games Management.

To promote candid and authentic feedback, individuals were assured of anonymity with regard to specific comments.

This report is the result of those interviews.

Before reading the Executive Summary, please note that my conclusions are predicated on the following:

- USCA wants to continue to be an internationally competitive organization. By this I mean not only does USCA wish to field gold-medal quality teams, but also that USCA itself wants to lead other nations in developing a systematic performance support program that provides athletes with the very best opportunities to succeed.
- In order to lead other nations, USCA will support a high-performance plan (HPP) that is “performance focused, athlete-centered, and coach driven”.
- USCA understands that the USOC has not randomly adopted the “performance focused, athlete-centered, and coach driven” slogan. The USOC has organized itself around this concept because it is the status of elite sport today. Elite sport competition is simply not what it was 20 years ago. To reach sustained elite success requires a structured and supportive training and competition plan, athletes willing to suspend having a “normal” life (at least for a while), and, of course, substantial financial support. Much research is being conducted on the nature of elite sports programs - their role in developing sports and athletes, and their impact on sports and communities. The notion of focusing on performance is at the heart of elite training:

“...art and science of high performance sport is getting the right ingredients together (the coach, the facilities, the training program, the competitions, etc.) in the right combination at the right time, and applied to the right group of athletes” (Abby Hoffman, quoted in Kihl, 2007)

The athlete-centered concept acknowledges that athletes are the ultimate stakeholder in the process:

“Those responsible for leadership and decision-making in sport must include the athlete in both defining the needs and goals and in determining how to meet them; i.e. the athlete should be the active subject in, not the object of, sporting programs” (Athletes CAN, 1994)

Coach-driven recognizes the invaluable role played by the expert coach. David Stotlar noted that “coaches are crucial to the development of athletes at every level” in his review of NGB elite athlete development programs. (Stotlar, 2006)

In almost all reports though, one conclusion continues to arise:

“Therefore, in international sporting competition, standing still could mean going backwards if those nations taking a strategic approach develop a competitive advantage over those nations that do not plan for success. It is clear that, for nations to be successful in the future, much more emphasis will need to be made on planning for success in a comprehensive manner” (De Bosscher, 2006).

One other note regarding the report: the terms “athlete”, “coach”, “staff”, “Board”, and “TATT” are used throughout to indicate the general consensus of feedback from those groups. However, at times, there was meaningful difference of opinion from individuals within the group. The full report delivered to the USCA gives voice to those non-majority views.

I want to thank everyone involved in this process for his or her thoughtfulness, candor, and sincerity.

## **PART 1: EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

After compiling and reviewing all the interview notes, there are two key issues that bridge all five topics. Before addressing each topic separately, these two issues are presented here.

1. The existing culture of the curling community is not compatible with a professionally created, implemented and managed high-performance plan.
  - Curling culture is fundamentally rooted in a team structure that is self-directed, self-governed and self-coached. For decades, teams have functioned as independent entities, sourcing support when needed but maintaining all decision-making within the team.
  - In line with this, prior to 2009, USCA did not have any single, focused, structured program to support its athletes/teams with systematically managed resources.
  - The 2010 HPP attempted to institute just such a structured plan, one similar to those used by many elite sports organizations today.
  - In my opinion, the USOC and USCA did not adequately understand or fully appreciate the deeply rooted nature of this culture. Neither organization anticipated the nature of the resistance that would emerge.
  - In addition, teams/athletes were not prepared to adapt their team culture to the requirements expected of them by the HPP.
  - It is my view that USCA and USOC need to re-evaluate the HPP in light of the cultural change that needs to take place within the organization. The HPP needs to integrate a comprehensive change management process that will address the key issues found in this report.
  - Furthermore, USCA and the curling community need to re-evaluate their commitment to elite sport competition. The organization is currently in the classic transition phase historically faced by many National Governing Bodies that find themselves “in the game” but not consistently on the podium. In order to attain consistent results in the international arena, USCA must institute a professionally created, managed and implemented HPP.

- It must be noted here that this is a choice that USCA makes. If USCA chooses to not invest in a such a HPP; if it decides that maintaining the current culture is more valuable than implementing such a plan, then the organization should ask itself several questions:
    - Does the lack of such a plan imperil USOC funding support?
    - Given that more international teams are moving in the direction of a structured support program, how will the USCA stay competitive in this environment?
    - What exactly can the organization do to support its teams if the components of a HPP are not acceptable to the team?
    - While it is always possible that another “ Team Fenson” may rise to the top, what will USCA do to create an environment of support and success for that team?
    - How will USCA respond to junior curlers who are familiar with HPPs and who will come to adult curling looking for such support?
  - This transition process is complex and difficult, yet several NGBs have successfully negotiated it. I strongly suggest that USCA work with USOC to initiate “consults” with those successful NGBs. The sharing of best practices and lessons learned can make this a less stressful venture.
2. A strong obstructive “us vs. them” mentality has developed between curlers and non-curlers.
- The USCA curling community currently appears to lack anyone with strong international high-performance program leadership or management skills. Until such experts can be developed, the curling community must look to other sports for the expertise it requires to create and lead a high-performance culture.
  - The “non-curlers” must recognize the considerable depth of sport-specific skills residing within this community. While non-curlers have expertise at managing a program, they lack on-ice knowledge, skills and abilities. In addition, the non-curlers need to acknowledge and tap into the current elite curler population for their best practices concerning team operations and logistics.
  - This impasse must be breached. It is self-defeating and potentially crippling. Only if both work together can they convince the USOC, curling sponsors (existing and potential), developing athletes and coaches, and the curling public that USCA is serious about elite sport leadership.

Presented below is the executive summary for each of the five topics included in the interview process. This summary contains the key learnings developed from reviewing all interview notes. Please refer to Part Two for a listing of common themes synthesized from the notes and to Part Three for a full compilation of all interview comments.

## **TOPIC ONE: OLYMPIC TEAM PLANNING/MANAGEMENT/SUPPORT**

### **KEY LEARNINGS:**

- Curling culture is fundamentally rooted in a team structure that is self-directed, self-governed and self-coached. This self-controlled team culture is incompatible with a program that is structured in the manner of current high-performance plans. Unless culture change is seriously addressed, the 2014 HPP will produce a repeat of the failures of 2010.
- USCA and USOC need to launch a period of culture change management during which emphasis is placed on educating the curling community on the status and structure of elite sport systems. As one Board member put it, the USCA needs to be “less parochial and more international” in its pursuit of competitive excellence.
- Adult curling culture is not accepting of “coach as coach”. Related to the culture change mentioned above, this concept requires a more planned integration approach than was implemented this year.
- The HPP needs to build in a system of checks and balances to ensure that all stakeholders have reasonable avenues to express grievances.
- Athletes are the ultimate stakeholder in the HPP; their involvement in the process is crucial to its acceptance.
- Although members of the 2006 Olympic Teams and athlete members of the EPC and Board were involved in or were presented with the HPP, Olympic team athletes felt left out of the process. The AAC needs to devise a more active plan to ensure dissemination of information that impacts currently competing athletes.
- Given the strong independent nature of curling teams, it was somewhat self-defeating of TATT to make the coach the only communication channel between the athletes and TATT. Athletes felt isolated from TATT members; they believed their concerns and issues were being misrepresented by their coaches.

- USCA and TATT need to open more channels of communication between the teams with which they are working and TATT members. While the Olympic coach ultimately leads the team, athletes should not fear communicating with TATT members.
- Athletes must accept responsibility for what commitment to HPP entails; they must be ready to travel, train, and compete in manner that indicates they are fully prepared to do whatever it takes to win.
- Athletes must also accept responsibility for communicating in a timely, relevant, and considerate manner.

### **BACKGROUND AND DISCUSSION POINTS:**

- The High-Performance Plan submitted to the USOC in May 2009 was the product of input from three primary resources: a survey conducted in early 2008 of athletes and coaches, a committee composed of 2006 Olympic team athletes, coaches, staff, and others, and a review process by the Elite Performance Committee of USCA's Board.
- The HPP was formulated late in the USOC's submission schedule. The former ADD, originally charged with the task of creating the HPP, was slow to respond to repeated requests for the Plan. USCA's choice to allow this procrastination resulted in a very tight logistical timeline for the HPP.
- Those interviewed almost uniformly agreed that the basic program of the HPP and the model of the TATT were well conceived, organized, and addressed the Critical Success Factors. In addition, everyone agreed that the individuals filling the various positions on TATT were skilled and knowledgeable in their respective fields.
- Athletes/teams were notified of the new HPP: first by letter in October 2008, prior to the Olympic Trials, then by full presentation in February 2009, immediately after Trials but before the World Championships.
- It was at this point that communication issues began. Athletes felt the presentation was negative in that TATT implied the teams were underdogs for the OWG. In addition, athletes perceived TATT as not appreciating the effort they made to win Trials nor did they grasp the importance of preparing for the World Championships. Athletes perceived the "tone" of communications from TATT to be condescending and negative.
- Those communication problems were exacerbated by the new role created for the Olympic coach. While TATT perceived the role of the coach to be the focal point for coordinating TATT resources for the team, athletes perceived the coach

to be a team manager and were frustrated by the single channel of communication.

- This problem would not be resolved to the athletes' satisfaction. In my view, this issue is a direct result of the disconnect between the HPP and the curling culture. Curlers had never viewed coaches as coaches. For USCA and TATT to implement such a major change with no planned integration plan was naïve.
- It is also my view that these Olympic athletes were showing signs of what Chris Green refers to as transitional culture shock (Green, 2005). In describing the problems that many athletes face as they transition from one performance culture to another, Green noted that athlete may express any/all of the following:
  - A sense of stress
  - Feelings of loss and deprivation in relation to old friends and status
  - Fears of rejection
  - Confusion about role identity and expectations
  - Disorientation engendered by unanticipated expectations in the new culture
  - Feeling of inadequacy

Green further states that "... procedures that forecast and intervene to prevent such failures can significantly reduce the problems of transition to the new group culture".

## **TOPIC TWO: OLYMPIC CURLING TEAM SELECTION PROCEDURES**

### **KEY LEARNINGS:**

- There is little consensus on the best system for choosing the Olympic Curling Team. Although most individuals favor the current playdown system, almost all believed it needed to be adapted in some manner.
- Given that the majority of athletes and teams currently competing exist and thrive in the current culture (see Topic One), if USCA does not change the team selection process, the failures of the 2010 HPP will be repeated. Whether or not the current playdown system identifies the best team is obviously debatable, however, it is highly unlikely that it will identify the team best suited to work with the HPP.
- It is interesting to note that there are two basic views on the nature of team dynamics which impact *when* a team is chosen. One holds that selecting the team a year out is plenty of time to prepare for the OWG. The other holds that it's better to choose the team as close as possible to the OWG in order to ensure that the team is still in its "honeymoon" phase. This latter view seems to me to be a somewhat cynical approach to creating an Olympic team – if the team dynamics are that fragile and delicate, how can they possibly withstand the pressures of competing at the OWG? The first view seems to me to be a bit naïve about the level of competition that exists at the OWG, to be continuously competitive at the OWG, teams really must train constantly.
- USCA needs to give strong consideration to separating its National Championships from its Olympic team selection process. This would create more opportunities for selecting a team that will "buy-in" to the HPP.
- USCA also needs to find a way to more widely disseminate the coaching and performance content of the HPP to a wider curling community. As several individuals noted, "better curlers equals better teams". This is a natural extension of the cultural change program that needs to be initiated.

### **BACKGROUND AND DISCUSSION POINTS:**

- While most individuals favor some sort of playdown system, all agreed that the system needed to be adapted to allow top teams to pre-qualify. It was apparent to most that forcing the designated Olympic teams to interrupt their Olympic preparation schedule in order to play in low-level qualifiers was counter-productive to the HPP.

- It is outside the scope of this review to analyze and determine a “better” team selection process. However, there are many individuals in the community with creative ideas regarding this process.

## **TOPIC THREE: USCA LEADERSHIP AND MANAGEMENT**

### **KEY LEARNINGS:**

- A strong obstructive “us vs. them” mentality has developed between curlers and non-curlers. The “curler vs. non-curler” fragmentation must be healed. It is a self-defeating and potentially crippling attitude for both sides. Both groups bring expertise to the discussion, both have important learnings to share and both need the other. A more collaborative and respectful process will benefit both athletes and the sport.
- USCA Board has hired professional staff to lead and implement a variety of programs. However, due to the historical “working” nature of this Board, Board members are still directly involved in day-to-day decision making. This runs counter to good business practices and will ultimately lead to the loss of (and inability to recruit) superior staff talent. That said, it is important to note that USCA does not now have the funds to hire enough staff to do everything that is needed. Some Board “work” is needed. For this to be successful, part of the change management process suggested above needs to include the development of a clear definition of the responsibilities of each, including a checks and balances system to ensure that both parties are living up to their respective roles.
- Athlete representation, while present, is minimal. More elite athlete involvement will help integrate athlete concerns into USCA decision-making.
- As expected, the USOC is seen as both a benevolent business associate as well as a somewhat obstructive “big-brother” - who happens to hold the purse-strings. This is, of course, no different than any other NGB. As long as USCA retains its NGB status, it will work with the USOC to ensure its athletes have a high-performance support program.

### **BACKGROUND AND DISCUSSION POINTS:**

- Too many Board members distrust most “non-curlers”; they view non-curlers as being incapable of understanding the fine points of curling and as being disrespectful of the history and culture of the sport.
- Too many of the non-curling staff and volunteers think most of the curlers on the Board lack understanding of the elite sports world and doubt their ability to support the full implementation of the HPP.

- USCA lacks a clear definition of the roles and responsibilities of Board members and staff members. The Board has historically been a “working” board in that many members perform tasks and duties normally reserved for paid staff. However, as the sport and the organization become more professional, it is problematic to have volunteers performing these duties. There is a strong sense of frustration and defensiveness from both groups. Conflict between professionally trained staff and experienced volunteers is destined to happen.

## **TOPIC FOUR: OLYMPIC WINTER GAMES PREPARATION: HIGH PERFORMANCE PROGRAM**

(Examiner's comment: This section is focused on the actual implementation of the program in the form of camps, training, competitions, and TATT support)

### **KEY LEARNINGS:**

- Athletes and TATT members alike were frustrated and exasperated by the actual execution of the plan but, naturally, for different reasons.
- TATT members grew frustrated with what they perceived to be athletes' non-compliance with a program to which they had, in fact, committed. TATT members all came from high-performance sports or organizations in which athletes devote most, if not all, of their efforts to training and performance. Their expectations of curling athletes were based on their previous experiences. In my view, TATT members lost sight of both the culture norm of curling athletes (the strong self-directed nature) and the fact that most curlers must hold full-time jobs and balance family commitments with curling.
- Athletes grew frustrated with what they perceived to be TATT's lack of appreciation for the skills they had, their lack of recognition of their non-curling commitments, and the on-going negative "tone" of communications (see Topic One above). Issues raised by athletes (inflexibility of the schedule and plan, the role of the coach, the lack of athlete control and input, etc.) are indicative of a cultural norm. This does not mean they are not good athletes or curlers; it does mean they are products of a culture in which they have thrived for years.
- The HPP did not include an accountability system to measure compliance and provide appropriate feedback or repercussions. This left both coaches with little authority to institute consequences for athlete actions. Accountability works both directions; athletes did not have a formal channel through which to communicate grievances. Coaches were the only identified communication channel; once athletes perceived coaches as part of the problem, they had no outlet to express this problem.
- This dissatisfaction and irritation was further charged by the role of the coach. Athletes' continued resistance to the "coach as coach" and TATT's continued support of this role was a conflict that was never fully resolved. In my view, this is directly related to the cultural issues addressed in Topic One. Until curling teams are accepting of the coach as coach/leader model, no amount of programming will change the level of resistance.
- In addition, the model called for the coach to be the communication liaison between TATT and athletes. From the athletes' perspective, this failed. With the women's team, a series of mis-communications involving the coach set up an

atmosphere of distrust. Both teams, the men's in particular, were struggling with the question of coach authority (this, again, in line with the teams' cultures). The HPP needs to build in some formal and informal channels of communication between all parties. One way to allay mistrust, fear, and defensiveness is to be sure that everyone talks to everyone.

- However, athletes must accept that some decisions will not be theirs to make. The HPP invests authority in the coach to make decisions in the best interest of the entire team. If the HPP is committed to, then athletes must be ready to give up some of the independence they have long held.
- It is in the roles of the coach and the psychologist that the clash between traditional curling culture and current high-performance culture is most evident. Once the teams perceived that the coach and the psychologist were TATT staff and were therefore responsible to the HPP and TATT, both teams detached from meaningful interaction with either.
- It was beyond the scope of this review to survey the junior curling program but interviewees all agreed that younger curlers will be more adaptive to the HPP model. Perhaps this is because many of them already function within the coach as coach model; perhaps it's because they are young enough to be rooted in the current culture.
- Local ice. It's difficult to think of any other sport in which top athletes do not have access to a playing/practice field during their primary training season. Sustained excellence includes sustained training. USCA and USOC must find a way to establish quality ice sheets in arenas accessible to athletes.

### **BACKGROUND AND DISCUSSION POINTS:**

- The overall consensus regarding the nature of the camps and training program was very positive. Although some athletes felt the camp content was too basic, most felt that it was useful and relevant. All agreed that the camps were well organized and well run.
- Pre-Trials communications regarding the extensive nature of the new HPP and the level of commitment required of the Olympic team was not effective. Athletes either ignored the communication or did not grasp its significance; athletes were surprised by the extent of the program once it started. In addition, by introducing the HPP at a Worlds preparation meeting, athletes felt TATT was minimizing the importance of the World Championships.
- Full athlete buy-in – athletes were not willing to simply acquiesce to the full demands of the HPP. Having been self-directed for years, both teams questioned

aspects of the HPP, the need to comply with all parts of the HPP, and TATT's commitment to an "athlete-centered" objective.

- Athletes initially chose their respective Olympic coaches with the understanding that Ed Lukowich would be available as a "primary" coach. It was not until the resignation of Lukowich that athletes began to realize the nature of the new role of the Olympic coach.
- Coaches continued to try to embed themselves as coaches and leaders but constant resistance from the athletes made it an exhausting and somewhat futile effort.
- All TATT members agreed that both coaches made substantial improvement in their coach skills and knowledge during the HPP year.
- Both athletes and TATT felt that the other was not held accountable for their actions. Athletes believed that TATT members would support the program/model at the expense of athlete performance. TATT members felt that athletes had committed to the program but were not compliant because they did not have to be.
- Both teams initially appreciated the mental training skills offered but both became distrustful of the psychologist once they perceived him to be a TATT member first, team psychologist second.

## **TOPIC FIVE: OLYMPIC WINTER GAMES: GAMES MANAGEMENT**

### **KEY LEARNINGS:**

- Teams lost unity/cohesion. In spite of both teams believing they could shut out distractions by pulling into themselves, neither team was successful in doing so.
- The year-long power struggle between the men's coach and the team skip came to a head during the OWG. Both the skip and the coach believed that the issues should have been resolved months before, with different outcomes, of course.
- The year-long communication problems between the women's coach and the team caused further fracturing of the team, contributing to the loss of confidence in the skip.
- In spite of TATT's and the teams' best attempts to think positively, the problems, issues, and frustrations of the previous year were not going to disappear at the OWG. If anything, they would become more pronounced as the teams faced the pressure and stresses of being in a global arena.
- Neither USCA nor TATT planned for any post-Games support. In light of the stressful past year, this was a major oversight that needs to be rectified.

### **BACKGROUND AND DISCUSSION POINTS:**

- Although neither team performed to their standards or expectations, both teams entered OWG competition feeling they had a substantial chance of being on the podium at the OWG.
- To his or her credit, every athlete interviewed refused to accept any excuse for his or her performance.
- Athletes from both teams noted that individual team members were holding discussions with each other, and sometime with the coach, that did not involve the rest of the team.
- Distractions were not shut out by either team as individuals continued to interact with family, work, online social networks, and the media.
- Logistics, team processing, transportation and accommodations were excellent.

## **CONCLUSIONS:**

While this report has revealed that the execution of the HPP has been complicated, distracting, and even problematic, it is my opinion that by giving priority to the following actions, the organization can begin laying the foundation for a successful 2014.

- The principals in the organization (chief staff, executive committee members, AAC) must have honest and open discussions about the present and the future of elite curling in the U.S. The discussions must produce a unified, cohesive, and collaborative strategy for international success.
- USCA must institute a culture change management process to educate, inform, and convince the U.S. curling community that a structured high-performance plan presents the best opportunity for international curling success.
- Part of that culture change process needs to include the development of an Olympic team selection process that produces teams that are more accepting of the HPP model. This will most likely entail the separation of National Championships from Olympic Trials.
- A comprehensive coach development program needs to be implemented as soon as possible. Athletes will not accept “coach-driven” until coaches are perceived as experts and leaders.
- The HPP needs to be adapted to include 1) a more open communication flow between TATT and athletes, and 2) a post-Games support and debriefing plan.