

# Roarin' game taking off in the U.S.

And that means importing new sets of curling stones from granite quarries in Scotland

*The Associated Press*

Somewhere in the Atlantic Ocean is a freighter loaded with 13 tons of coveted supplies, steaming their way toward North America. The cargo: curling rocks.

Their destination: New clubs across the United States, which couldn't get started because of a stone shortage after the sport made a splash at the 2006 Olympics.

"It's a good problem they have there," said Olympic speed-skating gold medalist Dan Jansen, a curling newcomer who got a chance to throw some rocks this month in a made-for-TV celebrity challenge.

Like Jansen, most Americans paid little attention to the curious sport with the clattering rocks until 2002, when it was the surprise hit of the Salt Lake City Games. But the Olympics were followed quickly by the off-season, and by the time the local curling sheet was frozen again, interest had sputtered.

American clubs were determined not to squander the attention again, so after Turin they scheduled "Learn to Curl" nights and beginners' leagues. New clubs were chartered — many in atypical locales like Tennessee, Arizona or California.

"It's fantastic how much it's taken off now," said Pete Fenson, the skip of the U.S. team that won the bronze medal in Turin. "We're happy to at least think we're part of the whole thing. We think it's a fantastic game and we want people to be exposed and interested."

Watching the sport on TV is one thing. But to start up a club means getting a set of the stones that are usually sculpted from granite boulders that fall from a



THE CANADIAN PRESS, FILE

2003 world women's champ Debbie McCormick: Americans high on the hogline

Scottish island called the Ailsa Craig.

And there weren't enough to go around.

So 40 new sets — each with 16 of the 20-kilogram stones — set sail from Scotland for Rotterdam aboard the Feederlink 3. From there, it's on to Montreal on the Maersk Palermo and ultimately to Stevens Point, Wis., the home of the national governing body.

The sets are earmarked for clubs in Minnesota, Arizona, Tennessee, Michigan, Colorado, Indianapolis, Wyoming, California, New York and Nebraska. Through the World Curling Federation's loan-to-purchase program, clubs can use

the stones while they get started without the having to shell out as much as US\$7,600 for a set.

That took care of the supply.

The sport's governing body is also working on keeping up the demand. This weekend's curling-with-the-stars event teamed non-curling Olympians with the top U.S. teams. Jansen joined Fenson's team, and skier Picabo Street curled with 2003 world champion Debbie McCormick.

"It's the same, really, with most of the winter sports, (including) speedskating," Jansen said. "Everybody watches it, and then it's, 'Where are they?' I would

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love for the curlers to get more exposure and more sponsorship dollars, because they deserve it, as I would for all the Olympians."

The event was taped last week at Whistler, near Vancouver, and scheduled to air on NBC on Sunday at noon.

Jansen wasn't about to start making plans to be back for the 2008 Games.

"I wouldn't have a chance," he said. "It's a talent, no question about it. Maybe for a first-timer, I was OK."

Fenson disagreed.

"Dan's a bit of a natural, and Picabo worked her butt off," he said. "We had the time of our lives. It's a nice way to promote curling as a social thing. Everybody's still trying to win, but they're having fun at the same time."

Since winning the first American Olympic curling medal in Turin, Fenson has become the face of the sport in the U.S. But no one can say McCormick hasn't done her share.

She's featured in the 2007 edition of a nude curling calendar — just in time for Christmas. Ana Arce, who has represented Spain and Andorra in four European championships, shot the pictures and also put herself on the cover, behind a strategically placed stone.

Thanks to the Olympic spotlight, last year's version sold 4,000 copies and attracted attention from *Sports Illustrated* to *Playboy*. Canadian Christine Keshen said the, ahem, exposure is good for the sport. "My hope is to help increase interest in women's curling," she told the *Curling News*. "I'm taking one for the team to show the world that the women that curl are beautiful, fit athletes."