

End of era with final Sask. Hospital bonspiel

[John Cairns](#), Staff Reporter / Battlefords News-Optimist

MARCH 31, 2015 03:39 PM



March 21 marked the final Saskatchewan Hospital annual bonspiel for outpatients who lived in approved homes in the vicinity. The winning team was the Jeremy Machin-skipped team who took home the Robert Saxton Trophy and the grand prize pool of \$34. Shown here are co-ordinator Doug Belyk, skip Jeremy Machin, third Kelly Eaket, second Alexis Jones, lead Robert Krilow and volunteer Lawrence Oborowsky. Photos by John Cairns

As anticipation of construction of a new Saskatchewan Hospital winds up, the operations at what has been a longtime favourite of curling enthusiasts at the hospital grounds are winding down.

The end is in sight for the building that is home to the Saskatchewan Hospital Curling Club. Earlier last month, it hosted its annual bonspiel for the last time.

Its official name is the Approved Home Operators Funspiel, and it has been a tradition at the curling club since 1977.

Six curling teams took part in the final funspiel March 21, packing the two sheets of curling ice at the rink for most of the day.

All teams took home some prize money, as well as a t-shirt as participant in the "Saskatchewan Hospital Final Bonspiel," but the winning team got to hold the Robert Saxton Trophy, named in honor of the early organizer of the event who donated the trophy for the grand prize.

According to a history of the event written by Saxton in 1985, which is part of the curling club's archives, the first event was held in 1977 in conjunction with inpatients at the Saskatchewan Hospital.

According to that history, the event proved so popular that from about 1978 onwards the participants were outpatients from approved homes, although some longtime members believe there was a mixture of inpatients and outpatients in the early years.

It is now entirely outpatients who participate. The event is open to male and female participants, and Saxton stated "many consider it, along with the outpatient camp and the Christmas party, as their social highlight of the year."

It is still true today.

Whenever the curling organizers and volunteers at the curling club see the participants around the community, the common reaction they hear is "when's curling?" says Doug Belyk, a co-ordinator of the bonspiel who has been active for years at the curling club.

Participation has fluctuated over the years, with an average of eight teams and upwards of 10 teams during some early years. Belyk remembers as many as 12 teams competing.

The bonspiel itself is usually held at the tail-end of winter, though Saxton had noted in his account that there were some "bitterly cold days and some proprietors willingly bring their people as far as 100 kilometres away."

The event has seen the help of volunteers over the years, including approved home proprietors and staff who donate their time and provide on-ice supervision for the curlers. The canteen is run by volunteers who serve up coffee, hot dogs and other items for a small price. Ice time is provided free of charge by the Saskatchewan Hospital and the Saskatchewan Hospital

Curling Club.

According to Belyk, in the beginning teams at or near the top would receive trophies, and then in 1999 the decision was made to give them a plaque they could put on their walls so it would not gather dust.

Around 2003, cash prizes were awarded for the first time, and that has continued. The prize pool for this year's event was \$34 to the top team, \$24 to the second place team, \$14 for third place, and then \$8 each to the remaining teams.

It's not a big prize pool and the winners usually have only enough money for cigarettes or hot dogs. In the end, this event really isn't about money — it's about the curling and having a good time, and the chance for the outpatients to socialize and enjoy the "roarin' game."

The curling club itself dates back to 1938, which was the first season in which games were recorded.

The rink used natural ice until the 1965-66 season. Starting in 1966-67, the curling club building was relocated to the top of the hill near the hospital itself.

"That's the reason why the rink was probably moved was because they were going to put the artificial ice in," said Belyk.

The main users of the facility over the years have included patients and staff at Saskatchewan Hospital. Eventually, it became available to other users as well who had no connection to the hospital.

The club was very busy. Volunteers recall that Mondays through Thursdays were staff curling nights. Friday nights were for the patients.

The Sask. Hospital rink played a role for a time in hosting action for the men's bonspiel.

"In the old days when they would have so many men's teams for the big bonspiel in town, they would use the Battleford rink, they would use this rink, the North Battleford rink," said Belyk. "There were like 128 teams who would go to the bonspiel in those days."

For several years, starting sometime in the 1940s, an active youth curling program was in place at the curling club.

This consisted of young curlers between Grades 1 and 8. According to Belyk the junior curlers were strictly children of the staff members in the early years, but that changed by the end of the program.

"They would come on Saturday morning and curl," Belyk said. That program lasted until 2004.

The highlight for the club, Belyk said, was when a team with two Sask. Hospital curlers, Henry Berg and Art Webb, teamed up with two North Battleford Granite club curlers to win the provincial senior's title, playing in the national senior's championship.

In 1963, the club was also represented in the northern playdowns for Saskatchewan in Melfort.

For years Sask Hospital Curling Club was one of three curling clubs serving the Battlefords, the others being the Granite Curling Club in North Battleford and the Battleford Curling Club in Battleford.

But the Granite rink was demolished several years ago, and curling has moved from the Battleford building, which now houses competitions and practices for the Battle River Archers. Former Granite and Battleford curling club members have moved on to form the Twin Rivers Curling Club at Northland Power Curling Centre.

The old Sask. Hospital Curling Club is the last one standing. But the building is at the end of its useful life.

According to longtime volunteer Lawrence Oborowsky, the main issue is the roof. On the west side, "the wet snow leaks onto the ice, but the roof is the worst. It's leaking so bad that the government doesn't want to fund any more money. It's going to cost too much," he said.

Volunteers also note the artificial ice plant is almost at the end of its life.

"It's very sad," Oborowsky said.

There is nothing firm yet on when demolition could start. In fact, the story goes that the plan was to raze the old building last year. But a new paint job was done on the building and the ice had already gone in, and so the decision was made to keep it going for one more season.

The volunteers expressed hope of another reprieve so the curling club building could continue on for a little longer.

But they realize the end is in sight. For these dedicated club members there are decisions to be made about where they can display the various trophies and other memorabilia from the club.

It's also an uncertain future for the Sask. Hospital annual funspiel in terms of whether it will continue at a new location.

Some of the participants at the Sask. Hospital bonspiel do curl at the new Northland Power rink regularly, Belyk noted. But the program there is run separately.

"It would be nice to be able to carry what we do over here and integrate it with what they do over there so these people could keep playing," said Belyk.

If the funspiel is going to move to the Northland Power Curling Centre organizers will need to figure out not only who they contact but also ice rental costs at the new facility. In their current arrangement, the Sask. Hospital ice surface is donated by the curling club, so it costs nothing for the approved home proprietors to use it for the bonspiel.

As it turns out, the low cost for curlers of using the Sask. Hospital Curling Club ice surface is among the many good things that longtime users will miss when the cozy old rink behind the main hospital finally comes down for good.

Said Belyk, "cheap curling is coming to an end when this building quits."