

If you want to go far, go together

By: Bobby Ray | The Business of Curling Blog, Issue 006 | October 9, 2024



In 2018, a New York Times analysis of Spotify data found that the songs we listen to during our teen years determine our musical taste as adults. For men, the most important period for forming musical taste is between the ages of 13 and 16; and for women, between the ages of 11 and 14.

If you were anything like me at that age your bedroom walls were covered in posters of Pink Floyd, Led Zeppelin, The Beatles, The Rolling Stones, and Shania Twain (indeed, the latter might be isolated to my Northern Ontario upbringing).

Peaking in popularity around the same time as Shania was another Canadian treasure known in curling circles for their 2002 cameo appearance in *Men with Brooms – The Tragically Hip*.

As teenagers, my friends and I passionately wanted to see the Hip live in action, so we called them up and they agreed to play at a house party one Saturday night when my friend's parents were set to be out of town... yeah right! (*That would have been a cool story though*). Can you imagine? We had no money, no influence, and no capacity to manifest an ambition of such magnitude exclusively for our personal benefit.

Dreaming aside, my friends and I did see the Tragically Hip, live, in our hometown; and it cost us only \$25 each. As it would be, every Civic Holiday Long Weekend the people in our community organized a festival with live music, an air show, fireworks, and other forms of entertainment in a gated area by the waterfront where folks who purchased a wristband were granted admission to the grounds. In 2007, The Tragically Hip were the headlining act, and an otherwise impossible experience was unlocked thanks to our community's collective action.

Collective Action

Collective action refers to *“action taken together by a group of people whose goal is to enhance their condition and achieve a common objective.”*

Collective action takes many shapes, can be formal or informal, and examples are visible most everywhere. Unions, social movements, political parties, cooperatives, boards, committees, councils, clubs, and associations are among some of the most well-known examples of collective action groups in our society today.

Perhaps the most familiar of all is government. I can't believe that I'm about to try and convince readers that paying membership fees to curling associations is a good thing by comparing it to the pleasure of paying taxes; but here we go...

I have a friend who often says, *“paying taxes is the best deal that there is in life.”* My friend is full of unpopular opinions, but he occasionally makes a radically accurate point.

Nobody enjoys paying taxes of course, but if Boxing Day and Black Friday had a baby it would fail to produce better value for money than taxes do. Take, for example, the average property tax in Canada and consider that for less than 10% of the average annual salary Canadians fund their local airports, public transit, ambulance, police and fire services, garbage collection and recycling, snow removal, maintenance of local road networks, parks and recreation facilities, libraries, public health, water and sewage, and, and, and... the list goes on.

We take for granted that we have somewhere to drive our cars, playgrounds at which to entertain our kids, beaches and pools by which to relax, a power grid that charges our precious electronic devices, and a breadth of infrastructure that didn't exist before the public purse made it possible.

Some of these services benefit us directly and some of them don't. Some people don't drive cars, have kids, or enjoy long walks on the beach; but everyone co-exists in this world, and everyone benefits from the indirect impacts of being surrounded by happier, healthier, and more well-educated people.

For the same reasons that we have governments, or any group looking to take a collective action in pursuit of a collective impact, it is important for the curling community to have associations of clubs that can collectively promote the sport, conduct research, invest in new programs and strategies, host competitions, and advocate for better conditions that help grow the game. None of the aforementioned can be done (or done as well) by each curling club independently, thus associations pool resources to create otherwise unlikely benefits that have a positive impact on curling at the national, provincial, territorial, regional, and community level.

We take for granted that without a network of clubs and associations there would be no Brier or Tournament of Hearts; that curling would not be an Olympic sport; that there would be no standards or training programs for ice technicians, coaches, or instructors; that more than 280 hours of spectator curling coverage on major television broadcasts every year would be absent; that millions of youth would be without a school curling experience every year; and that tens of millions of dollars in economic impact generated in communities that host provincial, territorial, and national curling championships would vanish.

Do associations spend every dollar with which they are entrusted without waste? Gosh no; they are not perfect. Do associations spend every dollar with which they are entrusted in a manner that every stakeholder agrees with equally? Not a chance; and you wouldn't want it to be so. If everyone thought the same way, believed the same things, and lived the same values, such lack of diversity would dilute the human experience. As with any governance system, there will always be divergent opinions on where and how to best invest resources; there will always be room for improvement; and there will always be some dissatisfied people – such is an inherent result of taking any type of action, including the 'what's best for most' variety.

Direct and Indirect Benefits

Perhaps the greatest challenge of advocating for the benefits of associations and their membership fees is the degree to which member benefits range from direct to indirect and become more indirect the further removed an association is from the affected stakeholder. A curler joining a curling club receives clear and direct membership benefits (access to a locker, access to curling ice, and

access to curling leagues). When that same curler is asked to contribute financially to their provincial or territorial and national curling association, it is within reason for them to wonder why they should, and what's in it for them. It's also within reason, but complicated to explain, that many individual curlers get little direct benefit from curling associations and that this is okay (if not by design) because their curling club does, the sport of curling does, and the system of curling in Canada does.

Similarly, those that attend a publicly subsidized concert receive a direct benefit when they experienced something of value to them at an unmatched price and convenience; while the other 75% of the local population that does not attend the festival helps to produce an indirect benefit by investing their tax dollars in the quality of life of those that do attend, and by generating an economic impact for restaurants, hotels, shops, and other tourism affected businesses in the community.

I'm a member of many collective action groups from which I receive no direct benefit but am happy to continue supporting. To name only a few outside of curling, I belong to a chamber of commerce, an arts council, and a YMCA. By supporting the YMCA in my community, I am helping to create more infrastructure and more opportunity for more people (especially youth and low-income individuals) to lead healthy, active lifestyles.

When I go to the YMCA myself and run on the treadmill or lift heavy things, I also gain a direct benefit of membership. To this point, I often suggest that being a member of a curling association is *like* being a member of a gym – you can contribute financial resources and create an impact for others, but if you want to gain direct benefits as well, then you must show up and use the tools that have been provided for you (*curling associations have several programs and sources of information that have been designed to enhance the curling experience at a curling club*).

A Preventable Catastrophe

The greatest risk to any association structure is that the longer an organization exists, and the larger it becomes, the more distant it becomes from its founders' mentality and the more susceptible members are to absence blindness; which leads to a perceived lack of direct benefit and free-rider problem; and ultimately ends in dissolution (only after which this happens do people realize everything that they once had and are now missing).

I left out a detail in my opening story. After decades of successful events, the year that the Tragically Hip headlined was the last time this festival was ever organized.

Despite more than 20,000 wristbands being sold, the city council and festival committee of the day suffered a loss of **founders' mentality** – the same phenomenon that is attributed to the incidence of only one in nine new companies sustaining profitable growth for more than nine years. Research by Bain & Company defines founders' mentality as (1) having a frontline obsession, (2) having an owner's mindset, and (3) having an insurgent mission.

As time passed, City Council began to narrow their focus to only the direct impact of the festival on the city's bottom line (they were losing money), and forgot about the original mission to create a tourism impact throughout the local economy, to bring world-class musical acts to the front steps of its community, and to give every kid in the area a reason to look up into the sky, point, and say "wow" as they would marvel at the aerobatic flight of planes and the glow of fireworks. They forgot that they started their collective impact journey not to create profit, but to create memories.

As the festival consistently delivered predictable benefits year after year, taxpayers started to take them for granted and eventually developed **absence blindness** (a cognitive bias that under-appreciates the maintenance of positive events, or the prevention or absence of negative events). An example of absence blindness from Josh Kaufman's book, *The Personal MBA*, is when effective managers anticipate likely issues and resolve them in advance. "Some of the best managers in the world look like they're not doing much, but everything gets done on time and under budget. The problem is, no one sees all of the bad things that the great manager stopped from happening. Less skilled managers are actually more likely to be rewarded, since everyone can see them 'making things happen' and 'moving heaven and earth' to resolve issues - even issues they themselves created via poor management."

When collective action groups start small, the benefits are evident to the intimate cohort of individuals advocating for the group's creation. As groups enlarge and systems intensify, benefits become more influential to the group as a whole, but less tangible to any one individual. Often organizations create benefits of such magnificent scale that even individuals that did not pay for the public good or common pool resource begin to receive the benefit, which in turn magnifies a **perceived lack of direct benefit** among fee-paying members. This is a market failure called **free-rider problem** and, in the case of the festival, it contributed to its demise when taxpayers, who were now subjected to a narrative of how they were already paying for the festival from the net loss of municipal budget investment, decided that they could listen to the music,

watch the air show, and experience the fireworks from their boat, balcony, or the bed of their pick-up truck without paying the \$25 to get inside the gated area.

By now you know that this story ends with the dissolution of a festival that once produced collective impact for its community. The same series of events have happened in other instances since, and will again, but it's a preventable catastrophe in the sport of curling if we can remind ourselves why curlers and curling clubs founded our associations in the first place; if we can treat our associations as if they were our own (because they are – membership organizations are owned by their members); if we can remember to appreciate where we have come from and what we are successfully maintaining; if we can agree that direct benefits are easier to explain but indirect benefits are better; and if we can continue to fund our collective actions not because it's a requirement or not, but because it's either the right thing to do or it's not.

Inside The Gated Area

This topic has come about because curling associations require more resources now than they have ever required before. Not only has the cost of doing business and maintaining the status quo been effected by inflation, but volunteer culture has not shifted in our favour, aging facilities are in need of repair or replacement, and there is a greater demand to do things differently now than in the past to meet the expectations of new generations, new audiences, new trends, and new technologies – all of which is welcome – but also cost more time, more energy, and more money than recycling existing processes.

The lifeblood of associations are members and membership fees – they comprise the core resources that allow provincial, territorial, and national curling associations to exist in the first place. For many other sports, membership fees are even steeper because they are the only or primary sources of funding for that sport – while curling has been successful in leveraging membership fees into significant additional sources of revenue from donors, grants, and major event operating profits.

If the cost of membership at your local community curling club, your provincial or territorial curling association, your national curling association, or all of the above is increasing, I say Huzzah!

If a not-for-profit curling organization is asking for more money it's not to enrich anyone personally, it's because they want to make curling more enjoyable, safer, and more accessible for more people and for a more unceasing amount

of time – ensuring that curlers can share the sport with their children, grandchildren, and beyond. Let's support that.

We find ourselves at a pivotal moment in the development of the sport of curling. From lochs and ponds to hundreds of curling facilities, hundreds of thousands of regular curlers, millions of Canadians that experience the sport every year, and whatever promise we breathe into the decades and centuries ahead. In this moment I am reminded of a renowned African proverb that says “If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together.” – so purchase your wristband folks, we're going inside the gated area.

Afterward: Membership Benefits

It's important to note that an individual curler's membership is with their curling club, that a curling club's membership is with their provincial or territorial curling association, and that provincial and territorial curling associations are members of Curling Canada. It is a package deal (as a club cannot be a member of only their provincial/territorial association or Curling Canada, it's always both).

Association membership fees are a transaction between a curling club and a provincial or territorial curling association, and between provincial or territorial curling associations and Curling Canada.

Most association membership fees are a per capita fee based on the number of individual curlers that belong to a member curling club. Across Canada, this fee ranges from \$10 - \$24 per person of which \$5 per person is paid by a provincial or territorial curling association to Curling Canada in exchange for membership in Canada's national curling association. Some provincial and territorial curling associations have a hybrid membership fee system that considers both the number of individual curlers that belong to a member club, and the number of sheets of ice a member club has. Previous to the 2015-2016 curling season, the per sheet assessment model was standard, though it was determined to be unequitable as curling clubs with more sheets of ice but few members were being charged a greater fee than clubs with few sheets of ice but more members (for example – clubs with 6 sheets of ice and 100 members were being charged twice the amount compared to clubs with 3 sheets of ice and 300 members).

Most membership benefits are delivered in a manner that flow from Curling Canada **to** Provincial/Territorial Association **to** Curling Club **to** Curler (or from a

place of origin to the curler along that order – e.g. Association **to** Club **to** Curler, or Club **to** Curler).

Following is a list of member benefits offered by provincial and territorial curling associations to clubs, or by Curling Canada through provincial and territorial curling associations. *Not all of the following benefits are offered in all regions of Canada, or they may be offered to varying degrees.*

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| <p>Competitions</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Club Championships • Provincial, Territorial, and Regional Tours • Stick Curling • Seniors, Masters, and Grandmasters • Mixed Team and Mixed Doubles • Under-15, Under-18, Under-20, Under-21 Mixed Doubles, and Youth Olympic Games • Under-25, University, and College |
| <p>Data, Information & Advocacy</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Research • Data Collection and Reporting (e.g. surveying) • Advocacy Tools and Campaigns • Communication (of Programs, Services, Information, Resources, Grants, and more) • Club Development Documents (e.g. sample successful grant applications; template policies, bids, and job descriptions; vendor reviews and sponsor contacts; advocacy tools; etc.) |
| <p>Education</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Curling Professional Training and Accreditation (see: CurlingPro.ca) • Coach and Instructor Training and Certification <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Club Coach Youth (NCCP) ○ Club Coach (NCCP) ○ Adult Learn to Curl Instructor • Ice Technician Training and Certification <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Assistant Curling Ice Technician ○ Curling Ice Technician • Business of Curling (see: BusinessOfCurling.ca) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Online Knowledge Centre ○ Webinars ○ Business of Curling Symposiums ○ Curling Club Strategic Planning |
| <p>Funding</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Scholarships and Bursaries • Loan Assistance • Gaming Funds (e.g. Casino, Online Raffle, Provincial/Territorial Lottery Funding) |

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| | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Event Hosting Opportunities |
| Programs | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adult Learn to Curl • Campus Learn to Curl • Development Camps • Youth Programs <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Curling 101 ○ Girls Rock ○ Ready to Rock ○ Youth Learn to Curl (Under-9, Under-12, and Under-18) ○ Rockstars (Under-12) ○ Hit Draw Tap (Under-12) ○ Singles Curling App • High Performance (HP) Programs <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Provincial/Territorial HP Programs ○ National NextGen Program ○ National Team Program |
| Promotion | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Curling Day in Canada • Curling Day in [Your Province or Territory] • Promotional Campaigns • Access to Canva (Graphic Design Platform) • Rock and Rings (School Curling Program) • Floor and Street Curling Equipment Rentals • Broadcast and Livestream of Spectator Events • Website and Social Media <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Featured Articles ○ Classifieds ○ Find a Curling Club • Awards and Recognition <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ 8-Enders ○ Volunteers ○ Coaches ○ Builders ○ Halls of Fame |
| Technology | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Curling I/O (online registration and club management platform) |
| Other | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Personal Accident Insurance • Advisory and Consultations • Equipment Loans • Discounts and Preferred Pricing with Sponsors and Partners, e.g. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Home and Auto Insurance ○ Car Rentals |



Bobby is a curling fan and player, as well as a former Club and Association administrator. As an ACP Master Curling Professional and the Senior Manager of Club Development and Member Services for Curling Canada, Bobby shares his passion for the Business of Curling with optimism that it will help grow the game.