

From the Bay City Times  
**curlers giddy**  
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When 16 curling teams from Michigan, Canada and Ohio gathered at the Lewiston Curling Club recently for its annual International Bonspeil, Jeff Michael noticed a lot of strangers walking through to watch the action.

Most of them had no vested interest in the tournament, he knew. They just wanted a closer look at the sport everybody seemed to be talking about all of a sudden.

That is the value of the Olympic Games to a rather quirky, minor (at least in the United States) sport - and especially when Americans find rare success as the U.S. men did in winning the bronze medal at the Winter Games in Turin, Italy.

Those boys from Bemidji were, as one TV talking head described them, "the rock stars of the U.S. Olympic team." In Italy, TV ratings for curling were off the charts. Around here, the sport didn't get much prime-time coverage, but enough people saw it on NBC's auxiliary programming to cause the phone to ring off the hook at Kathy and A.T. Nieman's house in Lewiston. Both are long-time curlers and eager ambassadors for the sport they love. "We had calls almost every night," said Kathy Nieman, who has been sliding rocks for 14 years. "We were sitting in our living room watching curling at the Olympics and we had friends from around Lewiston calling us. 'What's going on?' they would ask. 'Explain it to us.'"

Same thing happened at work and all around town the Friday the U.S. team won the bronze. "I think it had a huge impact," Nieman said. "It's a great thing," A.T. Nieman agreed. "The TV coverage was awesome, and there is definitely a lot more awareness that we're here."

Nieman and Michael were teammates on a Lewiston rink (team) that competed in a curl down (qualifying tournament) in 2001 for the opportunity to represent the United States in the Olympic Games the following year in Salt Lake City.

Because it had never competed in a national event, the Lewiston club was seeded 32nd among the 32 teams, which pitted them against the top-seeded team in the opening round. Lewiston took its opponent to the very end, losing the game on the last rock (the hammer).

Michael was the skip (captain) of the team that won this year's International Bonspeil, but he acknowledged that the Lewiston club's top players are well into their 40s and 50s - and too old for Olympic dreams. He's hoping the latest impetus will inspire more and younger players to get involved in the sport and take the club to new heights. Perhaps even Olympic heights.

"There's no reason why an athletic individual couldn't come into a club like ours or Midland's and practice, practice, practice and be a contender in 5-6 years," Michael said.

The problem for the Northern Michigan rink is that its season is so short.

It's a small, private club and it can't afford to keep the ice up year-round. Refrigeration gets costly when the sun starts beating down on that metal roof.

But the little ice house rocks from December to March, with leagues four nights a week, a women's league from 5:30-7:15 p.m. one evening and about 50 youngsters coming in a couple of afternoons a week to learn the game from masters like Michael.

Suffice to say the Americans' Olympic curling success was the talk of the week, with new members walking in off the street - some riding up on snowmobiles.

Jim White, who owns an Ace Hardware store in Boyne City, makes the 60-mile, one-way trip to Lewiston every Tuesday night for league play with several other teammates from the Boyne area. "I've actually had people coming into my store since the Olympics to talk about curling," he said. "Some are actually volunteering to sub sometime." A year ago, White rented the ice and brought a group of about 10 people to Lewiston to learn the game. "This year I expect we'll take at least 20," he said.

Joe Stone, a fourth-year curler from Mio, was so into the Olympics he recorded every match he could find on TV. For him, it was as much a learning experience as it was an inspiration. "The

Olympics shows people at the top of their game using different styles and different techniques," he said. "I see what they're doing and maybe I can pick some things up." Meantime, Stone said, Americans should appreciate a bronze medal that glittered more like gold to those who understand the intricacies of the sport.

In the United States, there are only about 15,000 people who curl competitively. In Canada, which won the gold medal, there are more than 1.5 million curlers. The game has a stronger following in Italy, Japan and Scotland, where it was invented, than in this country. "Our guys curled very well against some pretty stiff competition," Stone said. "We're very proud of them." Want to know more about this sport that is suddenly not so quirky? Call the Lewiston Curling Club at (989) 786-3888.