

Curling and community in rural Canada

- ***What we know***

- More than 729 000 Canadians curl every year (2.2% of population)*
- There are approximately 1900 clubs in Canada*
- More than 28% of curlers live in communities with fewer than 10 000 people*
- Canadians dominate competitive curling
- Curling is part of Canadian identity

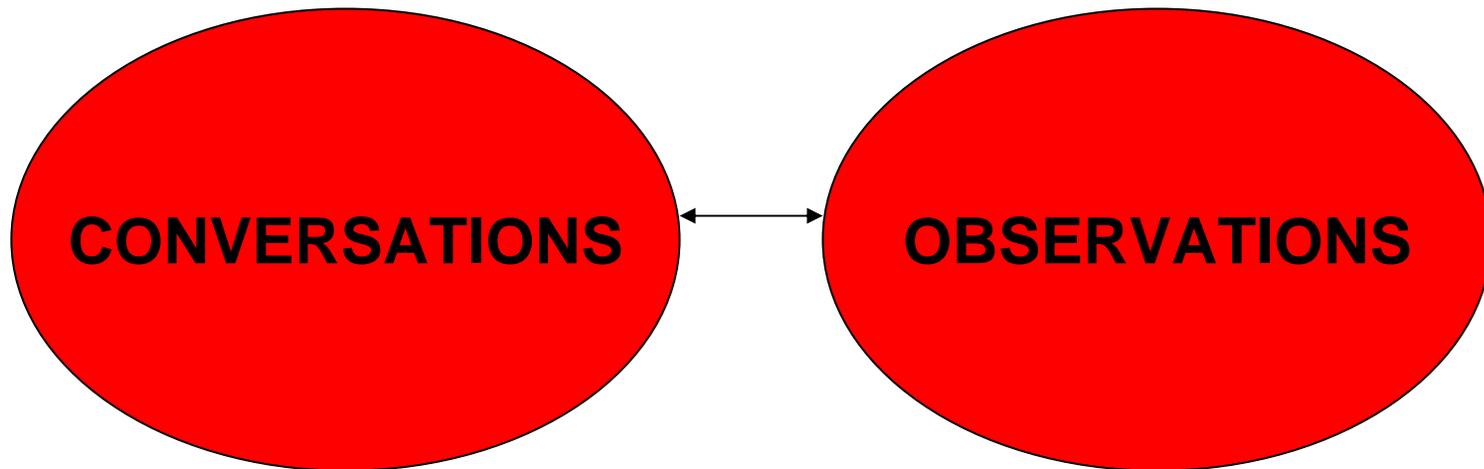
*Gebhardt & Potwarka, 2009; CCA, 2008

- ***What we don't know***

- **Why do people curl?**
- **What challenges are clubs facing?**
- **How can we get more people to participate?**

The research

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 - More than 600 hours (“bonspiel weekends”)
 - 22 clubs
 - Ethnography



The research

- **Analysis**
 - field notes, video footage and photos
- **Confirmation**
 - Shared results during conversations
 - looking for validation and new insights
 - Shared publications, photos and other outputs
 - 2 “research update” newsletters

FINDINGS: People curl because curling clubs are...

- Sources of regular physical activity and life-long social connections
- Part of community identity
- Sites of pride, history, commitment and ownership
- Founded upon volunteerism
- Platforms for valued family time and activity
- '*A gathering place*' for the community

Why do people try curling?

While previous exposure to curling seems to have an influence for some participants, **social connections are key influences.**

– *“because someone asked me to curl”*

- Family
- Friends
- Co-workers
 - Someone known through other networks (e.g., Church)
- A change (e.g., new community, marriage, children, empty-nest, family death, divorce) brought a desire for a new activity
- Learned in school

Why do curlers *join (and remain)* members of clubs?

Successful clubs encourage members to play a valued role

- Contributing to health and well-being
 - “*This club is a network of friends and family*”
- Enjoying physical activity (at varying levels)
 - “*it’s a good workout, especially if you sweep*”
- Grasping opportunities to volunteer/be a leader
 - “*You just jump in and start working together*”
- Fostering a sense of ownership in the club
 - Tinkering and fixing “*our club*” over time
- Engaging in community
 - “*we like to come out of the woods and see what’s going on*”

What challenges face the clubs?

- **Grave economic challenges**

“we just lurch from year to year hoping something serious doesn’t happen”

- Lack of stable economic support to keep the clubs alive
- Sense of a growing divide between elite/professional and amateur curling (competitive vs. social curlers)
 - *“elite play hurts us because social curlers feel left out and they are our bread and butter”*
- Volunteer/member burn out
 - *“the same people have to do everything”*
- Issues of diversity and access
 - *“we know we’re too white and too old”*

How are clubs addressing challenges?

Successful clubs are **adapting for accessibility**

- Stick curling, wheelchair curling

- Maintaining affordability
- Becoming a 'life-long sport'
 - From 'Little Rocks' to masters' championships
- Developing coaching and leadership capacity
- Changing to meet modern lifestyles
 - Flexible memberships and league play, shorter bonspiels
- Promoting social benefits of club membership
 - From closed, elite, white male spaces to social and diverse **community places**
 - » "*Curling centres*"

Implications for policymakers: Re-connecting to the vision

- *The **Vision** of the Canadian Sport Policy is to have, by 2012 a dynamic and leading-edge sport environment that enables all Canadians to experience and enjoy involvement in sport to the extent of their abilities and interests and, for increasing numbers, to perform consistently and successfully at the highest competitive levels.*

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The vision: A new era of curling

- Curling clubs become **centres** for sport and community
 - YOUTH DEVELOPMENT:
 - Teaching all kids to curl in club-supported school programs
 - Building **equitable** capacity for nurturing young athletes and future champions
 - FAMILY SUPPORT:
 - Focusing on becoming family-friendly
 - ADULTS:
 - Creating flexible memberships
 - SENIORS & PEOPLE WITH CHALLENGES:
 - Adapting to become accessible to all abilities
 - NON-TRADITIONAL CURLERS:
 - Accepting and supporting diversity and difference

Implications for policymakers: 3 steps to reaching the vision

Local clubs need investment to help build capacity to reach out to (and retain) new members

1. Support curling like all sport and recreation
2. Increase exposure to curling by implementing programs in schools across Canada
3. Provide development funds **both** to national or provincial curling organisations and to local clubs (they know what they need).

The future: Next steps and new projects

- **Toronto Curling Association study (2009)**
 - Getting a picture of issues of diversity in urban clubs
- **Women, health and rural curling clubs (2010 – 2012)**
 - SSHRC/Sport Canada project
- **Future research opportunities**
 - Emphasizing the social benefits of sport as means to enhance participation