

## Curling club gets new ice

Famous ice technician lays surface



World-class ice maker B.J. Gagnon takes a moment for a picture with young curler Brett Bushill at the curling club. Gagnon has installed new rink ice.

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Robin Poon

The Lillooet Memorial Curling Club will boast a new playing surface at its rink this season thanks to renowned ice technician B.J. Gagnon. Gagnon was in town last week to apply the new ice, a four-day process. He finished Friday with the help of local volunteers.

Local curlers held an open house Thursday evening to highlight what they and Gagnon hope will draw new and returning members to the club.

According to Gagnon, curlers who have played on the old ice will find the new surface a huge improvement. "The difference is going to be like night and day."



B.J. Gagnon paints the finishing touches on the Lillooet Memorial Curling Club rink Friday.

Gagnon has served as the official ice maker for the Scotties Tournament of Hearts, which determines the Canadian women's curling champion, since 1994. He has also made the ice at the Canadian men's curling championships, the Tim Hortons Brier, three times. Some of his many other ice-making projects have included world championships, Olympic trials, and professional hockey games. The work has taken him around the world.

However, in between the big events, Gagnon upgrades the facilities at local curling clubs like Lillooet's.

"I try to help clubs that are struggling with membership," he said. An aging membership base and a lack of young curlers have made the Lillooet Memorial Curling Club's continued operation uncertain in recent years.

Gagnon said the new surface will make play easier not only for older curlers but also those just picking up the sport.

"It works on both ends of the scale."

The ice is made from water that has been filtered with chemical beads to remove impurities like sodium, copper, and iron. With a pH level of 5.0, it is also more acidic than regular water.

When frozen, the treated water results in ice that is both smoother and brighter than the curling rink's old surface, made using tap water.

Gagnon said the heavy stones used in curling will travel much more easily over the smoother surface. Curlers with hip or knee problems can now launch the stones using a stick instead of having to get down to throw them.

In the past, older curlers might have given up on the sport because the ice quality prevented stick curling. Now, however, technology has caught up.

"The members will love it," said Gagnon, though he admitted it would take some time before they become familiar with the new ice.

At the same time, the relative ease of play should make the game more appealing to young would-be curlers.

Gagnon, himself an avid curler, stressed the importance of nurturing young players. Without them, he noted, "The future of curling is going to be very limited."

The curling club has just started junior curling on Monday afternoons.

Local curling club president Pat Reynolds and vice-president Ross Millward contacted Gagnon last March about replacing the rink ice.

They and other volunteers will maintain the new surface.

Millward knew the ice technician's work personally since he arranged for Gagnon to make the ice at a Whitehorse curling club when he lived in the Yukon.

“Our curling fraternity is very small,” said Gagnon, praising curling for its social nature.

Of course, growth is essential for its future.

As far as Gagnon is concerned, his role in the sport is simple. “My goal as an ice technician is to make the losers smile.” And if that happens, curling will naturally flourish.

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