

SPORTS

Youngsters swept up in challenge of curling

BY MIKE HAYAKAWA
Staff Writer

Are you searching for a sport for your youngster this winter? An activity that is affordable, provides a good workout, forces children to don their thinking caps and is something they can do most of their lives?

Although curling has a stigma as a pastime tailored to 'old fogies and elitists, many youngsters are proving otherwise by taking to the pebbled ice surface through youth programs at curling clubs.

"It's something you can play when you're six years of age and even when you're 68," says Barb Poole, Richmond Hill Curling Club manager.

"We try to advertise that we love to have kids and we've had club members go to elementary schools in the past to encourage our younger section to grow," says Robyn Scott, Unionville Curling Club's little rocks coordinator.

In the last couple of years, especially with the Olympics, youngsters have become a little more aware of the sport and we've tried to provide them with an opportunity to play ...

No concrete statistics are available on the game's growth at the "little rocks" level, for those ages six to 11, along with bantam and junior programs (12 to 20 years), but representatives of various curling clubs in York Region insist it's growing.

They say that's due to sev-

eral factors, not the least of which is expanding media coverage given to the sport in recent years, including this year's Winter Olympics, where Canadians claimed medals.

"In the last couple of years, especially with the Olympics, youngsters have become a little more aware of the sport and we've tried to provide them with an opportunity to play every Sunday," says Dave Dalton, Thornhill Country Club manager.

Ms Poole says the movie *Men With Brooms*, which depicted the sport from a comical viewpoint, might also have generated some interest.

Ultimately, though, Mr. Dalton says it's parents who decide if the game is suitable for their youngsters.

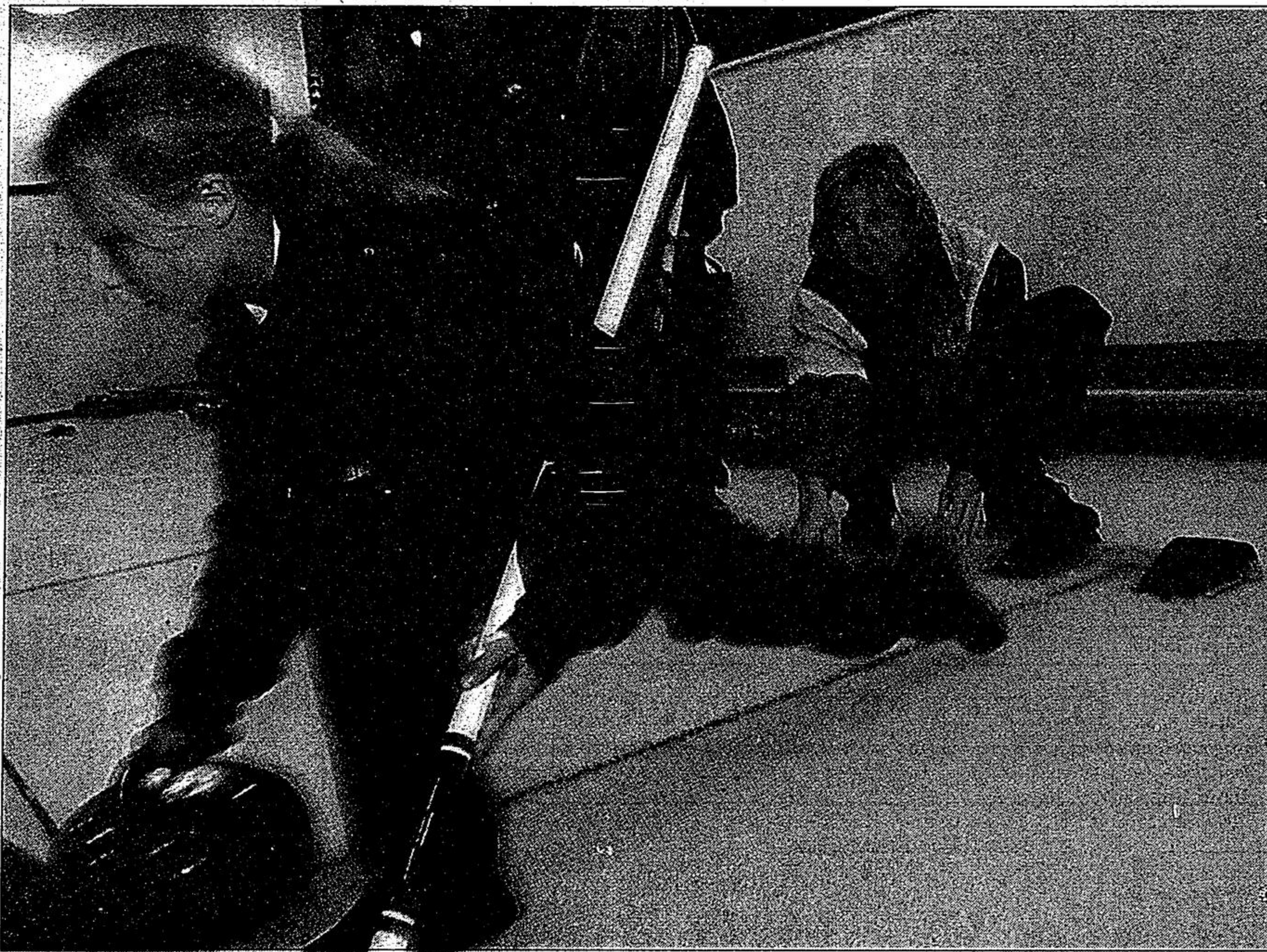
"While the game has had TV coverage, more than ever in recent times it's the parents who now see that curling is another sport to do during the winter. Parents are always looking for things to keep their kids busy."

An important factor for most parents is cost. Unlike other winter activities such as hockey, which can cost and arm and a leg, curling enthusiasts are quick to point out their sport is attractive from an economic standpoint.

Doug Bakes, an Ontario Curling Association spokesperson, says some curling clubs have joined with other sports for winter registration to lure new participants through cost comparison.

"In the fall and winter at a community centre, you find sports such as hockey, swimming, figure skating or volleyball setting up registration booths and some will allow curling clubs to register potential junior curlers.

"A parent comes along and sees that it might cost them \$450 to enrol their youngster for hockey or maybe \$300 for skating. In



STAFF PHOTOS/STEVE SOMERVILLE

Allyson Cowie (above) takes a shot after learning the throwing technique from coach Robyn Scott, while students Brenna Osaka, Erin Osaka and Megan Cowie look on at the Unionville Curling Club. Brenna (right) tries her hand.

the middle, you get curling, which might only cost a parent \$35 to \$40. A parent might say (curling) looks attractive. I think we've made some inroads in that area," he says.


Curling clubs will also supply equipment for youngsters, reducing expenses even further.

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