Creating a frozen masterpiece: The art of the ideal curling sheet

'The rocks talk to you,' says local ice tech Don Wilkin

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MIDWESTERN ONTARIO – For the better part of 40 years, Don Wilkin has loved all things curling.

He took up the sport himself in 1979 at the age of 22. Twenty years later, he would be coaching local youth on how to throw that perfect draw delivery. And now another 20 years after that Wilkin finds himself at the height of his curling knowledge, creating the ice itself from the ground up at three local curling clubs as head ice technician.

It wasn't a job he went looking for, it just kind of fell into his lap. A retired dairy farmer, Wilkin has the time and the patience required to dedicate one's self to the craft, which entails a lot more than people think. The formula required to create a toptier curling sheet sounds more like a science experiment than simply 'just making ice'.

But in the end, that's essentially what Wilkin does as head ice tech for the Palmerston, Listowel and Wingham curling clubs. There are just many steps required to get that desired end product.

"I had a little extra time and the previous staff in Palmerston were always looking for extra help to pebble and prep ice," said Wilkin of how he got his start during a quiet Monday night in January at the Listowel Curling Club. The 63-year-old works as he talks, carefully cleaning up all the snow created from a series of passes with an ice scraper, a specialty contraption that looks like a cross between a garden tiller and a snow blower. "One by one they were getting less interested and wanted to semi-retire from making ice."

The Town of Minto native expanded upon the initial knowledge of the craft he obtained from local ice-makers like Gord Soden and Fred Fotheringham (also citing Tom Leonard as a mentor) by taking a Level 1 ice technician course nine years ago. He took on the head ice tech role in Palmerston around that time, accepted the same position in Wingham three years ago and expanded the job to include Listowel in 2017. He also helps out at the Harriston club, and wherever else his services are needed.

"Every ice maker has got their own magic recipe for what they think works well," said Wilkin. "And what works here (in Listowel), does not work at the Palmerston club."

The whole process begins in the early fall, prior to the beginning of your average curling season. A series of levelling floods gets things underway, after which the surface is painted white. The painted coat is then sealed with a lot of fine spray so that the paint doesn't move.

A level surface is paramount, but the sheet always has to look reasonably attractive as well. The general rule of thumb is 1,000 gallons of water used per sheet. "It has to look good," said Wilkin. "I hate

"It has to look good," said Wilkin. "I hate the look of paint that has run or air bubbles under the houses."

Another light flood is performed to level it again after the paint is sealed. Then all the markings go down – lines and houses. The hacks (foothold starting blocks) are placed, and then yet more flooding is performed to complete the levelling process.

This is when the sheet looks its cleanest the entire season – closer resembling a mirror than curling ice.

"He always said it never looks better than it does right after that last flood," said Wilkin of Fotheringham, who was fond of saying so during tutelage of his protégé.

'Pebbling' is the process that allows curling rocks to move properly in the first place. Essentially, an application of fine spray over the top flood to create the desired effect. Ice makers employ a variety of different water temperatures and droplet sizes depending on a number of factors, including ambient temperature, water purity and the abilities of the ice plant itself.

"You're trying to replicate what freezing rain is like," said Wilkin, before breaking into a pretty good impression of a Scottish accent. "Years ago, some Scotsman decided that the best day for curling is after freezing rain on the loch. So away they'd go. There's been various shapes and sizes and styles of pebble heads created over the years.

"The interaction between the running surface of the rock and the top of the pebble is what makes rocks do what they're doing." On this particular day, Wilkin is using a reverse osmosis water temperature of about 120 degrees Fahrenheit coupled with a fairly fine droplet size for his pebbling run at Listowel. When his water concoction is at the temperature he is after, he shoulders on a tank and sprayer that looks



Dan McNee Photo

THE ART OF ICE – Don Wilkin, who serves as head ice technician at the Palmerston, Listowel and Wingham curling clubs, performs a pass with a scraper at the Listowel Curling Club. Wilkin, 63, says that, 'every ice maker has got their own magic recipe for what they think works well'.

similar to a vintage shower head and begins a brisk backwards walk up and down each of Listowel's four sheets. Each trip is timed to ensure that the pebble distribution is as close to the others as possible, so that every sheet runs the same.

Wilkin explained that if you were to throw a rock as hard as you could on an unpebbled sheet of ice, the rock would likely stop itself before it even reached the halfway mark. The rocks themselves are also used to determine if a sheet is level or not.

"The rocks talk to you," he said. "If they're not doing what they're supposed to, you can tell if the sheet is level or not. The rocks should move in the direction of the rotation. If they don't, then the sheet's not level. Especially if they go against the rotation."

Wilkin completes the whole process by using another bladed device to nip the top off every pebble before play can begin, otherwise curlers would have to throw a series of rocks to knock down those pebbles in a more manual sense.

Every pebble must be scraped clean using the ice scraper following a standard night's league play. And then the process begins again.

"You can do the exact same thing two different days and get two completely different results," said Wilkin of the pebbling process. "So, I do my experiments more than once."

While accidents do happen on the ice (our head ice tech brought up a recent incident in Wingham where a rock was unintentionally dropped onto the surface of a sheet from a couple feet, creating a decent-sized gouge), one thing in particular really gets Wilkin's goat when it comes to curling taboos.

"My No. 1 pet peeve is people that leave their hands or knees on the ice and watch their rock go all the way down," he said, adding that it only takes two to three seconds for a curler's body heat to create potentially play-altering indentations in the ice. "Anybody who reads this article will probably laugh and say, 'I knew he was going to say that'. The knee prints and the hand prints bother me. It's not too much to ask. It affects the play of the other seven players on that sheet."

When asked what was the best compliment he ever received for his efforts in ice making, Wilkin recalled a playdown event in Palmerston from a few years ago. A visiting team had lost two straight games and were eliminated from further play.

"On their way out they said, 'thanks for the ice, that was great'," said Wilkin. "I said, but you lost. 'Yeah, I know, but it wasn't your ice's fault, your ice was really good!' It's the same sheet of ice for both teams – one team will get it, the other one won't sometimes."

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