

Governors-General And Curling In Canada

The Governor-General's Curling Club

Since its inception in 1874 Governors-General have extended their patronage to the Governor-General's Curling Club, and the development of curling in Canada, especially in the country's early years from Confederation to World War I, was in no small part due to the continuous support received from the Governors-General.

Curling in Canada

The history of curling in Canada begins with eighteenth century Scottish Highlanders serving with General Wolfe at Quebec, playing on the St. Lawrence River with "stones" made from melted-down scrap iron from old French cannons.

By 1807 the first curling club in Canada was formed – the Royal Montreal Curling Club. Their games also were played on the St. Lawrence. Soon many other curling clubs were formed: the Kingston C.C. in 1820, the Quebec C.C. in 1821, Fergus in 1834, and the Granite in Toronto in 1836.

Royal Patronage for Curling

By the nineteenth century there had long been local curling clubs throughout Scotland, operating independently with their own rules and customs. In 1838 an ad in the Edinburgh Scotsman called for representatives from all curling clubs to meet. The result was the Grand Caledonian Curling Club with its objective to "unite curlers throughout the world into one Brotherhood of the Rink and to regulate the Ancient Scottish game of Curling by General Laws." (*A Century of Curling* 13)

Within a short time the Club received royal patronage. During an 1843 royal visit to his home, the Earl of Mansfield, President of the Club, planned a demonstration of the grand game to her Royal Highness, Queen Victoria. Mild weather made an outdoor game impossible, but the resourceful Mansfield turned the waxed and highly-polished ballroom floor into a reasonable substitute for ice, and the Queen "was amused." The Prince Consort was enthusiastic about the game and became the patron of the now **Royal Caledonian Curling Club**.

Three former Governors-General of Canada have served as President of that Royal Caledonian Curling Club, the Mother Club: The Earl of Minto, The Marquis of Lorne and The Earl of Aberdeen. A Canadian Branch of the Royal Caledonian was formed in 1852.

Vice-Regal Patronage in Canada

Lord Dufferin and his family met the Canadian winter with enthusiasm and he became a keen curler and supporter of the game. In 1874 he built a covered curling rink as well as an outdoor skating rink and toboggan run on the grounds of Rideau Hall. He formed the Vice-Regal Curling Club so that he and his staff could play the “roaring game” he so enjoyed. (The Club was later renamed the Governor General’s Curling Club). Lady Dufferin makes frequent references in her diary to her husband’s skill during curling matches. (*My Canadian Journal*). The historian at Rideau Hall reports that “despite many political difficulties during his tenure (especially the Pacific Scandal which forced the resignation of Prime Minister Macdonald) the curling rink ‘never lacked for use.’” (Mangan 156). In his book, *The Cultural Bond: Sport, Empire, Society*, J.A. Mangan considers Dufferin’s choice of curling to be “an appropriate sport in Canada as a social vehicle for deliberate diplomacy. The sport had democratic traditions and an etiquette suitable for participation by all classes, even nobility, and later by both sexes.” (159)

Dufferin also established the Governor-General’s Trophy for a prestigious double-rink curling competition. The final match was always played at Rideau Hall until 1939, when the curling rink was removed in preparation for a Royal Visit. The Trophy is still in play today, with a team from the Governor-General’s Curling Club entered in the competition. Until relatively recently in its history the Awards Dinner was held at Rideau Hall, with the Trophy winners and members of the Governor-General’s Curling Club, resplendent in their red blazers, in attendance.

“**The Marquis of Lorne**, who twice had been the President of the Royal Club, very naturally and very enthusiastically took up the cause for which Lord Dufferin, his predecessor had done so much. The very first year after Lord Lorne’s arrival we find the Vice-Regal Club winning a royal medal from the Carilion Club, His Lordship, according to the report of the match, playing a fine lead.” (Kerr 150) Later Lorne skipped many games and donated a Silver Cup “to be played for all the regularly organized Curling Clubs of the Dominion who desire to enter into the competition.” (Mangan 165). Lorne and his wife, Princess Louise, Queen Victoria’s youngest daughter, were naturally at the centre of society and their curling, skating and tobogganing parties were splendid affairs.

Vice-Regal support for curling continued with **Lord Lansdowne**. In his book *The Day Before Yesterday*, Lord Frederick Spencer Hamilton, Aide-de-Camp to Lansdowne and a member of the Vice-Regal Curling Club, recounts a match he played in 1887:

“The Rideau Hall team consisted of Lord Lansdowne himself, General Sir Henry Streatfield...and one of the footmen, who seemed to have a natural gift as a curler. At a curling match against Montreal in 1887, a long-distance telephone was used for the first time in Canada. Ottawa is 120 miles distant from Montreal, and a telephone was specially installed, and each “end” telephoned from Rideau Hall to Montreal, where the result was shown on a board, excitement over the match running high. Montreal proved the victors.

On great occasions like this, the ice of the curling-rink was elaborately decorated with colours. It was very easily done. Ready-prepared stencils, such as are used for

wall decoration, were laid in the ice, and various coloured inks mixed with water were poured through the stencil holes, and froze almost immediately on to the ice below. In this fashion complicated designs of roses, thistles and maple-leaves, all in their proper colours, could be made in a very short time, and most effective they were until destroyed by the first six ends.” (178)

In a farewell speech to curlers Lansdowne spoke of his regret in leaving Canada and “the roaring game”, for it was unlikely he would be curling during his next posting – in India! He had become a keen curler. The tradition of Vice-Regal support of curling had been well established.

Lord Stanley’s name is inextricably linked to hockey in Canada. The Stanley Cup is a national icon. But Stanley, too, was an enthusiastic curler. He was patron of the Ottawa Curling Club, where his friend, Sir Sanford Fleming, curled and he donated another Stanley Cup to the curling club. Fleming also was a member of the Vice-Regal Curling Club. In its membership roster Fleming is listed simply as the President of the Rideau Curling Club. (He had left the Ottawa Curling Club and started a new club in protest over the temperance rules of the Ottawa. Curling and whiskey were also inextricably linked!).

Lord Aberdeen sponsored a golf cup – the Aberdeen Cup was awarded to the Amateur Golf Champion of Canada and was first played at the Ottawa Golf Club in 1895 – but he was also a Scot and an avid curler. As patron and playing member of the Vice-Regal Curling Club he demonstrated “a first rate knowledge of the fine points of the game.” He was actively involved in the administration of the Ontario Curling Association, helping to establish its policies and rules. He instituted a Governor-General’s Trophy in 1894 “to be awarded to the winner of competitions held within the jurisdiction”.

Lord Minto is most closely associated with the sport of figure skating. Lady Minto was an accomplished skater and the couple donated several prizes for both men’s and ladies’ figure skating. Before leaving Ottawa they also founded the Minto Club, which first started on that outdoor rink at Rideau Hall. But Lord Minto also curled. Lord Minto was not only an ardent curler, but also President of the Royal Caledonian Curling Club. Like Dufferin and Lorne before him, Minto encouraged Scottish curlers to come to Canada for a grand curling tour. John Kerr, the Scottish captain of the tour that finally took place in the winter of 1902-1903, dedicated his report and book on the History of Curling in Canada and the United States to Governor General Minto. The Canadian curlers travelled to Scotland for a return match in 1909 when the Strathcona Cup was first awarded. This friendly competition is still held every five years over a hundred years later!

Lord Grey, like Stanley, is remembered by most Canadians for his donation of a sports cup. His Challenge Cup for the amateur rugby football championship of Canada in 1909 is now known as the Grey Cup, awarded to the champions of the Canadian Football League. Grey also was active in curling and was patron of the Ontario Curling Association. In 1910, with the consent of Lord Grey, the Vice-Regal Curling Club was renamed the Governor General’s Curling Club, and a number of prominent curlers in the Ottawa area were invited to become honorary members. Among them were William Lyon Mackenzie King and Robert Borden.

In 1938 the **Lady Tweedsmuir Trophy** was donated by the Governor-General's wife. This double-rink championship of the Ladies Curling Association of the Canadian Branch of the Royal Caledonian Curling Club is the women's counterpart of the Governor-General's Trophy competition for men. The reception and medal presentation also were traditionally held at Government House. The final match and awards dinner are now held at the same time as the finals of the Governor-General's Trophy in a curling club in the Ottawa area.

For a brief time during Governor General **Edward Schreyer's** tenure an outdoor curling sheet was returned to Rideau Hall. Schreyer was a Manitoban and a curler. Writer E. Shirley Woods recalls curling with the Governor-General several times. (xii)

Today's Governor-General's Curling Club

In 1967 with the consent and encouragement of Governor-General **Roland Michener**, the membership of the Governor-General's Curling Club was increased to a maximum of 100 with representation from across Canada. In 1972 a constitution was written and approved by Governor-General Michener which added a new category of 25 emeritus members.

Since that time the main focus of the Club has been to recognize those who have made a significant contribution to curling, whether it be locally, provincially or nationally, not only as competitive curlers, but also as builders and administrators. Some of its members are legends of the game. One of its objectives is to promote the growth of curling in Canada and preserve its history. A recent initiative, in cooperation with the Canadian Curling Association, will see members sharing their knowledge of the history of curling at an exhibit at the 2010 Brier in London, Ontario.

The men and women of today's Club come from all walks of life and are proud to belong to this honorary Curling Club. The Club has no premises of its own and is supported only by Club events and donations, but members do from time to time compete in various competitions and bonspiels. The Club's crested red blazers are a familiar sight at curling events everywhere, including national and international championships.

Sources

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