**Cultural Plunge**

**Curling**

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**Why Curling and personal experience**

It was 20 years ago. I was invited for a weekend to Champery, in the Swiss Alps, for a two days seminar for the managers of the organization I was working at every summer of my studying days. This was the annual debriefing event, where all the material and thoughts we would have collected a couple of months before in the heat of a summer full of music and concerts – it was a Music Festival Organization – would be shared in order to improve next Festival’s edition. Spending the weekend between formal meetings, work sessions and evening diners, the team building activity chosen that winter was curling. I am from Chile and grew up in Switzerland, where on TV I would watch all type of winter sports – as Alpine countries do - and if skiing was culturally foreign to my Chilean identity, things like large hill jump or bobsleigh were fascinating and harder to understand. Curling was very seldom on screen apart from World Championships, the Swiss team always being a top nation in it, and it made hardly sense to me. I grew up learning and practicing ski, snowboard, ice-skating and sledding, but curling still was an unidentified object in my winter sports landscape and experience.

So that very same weekend in the Alpine resort, my first encounter with curling left me impressed by what that game provided as possible fun. Not having to wear a protective or specific outfit was a surprise, the second to have to change shoes to go on the ice, and having one slippery sole on one foot and a grasping one on the other. As well, the social aspect of it made a lot of sense once we started playing and, being in my young adult days, I even remember liking the competitiveness of the last stone, which proudly gave us the victory after a tight game.

**Curing in a few words**

Curling has a long history and the first evidences and records of the game being played go back to 1541 somewhere in Paisley Abbey in Scotland. It was defined as a challenge between a monk and a relative about throwing stones across the ice. By the end of the 17th Century, the game had become very popular in winter months and was described as a chief winter amusement between different parishes; a healthful, innocent with no harm amusement. (Scottish Curling Federation, 2020). In 1830 the creation of a national club was established in order to regulate the game and in 1838 it took the name of The Royal Caledonian Curling Club. Originally the game was played on frozen lochs or ponds, and in 1907 the first rink was created in Scotland and used for curling too.

The sport came to North America (Canada and USA) with the Scottish immigrants by the mid 18th century. The first club was created in Montreal, Canada, in 1807, and in the USA by 1855 New York, Detroit, Milwaukee and Portage, Wis., had their clubs too. In the rest of Europe most of the clubs developed in the 20th century (Team USA, 2020., Curling Canada 2020). Curling was an Olympic sport in the 1924 first Winter Olympic games, then dropped and listed again as a demonstration sport between 1936 and 1992; in 1988 and 1992 it held both men and women competition. Finally, in 1998 it officially became an Olympic sport and listed for medal winning (IOC, 2020).

The game is made up to 8 ends or innings and is played in a 2 hours schedule. Olympic regulations have 10 ends and a 2.5 hours schedule. An end is completed when both teams (4 players per team having 2 stones each) have played the 16 stones. As mentioned, teams are made of 4 participants, having distinctive roles: the lead, the second, the third or vice and finally the skip who is the captain and usually defines the strategy. Similar to Boccia or French Petanque , the goal is to set as many stones as close as possible to the center of the “house” , a large bulls eye drawn on the ice (close to an archery target paint). The team that score lasts delivers the first stone in the next end, and gives their opponent the advantage of the last stone – called hammer – in that same end (Team USA, 2020). Each stone is made of granite (from Scotland and Wales) and weights approximately 42lbs. Smaller stones are available for youth curlers. Other parts of equipment include brooms (with flat brush heads), used for sweeping the ice and changing the speed and trajectories of the stones, a different set of shoe soles for sliding and gripping. Only warm clothes are required, the game being played on 45 meters long x 5 meters wide ice sheets (indoors or outdoors). The game being on a schedule there is a 38 minutes allowance of so called Thinking Time on the 10 ends format and 30 minutes on the 8 ends format, this giving curling the nickname of “Chess on Ice”(World Curling Federation, 2020). The game can as well be played in Women’s, Men’s Mixed doubles and mixed Wheelchair teams. But the most important is probably lies in its spirit: “Curlers play to win but never to humble their opponents. A true curler would prefer to lose rather than win unfairly ... while the main object of the game is to determine the relative skill of the players, the spirit of the game demands good sportsmanship, kindly feeling, and honorable conduct “ (The spirit of Curling, 16th century. ; Team USA, 2020). Therefore it is known to be one of the most fair play and respectful sport, practiced essentially for the social aspect of it, with no restriction of age or gender.

**Sociological perspective**

Curling is a sport with European origins that got exported through his immigrants and tourists around the globe, as a remembrance of the left home country culture or a way for settlers to recreate a new home away from home. It flourished in the former northern and colder lands that were part at some point of time of the Great British Empire or were a dominion. In other cases, like in the Alps, the tourism industry for mountaineering that was enhanced by the wealthy British tourists in the 18th and 19th century enabled the development of curling in places like Switzerland (Curling Club Fribourg, 2017), the locals answering with an offer to a demand in exchange of monetary compensation. The sport is deeply rooted into traditions and the idea of being a sport accessible to anyone. However it is interesting to realize that if it did maintain traditions that helped communities to gather and overcome the acculturation to new continents (Coakley, 2016), it created as well self-reflective communities that reinforced their European cultural inheritance, predominately white and paternalistic, with an idea of power linked to royalty due to the very same historical development of curling in the United Kingdom. If we take the example of Canada, where that sport is officially organized since the early 1800s, we could assume that the connection with royalty and white predominant model should have been diluted by now, thanks to the globalization and other reasons such as new immigrants and local native populations cultures. In 2011, diversity was still a major issue in the curling realm in Canada, despite the game being an Olympic sport since more than 10 years; the game was an example of Canadian diversity, with rural and urban, professionals and laborers, young and old , men and women with the only defect to all be Caucasian (Weeks, 2011). No minorities were visible and the plan by then, highlighted by the Canadian Curling Association’s Director of Curling Development was to inspire new comers by making the game fun, affordable and family friendly, with a background of changes in Canada’s demographics including larger minorities and a decrease of the Caucasian majority, traditionally the larger part of the curling players.

Nine years later, and after a major change in international Curling identity as a sport, the same question of inclusion was asked to Rayad Husain, Toronto native with Guyanese origins that was part of the 2009 article as one of the few visible minority member playing the game. To his perspective, and having represented Guyana 2 years before at the 2018 Winter Olympics, nothing had really changed in Canada, despite the efforts of the new Curling Canada CEO, Katherine Henderson (Heroux, 2020). Her early efforts in terms of fixing inequalities were initially focused on gender gap and successfully established parity in prize money for both male and female national champions curlers in Canada in 2019. However the plan regarding minority inclusion still is seen through the demographic lens of loss of white population and traditional viewers of the sport and the need to invite and welcome the immigrant audience. Work in Schools by introducing kids from all socio-cultural backgrounds is one of the ways the federation hopes for connecting with immigrants. However the sport itself is still deeply representing Victorian values and Scottish paraphernalia, elements very foreign and often unattractive to immigrants or excluding for local native communities (The Game of Stones, 2020). In his thesis, Richard Norman explains all these different facets that are the essence of curling in Canada, from the immigration perspective to the gender or traditionalist purposes of the game. He highlights as well the fact that the game changed and became professionalized, therefore power, political and financial stakes becoming predominant (Norman, 2020).

And this is another interesting sociological aspect of the game; since it became an Olympic sport (for the contemporary games) in 1998, this status change brought an unexpected revolution of the game and its approach. Tradition, fair play, social predominant purpose of gentleman having a nice time together is what allowed the game to be played by all different classes of ages since the creation of the sport. The professionalization of the sport in the late 90s, political times where neoliberal model established itself globally as the dominant model with its inherent idea of performance, changed curlers into athletes (Allain, 2020). As a first reaction, the elder participants continuing in privileging good moral conduct, sociability and fair play against the rising ageism that entered their curling realm too. Rationalization of the sport, like any other, created new training programs for now so called curling athletes (not curlers any more) and it brought both political and commercial interest from investors and sponsors. For a sport that is regularly only played by 4,8% of the Canadian population, and less in the USA, one of the most exciting moment of the 2018 Winter Games for the Team USA was the Gold Medal in men’s double (Darby, 2018), where cardio trained, optimal muscle mass percent athletes in tight fashion cut outfits won the first ever title for USA. The image of gold on well trained performing and mentally prepared athletes became the new face of curling for North America (Bergland, 2018). A game on the change, reinventing itself by temporary excluding more than before or just the natural flattening of a system, to assesses the inventory of its cultural pieces before remodeling it to a new reality?

**Value of the experience for a Coach / Mental Preparation Specialist**

This deep dive into curling was an exciting journey involving what are some of the most important elements that create and define a sport as a cultural object or site. The legacy that lies in the traditions, for good and bad, are a deep and strong force of conformity that athletes very often unconsciously embrace and can be the source of their inability to perform or to reach the freedom needed to embrace creativity and fun. Being myself an immigrant and having lived on many countries and continents, I am always curious on how much reverence one could have, generation after generation, to traditions and what it takes mentally to overcome the fear of betrayal, that often is more of a self-talk rather than a reality. As well the acculturation that immigrant athletes population has to go through is sometimes facilitated when a sport has a long historical inheritance tempered by the modernity of its practice. I believe it is in the changes of Times that sports are being revolutionized and athletes have access to more training facilities and techniques for better performances. However this is only one part of the sport and at the local grassroots level it should be inclusive and source of fun for an entire community. And as diversity is everywhere, so are the communities. And seeing the sports evolution as a market where demographics are numbers is avowal of wanting a system to stay the same and just replace the missing pieces. Does it bring changes? Yes over the long run, but everything is seen as an outcome. I prefer the idea of actively reinventing those sites in a common effort, as a continuous process.

So that very same evening, 20 years ago, when I threw that last stone, and being the only member of an ethnic minority on the ice, I remember thinking that we were all together cheering and hoping for the stone to be successful, both teams equally enthusiastic as it meant memories and legends to be created, altogether, around a good and well deserved beer.**References**

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