

# A TALE OF TWO CLUBS



Montreal Thistle – a curling club in transition.

*The role of the Business of Curling magazine is to help club executives understand our industry and how we do business. Unfortunately, each issue cannot be crammed with good news stories. In reality, there are stories of clubs shutting down or in serious financial difficulties.*

*This is the story of two such clubs.*

*If the walls of the Montreal Thistle could talk, the story she could tell of her proud history would be fascinating. Yet, tradition was no defence against rising property taxes, a suburbanization of the downtown core and the exodus of industry. The building now sits empty, the shouts of 'hurry, hard' a faint echo of her past. The 'For Sale' sign now hangs over the front door.*

*Atikokan's history may not be as spectacular; yet, this club was once the focal point of this Northwestern Ontario community. Atikokan does not have a population of three million, nor has the club been around for 156 years; however, it does have similar problems to Thistle. While there may not be a "For Sale" hanging over the front door, the club is perilously near closing.*

## The Montreal Thistle Curling Club A Sign of the Times

By Ann Drummie

**F**ounded in 1843, the Montreal Thistle Curling Club has undergone numerous changes throughout its 156-year history.

The club, which was rebuilt from a fire, has since moved into an indoor facility; built a new clubhouse when its land was sold by an

unscrupulous syndicate; incorporated artificial ice; permitted the participation of women and students; and incorporated a relaxed dress code.

In the early 1980s, the club reached its zenith with a full staff, curlers participating in national events, and over 250 members playing more than once a week in various leagues. Over the next two decades, however, Thistle's community changed. Large corporations moved away from Montréal; the City imposed a new business tax; society placed less emphasis on identity by club affiliation; professionals had more avenues for developing networks than the social club infrastructure; and increased interest in fitness created more options for the recreation dollar.

Appeals were submitted to the City regarding excessive taxation. Leagues were restructured to be more open and flexible, but some cost-cutting decisions resulted in adverse long-term effects. For example, volunteer or part-time bartenders were downgraded to casual employees – a situation that contributed to reduce overall sales and contributions. The demand for arranging orders and scheduling shifts contributed to increased anxiety levels of volunteer coordinators. Volunteer bookkeeping resulted in decentralized files, inconsistent accounts, and insufficient accounting information at the Annual General Meeting.

While the call for volunteers increased, members eventually found themselves unable to supply the demand. With increased volunteer burnout and turnover, and the absence of any long-term plan, the presidency became the proverbial "hot potato."

### A club in transition

The success of a curling club is traditionally quantified by its membership; however, this figure is often misleading. The number of members at Thistle didn't change considerably for a few years, but the members themselves did. They went from playing in three leagues a week to just one, and stopped frequenting the lounge until the early hours of the morning.

Reduced membership eventually sparked attempts to find those who were willing to make a six-month commitment. With increased desperation, Thistle resorted to traditional avenues – basic advertising and word of mouth – to attract these kinds of mem-

bers. A membership target was established with little potential for success, and even less that it would solve the current crisis.

There is little question that the club could have responded to the crisis sooner if the operation had been evaluated on a weekly ba-



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sis, addressing a number of issues, including:

- How many hours was the ice being used and for what?
- How many participants were on the ice?
- How often were guest passes being used?
- How many lessons were being given?
- How many hours was the lounge being used (compared to bar revenue)?
- How many club teams were entered in outside events?
- How many volunteer duties/hours were performed, and by how many volunteers?

#### A different approach

Through the Business of Curling program, the club finally redrafted its services. Thistle would no longer rely on the support of traditional curlers, but would promote a grass-roots campaign from which future long-standing members would rise. Research revealed numerous strategic options previously available, including moving the club, acquiring more land for parking, and building a concrete base. Unfortunately, all of these strategies were not feasible given the club's limited resources.

The initial business plan focused on what the club could actually do with its current resources. Internet pages and newsletters, four-week memberships, lesson packages, simplified curling fees related to ice time, promotional group party packages, and a local charity event were all initiated.

One year after its inception, the business plan highlighted essentials for the successful operation of an urban centre curling facility. They included:

- commitment from the City for leniency in taxation;
- a program to subsidize at least one employee with marketing skills;
- partners to support activities at our facility (City, YMCA, universities);
- sponsors to pay for a concrete base;
- renter(s) to share in the operating costs;
- curling associations to reciprocate the efforts of the other parties.

These essentials all hinge on recognition, support and negotiation from outside sources. As a private social club, however, Thistle had always experienced success without any "outside" assistance. There was no regular interaction at a decision-making level with any other curling club. For years, no one outside the executive had any clear sense of what was wrong.

Stakeholders essential to the club's survival should have been involved on a regular basis. The club needs people other than its committed members to believe in its role in the community. These people will help

champion its cause and compensate for skills lacking in volunteer boards. Contacting past members recently proved to be an invaluable source of emotional support.

Presently, there is a significant debt from previous years of operation. An overwhelming effort is required to put the essential pieces in place. The club is comprised of a small group of curling enthusiasts with greater priorities, including jobs and family. It has been determined, under the circumstances, that the wisest business decision is

to sell the major assets—the land and building. Plans regarding the preservation of Thistle's history and the proper distribution of club items are currently being discussed. There exists growing support to manage the surplus as a fund for training coaches and junior-development programs in Quebec. This is considered an exceptional way to maintain the club's proud name.

*Ann Drummie is the president of the Montreal Thistle Curling Club.*

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