



A CLUB NOBODY WANTED

A New History of the Chicago Curling Club, Part One

The winter of 1947-48 was colder than usual, but the curling members of the Indian Hill Country Club weren't complaining. On the contrary, they were thrilled by the seven extra days of freezing temperatures. It was "the first time the weather was suitable for curling in the month of November," and the lingering frost allowed them to play into early spring. The curlers took full advantage. Enthusiasm for the sport was booming and not only did they have a record number of male members on the ice that season, but "the women, too, had a big year and some of the teenagers were out several times."

Yet when the thaw came, the club had a new problem: too many members and not enough ice. Indian Hill was not alone. The other country club curling rinks on the North Shore also had more curlers than they could handle.

Curling found a permanent home in Chicago in the late 1930s. Like a bulldog with a bone, the Great Depression had sunk its teeth into the world economy. The spectre of fascism loomed in Europe, and menaced Africa, Asia, and other outposts of the old empires. The war in Spain had galvanized the Left. The New Deal re-envisioned American political and social philosophy. In sports, it was the era of Jesse Owens, Joe Louis, Lou Gehrig, Sonja Heni, and Babe Dedrikson. Life was uncertain for all Americans, and people needed a diversion – especially in the cold, dark months of winter. Indian Hill was the first club to take up the roaring game, in 1936. By 1940, the Skokie, Exmoor, Glenview, and Oak Park clubs all featured curling on their winter calendars.

Too good to keep to ourselves

After the war, the sport saw another upsurge of interest accompanied, perhaps, by the post-war boom in suburban living. The North Shore clubs had so many people involved in curling that their most "ardent" members concocted a plan to interest other local country clubs in the sport. "All were in agreement that the sport was too good to keep to ourselves; that other clubs without any major winter activity should be invited to join the fraternity." They gave their pitch over a dinner at the Country Fare restaurant at the corner of Skokie and Dundee, and invited North Shore, Saddle and Cycle, and other private clubs with like-minded members. "A Plan to Interest More Clubs in Curling" was only the opening salvo in the campaign to expand the sport in Chicago – the group of organizers formed the core of what would become the Chicago District Curling Association.

More ice was only one issue for the group, however. Curling outdoors presented its own set of challenges. As the author of the Indian Hill newsletter assured its members in 1948,

A new lighting system, far better than the old one, is being installed on each side of the three sheets of ice. In addition to giving brilliant uniform light, the new system will eliminate those annoying little bumps which formerly appeared on the center ice below the old hanging lights. New canvas wind-breaks are being erected. New techniques used in the preparation of the foundations should give us three perfect sheets of ice.

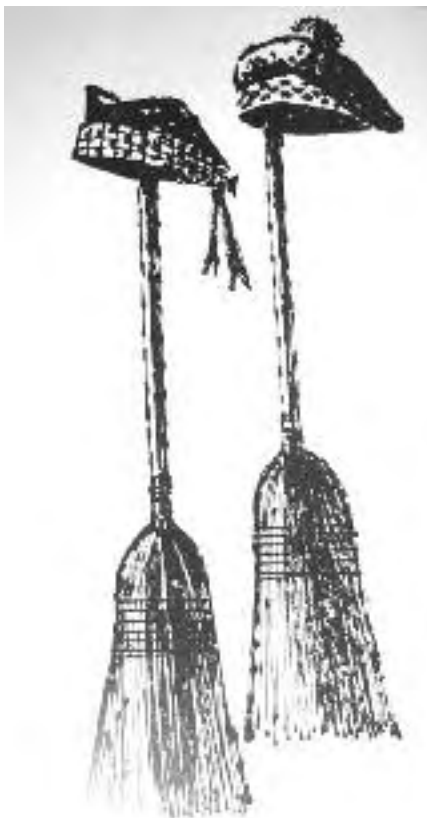
In addition, snow, thaws, and subzero temperatures could make outdoor curling uncomfortable and, in extreme conditions, impossible.

Artificial ice would solve these problems, but not one of the clubs was yet willing to commit the finances to install it in their own facilities. Even at Indian Hill, money for the improvements only went so far, and the responsibility for revamping the warming hut next to the "three perfect sheets of ice" fell on the Indian Hill Squaws, the club's women's organization.

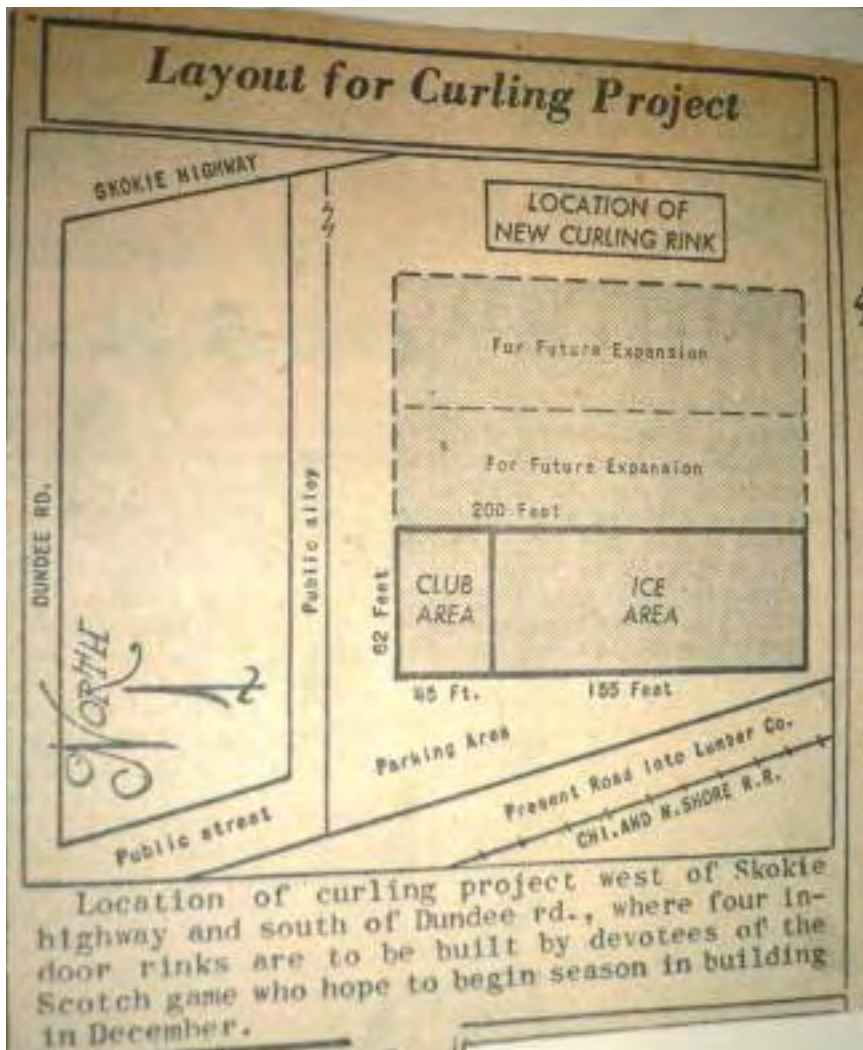
Last week it looked pretty bad

The Chicago District curlers were determined to have artificial ice, whatever it took. They decided to create a new club to serve and complement the Chicago curling community as a whole. A new club was not really their first choice – they already belonged to their own clubs, with their own sets of dues and obligations. Yet, their spirit of camaraderie and their commitment to curling was such that they were able to think creatively, outside their identities as members of individual organizations. Hughston McBain and Dar Curtis, both from Indian Hill, spearheaded the campaign along with members from the Skokie,

Glenview, and Exmoor clubs. Within a period of nine months, they raised the money, chose an old lumber yard for the site, recruited members, and built the club and the icehouse. The process was not without setbacks. As McBain wrote Curtis in the project's early days,



Last week it looked pretty bad and I was inclined to think we could not make the grade; however, it now looks much brighter. We had a meeting last night of the Indian Hill group at Martin Lindsay's home. . . Many of us sincerely believe that there are now enough curlers (over 350) on the North Shore to organize and support a North Shore Curling Club which will supplement, rather than replace, the individual Curling Clubs of Skokie, Indian Hill, Exmoor, and Glenview which we all enjoy and want to see continued.



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The organizers sold shares to finance the club, with the shareholders serving as the first membership body. One share cost \$250, but the Chicago Curling Company – the entity they formed to finance the venture – only accepted shareholders who pledged \$1000 or more. They raised almost \$125,000 to fund and support the new facility. Enthusiasm for the new club ran so high that many aspiring members found themselves waitlisted.

Now we can curl when we like

On September 16, 1948, the *Tribune* announced, "Curling House Will Have Four Indoor Rinks." By December it was finished. Chicago's quonset "Curling Palace" as both the *Tribune* and the *Winnetka Talk* described it, opened on the North Shore. The rocks that the organizers had ordered from Scotland had not all arrived, so the club borrowed the old, well-used rocks from Wauwatosa. Club historian Fred Duncombe wrote, "Being discarded stones they were, of course, not too good. But badly worn stones on indoor ice were still a great improvement over curling on outdoor natural ice."

If it was indeed a "club nobody wanted," as Hughston McBain is reported to have said, then the Chicago Curling Club became, in fact, the club everyone needed. From the moment the first official rock was thrown on New Year's Day 1949, the indoor, artificial ice of the CCC was the new center of Chicago curling.

* The approximate investment of the Chicago Curling Company in its original fixed assets" was \$111,800. Source, Duncombe, "History of the Chicago Curling Club"

* George L. Erwin Jr. was a founder of the CCC (Skokie) and the President of the Chicago Curling Company, the organization charged with financing the new club. The Erwin event is played in his honor.