

St. Albert Curling Club sweeps to 75th anniversary



KEVIN MA/St. Albert Gazette

▲ St. Albert Curling Club members Jackie Rae Greening (left) and Jamie Gansauge show off some of the trophies that will be awarded during the club's 75th anniversary bonspiel this February. Greening is holding the "Skunk" trophy, awarded to the first team to be eliminated from the tournament.

► Some aspects of curling have changed considerably in the last 75 years. Shown here is a 1940s-era rock next to one of the club's modern ones, and a 1950s-era corn broom next to a modern flat one.

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Curling was a chilly experience in St. Albert back in the 1950s, said Morinville resident and Canadian Curling Hall of Fame member Wally Ursuliak. Back then, you played using corn brooms in a ramshackle rink built with un-insulated planks.

"You could see outside through the cracks" in the walls, Ursuliak said, and there was no natural gas heating — you had to wear thick sweaters to ward off the chill.

Ursuliak, 94, is one of the many Canadian curling legends coming to St. Albert this February to celebrate the St. Albert Curling Club's 75th anniversary.

The club was just a little two-sheet, natural ice rink kitty-corner from the Bruin Inn back then, said Jackie Rae Greening, chair of the club's 75th anniversary committee and Alberta Sports Hall of Fame member.

"Here we are, 75 years later, and we're still going strong!"

The club is hosting an open bonspiel from Feb. 1 to 3 to mark this occasion, Greening said. Some 32 teams will compete for old-school prizes such as pickle dishes and transistor radios. Most will want to avoid the skunk-shaped "Skunk" trophy, which will go to the first team eliminated from the tournament.

Greening said many famous club members are expected to compete in the bonspiel, including Olympic gold medallist Marc Kennedy. Ceremonies on Feb. 1 and 2 will recognize the club's history and its

many champions. Feb. 3 will feature the championship finals plus dinner and a dance.

Greening encouraged everyone to come to the club and take part in the festivities.

"Everyone is welcome. It's going to be a party!"

The first rink

St. Albert's first curling rink was built in 1949 across the street from the Bruin Inn on St. Anne St., *A Bridge Over Time* reports.

The rink was the initiative of St. Albert Curling Club founders Frank Ball, Bert Sumner, and Bruin Inn owner Stan Hauptman, St. Albert Curling Club historian David B. Fraser writes. Built by Frank Hesse and volunteers, the rink featured two sheets of natural ice with a walkway in between and two strings of about eight 100 W incandescent bulbs for light (one string per sheet). Ursuliak said the rink had a wood stove for heat.

The *Gazette's* archives report that the rink officially opened on Dec. 26, 1949, with the first mixed bonspiel commencing at 1 p.m. the next day. It was likely an interesting event, as hardly anyone knew how to curl. Membership fees were \$10 for men and \$6 for women back then — today, a one-year membership at the club costs about \$450.

Most players brought their own curling rocks in those early days, with many leaving them at the rink for others to use, Fraser writes. Many would try to get to the rink early to use Frank Ball's set, as they were bigger and presumably more



effective than the others. Men wore thick sweaters, while women wore skirts and winter (sometimes fur) coats. Most curled in regular shoes, sometimes augmented with slip-on sliders.

Curlers used wide straw brooms to sweep in the early 1950s, swapping them for narrower "corn" brooms toward the 1960s, Fraser writes. These gave way to synthetic fibres and, by the 1980s, today's flat-headed brooms.

Corn brooms completely change the game when it comes to curling, as they litter the ice with agricultural shrapnel that sends rocks skittering astray, Greening said. A dedicated curler might chew through 50 brooms in a season.

The first rink's natural ice was subject to seasonal thaws as it was not refrigerated, Fraser writes. Curlers would find themselves "pushing water" whenever the ice melted, and would sometimes play at three in the morning to ensure the ice was hard enough for a game.

The club's expansion led it to build a six-sheet artificial ice rink in 1958 at the club's current location on Tache St.,

A Bridge Over Time notes. This landed the club in serious financial trouble, as a \$125,000 loan it planned to use to pay for the rink fell through. St. Albert residents Ronald Harvey (namesake of Ronald Harvey Elementary), Fred Laird, and Bill Penrose bailed the club out by borrowing the necessary \$100,000, becoming the club's "Bankruptcy Trustees."

History in the making

The club became home to a long list of curling champions, including world champion Scott Pfeifer, Canadian champion Cathy King, and Olympic gold medallist Marc Kennedy.

The most legendary of these champions was Hector "Hec" Gervais, a St. Albert potato farmer who was one of the club's ice-makers in the early 1950s and went on to win both the Brier and the world championships in 1961. One 1957 news article described him as a "Mastodontic" 6'3"; 268-pound man "with the strength of a blacksmith, the strategic attitude of an air force commander, and the delicate rock-laying touch of an expert pickpocket."



CHESTER PERREAULT/Photo

This SUV swerved off the road and crashed through the wall of the St. Albert Curling Club on Sept. 3, 2009. The driver was taken to hospital.

Most knew Gervais as “The Friendly Giant” due to his jovial off-ice attitude, Greening said.

“He was only friendly off the ice,” she noted — on ice, he was a ferocious opponent, always thinking four or five moves ahead.

“He was scary to play against!” Greening said.

Gervais was inducted into the Alberta Sports Hall of Fame in 1991. The St. Albert Curling Club’s upstairs lounge is named the Friendly Giant Lounge in his honour.

The St. Albert club made history by helping to introduce curling to Japan.

Ursuliak said the governor of Hokkaido, Naohiro Dogakinai, was visiting Edmonton in 1979 and wanted to see curling. The provincial government called in Ursuliak, who took the governor to see women’s curling at the St. Albert club. Impressed, the governor asked the province to send Ursuliak to Japan as the nation’s first curling instructor.

“I thought it would be just a one-year deal, but it ended up being five or six years,” Ursuliak said.

Ursuliak’s efforts caused curling to take off in Japan and spread throughout the region. The Japanese government awarded him the prestigious Order of the Rising Sun, Gold and Silver Rays medal in 2017 for his efforts.

The St. Albert club made history again in 2009 when its rink got into a car accident.

On Sept. 3, 2009, a SUV travelling south on Sir Winston Churchill Ave. collided with another vehicle, veered off the road, and smashed through a bus bench, a tree, and the south side of the St. Albert Curling Club rink, the *Gazette’s* archives report. The car’s front end ended up several feet inside the facility.

“I came out and (saw) this car sitting on top of our (curling) rocks,” ice technician Chester Perreault told the *Gazette* at the time.

The driver was taken to hospital, and club members patched the hole in the wall.

Sweeping to the future

The curling club building went through several rounds of renovations in 1997, 2005, and 2008, *A Bridge Over Time* reports. 2011 saw the club’s front end rebuilt and the Wall of Fame opened on the second floor.

Today, the club is still going strong with some 900 members and one of the biggest stick-curling leagues in the nation, said president Jamie Gansauge. Greening credited the club’s longevity to its dedicated volunteers.

Greening was optimistic about the future of curling in St. Albert, as it was an easy, inexpensive sport open to anyone from young kids to nonagenarians.

“If we’re doing it right, I think people will still be throwing rocks in 75 years.”

Visit stalbertcurling.com for details on the 75th anniversary. ■



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St. Albert Gazette

St. Albert Curling Club president Jamie Gansauge shows off some of the memorabilia donated to the club by its many provincial, national, and world champions.

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