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PRESENTS THE COACHING SERIES...

## **“A PANE IN THE GLASS”**

### **It Takes a Big Man**

By Bill Tschirhart.

We hear it all the time. "There's no "I" in Team." But never was it more evident than in 1994 at the Ontario Junior Mixed Curling Championships in Fergus, ON. The banner that hangs in the curling lounge at the Westmount Golf and Country in Kitchener lists the provincial champions for that year from the University of Waterloo as Tony Rowlandson (skip), Kate McKellar (third), Sean Follis (second), Kim Shortt (lead) and Bill Tschirhart (coach). But how this championship was won proved to me why scholastic athletes really are exceptional for much more than their athletic abilities.

Our curling season at the University of Waterloo (UW) was rolling along smoothly. I coached both the men and women's varsity teams at that institution in the heart of south-western Ontario. Noted for its graduates in the fields of mathematics, science and engineering, dedicated young scholars from across the province of Ontario and from points all over the globe flocked to its modern, glass and steel buildings for an unparalleled education in these fields. During moments of delirium, I actually tried to convince myself that perhaps at least some of these students with a curling background came to UW in hopes of securing a spot on the varsity team and thus gaining from my coaching expertise. I doubt that was ever the case.

Competitive curling in the province of Ontario follows a very traditional path. Suffice to say that in Canada's most populous province, that journey makes more than a few stops. A team must initially win the right to represent its curling club in which it plays. More than one defending provincial or national champion has failed "to get out of the club" the season following its triumph. The team then must prevail at zone and regional competitions before moving on to provincials.

In our case, we didn't play out of a club although we were blessed with a fine practice facility, The Westmount Golf & Country Club. The members of this private club were most accommodating to our varsity curling programme but we, of course, had no right to represent it in a provincial competition.

But that's when it happened. By thumbing through the Ontario Curling Association rule book we discovered that a junior mixed team could represent "... its club or scholastic institution". The words "scholastic institution " jumped off the page.

Hmmm, "The University of Waterloo, that's a scholastic institution. We qualify!

The next step was to assemble a team. For me, that meant selecting two members (and only two) from each of my varsity teams. I was reasonably certain that two from each team would be interested but something of a chill came over me when I wondered exactly what I might do if more than two expressed an interest. Luckily, primarily due to the fact that the competition was late in both the curling season and the academic year, only Kim, Sean, Kate & Tony felt that they could afford the time should the newly-formed team get through to the provincial final.

It is the tradition in "mixed curling" that the two female athletes play lead and third with the males assuming the roles of second and the prestigious skip position, and that's the way we lined up going into the first step, the zone competition.

As the teams arrived, there were more than a few raised eyebrows when the words UNIVERSITY OF WATERLOO appeared on the draw sheet among the names of the club teams.

Experience and talent was evident early. The UW squad played very well and on successive weekends in first zone then regional events, qualified for the eight team provincial play down

By the time we gathered at the four sheet, historic Fergus Curling Club, news of the maverick foursome from "that university in Waterloo" had preceded us.

The format for provincial play in the province of Ontario is rather uncomplicated. It's a seven game, round robin. Finish first, and the much coveted, beautifully embroidered O.C.A. banner and the provincial championship it symbolizes are yours.

For as well as we played at zones and regionals, we played that poorly in our first two games in Fergus. As a result with only five games to play, we were stuck in the "starting gate" at 0-2. We managed to squeeze out victories in games three and four to even our record at 2-2 but we knew we weren't hitting on all cylinders.

Our accommodation for the event was in the nearby City of Guelph and that's where we retreated to "stop the bleeding".

This is when a coach is called upon to be an amateur sports psychologist by balancing honesty with good measures of sensitivity and psychology. I realized that at that particular moment, all those commodities were in short supply. It didn't help to gaze around the uncomfortably silent room to see four young, frustrated athletes who looked as though someone had shot their dog. Excuse the cliché but the silence really was deafening.

Finally, the silence was broken by words that gave us all a jolt. They were spoken by our friendly giant of a skip, Tony and they are words that will ring in this coach's ears forever. "I think Kate should skip!"

Before the impact of the words had a chance to sink in, Kate confidently looked around the room and said, "OK"! This also meant a change with the remaining two players because if Kate assumed the role of skip, the rules of mixed curling stipulate that the positions must alternate genders. This suggestion meant that Kim was now going to play second and Sean would play the first two stones of each end for us at the lead position. But wait, there was another interesting situation, or shall I say opportunity that presented itself. A mad dash for the rule book confirmed our speculation. Even in mixed play, any member of the team could hold the brush for the skip when he (or she in our case) played his/her stones. That meant that when Kate played her critical stones, we could use Kim in the house and have both males brushing her stones. Normally when the male skip became the shooter, the female lead and male second did the brushing. We saw this quite legal wrinkle as a great advantage for us.

The next morning, the downcast looks of the night before were transformed into a confidence that I could never have developed with my best "locker room speech". With little or no notice, as the game was about to begin, Kate calmly assumed her skip's position in the house and called the first shot. The same interested eyes who noticed the "school team" on the leader board in last place were now even wider when witnessing this bold change of team configuration.

Everyone on the team dug a little deeper and found a renewed enthusiasm. Games five & six of the round robin were in the "win column".. With one game to play, the UW Warriors were tied atop the leader board at 4-2 with a very experienced club team from Bradford Ontario skipped by a high profile male athlete. It was a winner-take-all battle as the victorious team in this last game would be declared champion. I usually can recall most of the shots of important games but in this case there was only one, and it was the last shot delivered by Kate. In the parlance of curling it was just an "open hit". Remove the opposition stone and keep the shooter in the house and the title would be ours. There was no hesitation. It was a clean nose hit and for the first time in the history of mixed curling in the province of Ontario, the Jr. Mixed Championship was won by a team with a female skip!

If you go to the curling lounge at The Westmount Golf and Country Club, that provincial banner hangs on the east wall. It lists the team in the traditional order with Tony as skip. He deserves that honour for his unselfish act of putting the team above his own ego. That takes a truly big man.

My name is listed last as coach and I'm proud to have my name listed with four great, scholastic athletes who taught me much more than I ever could them! I often wonder if I could do what Tony did in a similar circumstance.

Could you?

AUTHOR'S NOTE: I recently received email from Tony. Kate alerted him to the story you have just read. I must confess, I didn't tell the four athletes that I was recounting their victory and how it was achieved. They probably would have asked me not to as it would have drawn too much attention to them. So, I stuck to my usual plan of asking for forgiveness rather than permission. Kim, Sean, Kate and Tony not only stay in touch but they play together on occasion according to Tony's email. That's what's so great about this sport. It's not the victories or the defeats. It's the life-long friendships you make!

Enjoy working with your athletes and I'll see you soon behind "A Pane in the Glass"!