



Wheelchair Curling on the Paralympic Winter Stage



Kate Caithness

FEDERATION VICE PRESIDENT CHRONICLES THE SPORT FROM ITS BEGINNINGS IN SCOTLAND TO WHERE IT IS TODAY

Born in Scotland, Kate Caithness has been actively involved in the Paralympic Sport of Wheelchair Curling for quite some time now. Currently, the Vice President of the World Curling Federation (WCF), Ms. Caithness is also one of the seven members of the WCF Executive Board, a member of both the IPC Sports Council and the IPC Paralympic Games Committee.

Ms. Caithness has been involved with the WCF since 1998. In 2000, because of her high interests in Curling for athletes with a disability, she was asked by the Executive Board to become the WCF Disabled Project Leader. The volunteer position had Ms. Caithness introduce Wheelchair Curling to the WCF Member Associations, as well as seeking for admission to the Paralympic Winter Games.

With clearly a full plate of responsibilities in front of her, Vice President Caithness has become an expert on Wheelchair Curling, and continues to promote it in the world of Paralympic Sport.

How would you introduce Wheelchair Curling to new fans who are unaware of the Paralympic Sport?

Wheelchair Curling is a very enjoyable team sport for all ages and abilities. Through our early promotion of Wheelchair Curling as an integrated (not segregated) sport alongside able-bodied Curling, we have built the sport to allow the same skill levels to be apparent. However, with the absence of sweeping in Wheelchair Curling, it could be argued that the skill levels for wheelchair curlers are far greater. A DVD introducing the sport to newcomers is available for anyone on request from the WCF Headquarters in Perth, Scotland.

What is the history of Wheelchair Curling and the World Curling Federation (WCF)?

I think it is important to first give a brief history of the sport.

Curling first began in the 17th Century and the first recognized Curling Clubs were formed in Scotland. During the 19th Century, the game was 'exported' wherever Scots settled around the world in cold climates, most notably at that time in Canada, USA, Sweden, Switzerland, Norway and New Zealand.

The first Rules of Curling were drawn up in Scotland in 1838. In 1966 the International Curling Federation was established and in 1991 the name of the Federation was changed to the World Curling Federation.

Wheelchair Curling first was introduced at an International Bonspiel and Workshop held in Crans Montana, Switzerland, in January 2000. Disabled Curling had been discussed at the WCF Annual General Assembly the previous

year in St. John, New Brunswick, and this was to be my first sight of Wheelchair Curling.

Sweden and Switzerland were the only countries at this time trying this sport. During the workshop, rules were discussed and there were some who thought the game should be played with junior stones and on a shorter playing field. Thankfully this was quickly ruled out. There was representation present from the WCF, and at the end of the week we formulated the basic rules for Wheelchair Curling.

Thereafter International Bonspiels and workshops took place and in 2002 the first World Wheelchair Curling Championships were held.

How has the sport of Wheelchair Curling grown over the years?

During its infancy, I hosted 'Come & Try' events in several countries and also introduced coaches to Wheelchair Curling at courses held during the WCF Annual Summer Camp and Clinics. This has resulted in some 24 of our Member Associations now involved in Wheelchair Curling with more coming on board.

Our rules state that each team in WCF sanctioned events must comprise mixed gender, and this has certainly encouraged female participation.

What are the opportunities for other disability groups?

A seminar/workshop was held recently to discuss the way forward for Curling for other disability groups. Recently, 'Come & Try' took place in Prague with a view to introducing the sport to cerebral palsy and visually impaired athletes. In fact Wheelchair Curling for visually impaired athletes has been played in Canada for some years now.

Can you talk about the possibility of expanding and refining the classification system?

The Paralympic Games have been successful through the appropriate classification of athletes. Thankfully we have managed to establish a system which largely allows our sport to be a huge success. We feel that the classification governing Wheelchair Curling is well placed but this must be constantly monitored. We are currently looking at some small changes which will be brought into place following the Vancouver 2010 Paralympic Winter Games and these will

The sport is currently practiced by athletes in over 20 countries

OVERVIEW OF FACTS

Wheelchair Curling

- The first World Championships were held in Switzerland in January 2002. Switzerland won in the finals against Canada.
- The sport had its Paralympic debut at the Torino 2006 Paralympic Winter Games.
- No stone must be of greater weight than 19,96kg or of greater circumference than 91,44cm or of less height than 11,43cm.
- Most stones used in international competitions are produced from granite only found on the Scottish island of Ailsa Craig.
- Current most successful team: Canada



Wheelchair Curling at the Torino 2006 Paralympic Winter Games

be communicated shortly. We are also looking at classification for other disciplines with a view to inclusion in the future.

Can you talk about experiences in the sport when reflecting on the time during and since the Torino 2006 Paralympic Winter Games?

I was delighted to be appointed Technical Delegate for Torino where Wheelchair Curling made its debut on the Paralympic stage. What impressed me and continues to do so, is the absolute dedication undertaken by the athletes, along with the team spirit and camaraderie amongst the teams. There is no doubt in my mind that Wheelchair Curling in Torino caught the public imagination and was a great platform to move the sport forward. Wherever I go, I find enthusiastic wheelchair curlers around the world, and the commitment of players, organizers and volunteers is fantastic to see.

Can you highlight upcoming competitions and what you hope Paralympic fans will watch for in the coming months/years?

Each year, apart from the year when the Winter Paralympics take place, ten teams compete in our World Champion-

ships. The number of teams entered for the qualifying competition is growing dramatically and perhaps in future years we shall be forced to look at zonal qualification.

What can the world hope to see at the Vancouver 2010 Paralympic Winter Games?

As the skill levels improve we have seen the athletes introduce more varied shots to their repertoire. The length of games have been extended to eight ends of play by popular choice, but to ensure good time management we have introduced time clocks. I know that the athletes will truly aspire and seek to become true Paralympians in their sport. There is an excitement building and I have every reason and confidence to believe that we will be party to something very special in Vancouver 2010.

For more information about Wheelchair Curling, please visit www.worldcurling.org.

