

CURLING CANADA COVID-19 RETURN TO TRAINING CASE STUDY: AN INTERVIEW WITH GERRY PECKHAM, DIRECTOR, HIGH PERFORMANCE DIRECTOR AND DANNY LAMOUREUX, DIRECTOR, CLUB DEVELOPMENT AND EVENT OPERATIONS

Who in the organization was responsible for organizing the return to training and competition plan?

Danny Lamoureux (Director, Club Development and Event Operations) was the key point person that gathered and compiled all relevant information from expert groups, the internal COVID-19 strategy group, as well as from key stakeholders. For the most part, the general COVID-19 medical information is 'industry standard' in terms of what you see in other Canadian sports. What was different for curling was the on-ice guidelines to ensure appropriate physical distancing and limiting group sizes. We had to create a standard of care for clubs to follow that changed how the sport could be played under the current pandemic restrictions. It was easy to get curling re-started as the sport typically involves relatively small numbers in very large spaces. It was more about creating the appropriate traffic flow and modifying how games are played by changing the rules around sweeping and in some cases, limiting team sizes. We also had to make sure that our guidelines could be adapted and modified as necessary in order to meet regional public health restrictions. As curling is a club-based sport and each club is an autonomous entity, we really could not mandate how they would return to the sport. Instead, we took an approach to work in collaboration with provincial Executive Directors as well as club representatives that meet on a weekly (and for some daily) basis to discuss issues and solutions that span grassroots through to high performance teams. While Danny was the key individual from Curling Canada, the return to sport process truly was a collaborative effort from the sport's community.

Was a set of guidelines published from the sport to its community?

Yes, they are available on our website at <https://www.curling.ca/covid-19/>. These guidelines were first published in July on our website and publicly through a press release afterwards. Every club in Canada received these guidelines in both languages with all necessary forms. Our resources are not restricted to registered members and were shared with approximately 1,080 different clubs with about 14% of those clubs not being affiliated with Curling Canada.

Were the developed guidelines reviewed and approved by an appropriate medical professional?

Yes. Through Gerry Pekham's high performance program, we had access to a medical team that provided input and review throughout the development process. The bulk of curling's membership involves individuals between the ages of 35 and 55. While not necessarily the at-risk population for complications related to COVID-19, the sport does include a substantial participant group older than this average age demographic. We really emphasized that clubs targeting the 60+ age group had to take a very close look at their planned operations and assess their membership's comfort levels prior to returning to the sport. We advised them to consider even stricter guidelines such as limiting to three person teams and using push-sticks. Some clubs with older members have opted to not return at this point. Similarly, some clubs that offer curling programs for the under 15 age group opted to not re-start their youth programming as well. While not related to increased risk if infected with COVID-19, this demographic is associated with an increased number of staff to supervise and be on the ice during play. We also think that it is important to point out that early on there was some speculative talk about how COVID-19 was more active in cold environments. Many clubs initially voiced concerns and hesitation to get back to the sport due to a perceived increase in risk. However, we could not find any scientific proof,

and brought everything back to the importance of the basics: maintain physical distancing, having appropriate traffic flow in place, modified sweeping rules, to name a few.

Did the International Federation (IF) provide any resource documents or information to help in the development of the return to sport plan?

No, the IF did not provide any resources for us to use during the return to sport planning process. We developed strictly Canadian guidelines that would work for our sport and adhere to the provincial public health restrictions. Once we published our guidelines they were shared with the IF.

Who were the key people involved in the planning and implementation of your return to sport and competition framework?

Our return to sport framework required the support and collaboration from every provincial Executive Director, club managers, as well as Curling Canada leadership. The pandemic greatly changed the level of communication and cooperation that we now have throughout the entire spectrum of grass roots to high performance within the sport community. Even tiny clubs in rural Canada are doing some fantastic things in terms of operations, online presence, and sport development that other larger clubs in urban centres can learn from.

As a winter sport that requires facility access, what was the process for getting athletes back into a training environment?

Everything started with the development of our safe return to sport guidelines. We focussed on helping clubs get re-started as that is the foundation of our sport. This has allowed curling to progress from a return to play perspective, which is different than a return to competition. Based on daily monitoring of club online presence, social media, and direct communication with club managers, we estimate that about 70% of curling clubs are open and operating. The remaining 30% are either waiting until the New Year to see if the pandemic situation changes or have opted to remain closed for the remainder of this season and look to re-open next Fall. Interestingly, some clubs have experienced an increase in membership as curling has been able to re-start in many communities where there are currently limited active living options. When we look at which clubs are open and which are remaining closed for now, it is also interesting to note that it is not related to large/small urban centres or large/small club memberships. Conversely, return to competition has been extremely difficult for our sport. High performance competitive play has not returned to normal at all. While some provinces are planning to have provincial camps and regional event tours, these are not elite training or competition opportunities. Our National teams will have to 'cherry-pick' regional events if available in their province. If not, they will be limited to what competitive play they can create within their own location. For example, a few high performance teams have decided to gather in one location so that they could play inter-team competitive games in the training environment. With a lack of high performance options, we have had to be creative and have shifted our focus on targeted training.

You mentioned that a return to competition has been difficult. How have you addressed the potential for travel within Canada for competitions?

For the most part, competitions are only hosted within a province or region for provincial/regional teams. Larger Bonspiels and weekend tournaments are not happening because the number of teams required to make them financially viable did not meet approved thresholds. There are no major TV

competitions planned until the January/February time period, and even those events have contingency plans in place. Different provincial health policies and requirements around quarantine for those coming from other provinces have created significant challenges for our teams even if they were looking to compete elsewhere in Canada. Furthermore, many of our high performance teams have professional careers and businesses outside of the sport and do not want to negatively impact them due to public perception of how they are managing themselves within the curling context. Our sense is that the curling population in general has been cautious and compliant through the return to sport process. Clubs and teams are doing their due diligence about inter-provincial or regional travel. There have been no cavalier approaches with a general willingness to adhere to and even go beyond requirements to make sure teams respected the local community and clubs they may travel to. As mentioned, this has all lead to some high performance teams collaborating and creating a unique training environment where they can gather in a single location for some inter-team play within a given province and city as opposed to formal competition.

With potential regional tours or events in the works, how is that going to compare to previous years' in terms of availability of competitions?

Tour events are going to have to have a limited number of teams in attendance, and not all provinces will be able to host them. We estimate that there will be a 70% - 80% reduction in the competitive opportunities for curlers in Canada. Most provinces have had very active tour schedules in the past, but now are having to re-imagine how that might work going forward and considering options like splitting events between clubs/cities. Some provinces are very interested in creating some mini tours within regions as it helps to identify teams for events like provincial championships. However, given the current situation it is going to be an uphill battle to get any volume of inter-provincial competitions started again.

What about international travel and competition outside of Canada?

There has been absolutely no interest expressed from our high performance teams to leave the country. In a normal year, the best competitive opportunities are in Canada already. In terms of elite play, we are in a holding pattern as we wait for the pandemic restrictions to relax so that provinces can begin to host high performance events hopefully in the New Year.

What has been your approach to symptom monitoring and health controls for returning clubs?

As part of our resource development, we created COVID-19 declaration, assumption of risk, and waiver forms for clubs to use and modify based on their needs. Through our website anybody can access and download these forms in either PDF or Word format.

Did you have to go through any special processes to ensure that athletes and staff at clubs had appropriate medical insurance in place that covered COVID-19 infection and treatment?

Insurance within our sport is up to each club to have in place. Curling Canada used their lawyers to draft advising documents so that clubs knew exactly what they had to ask their insurance providers. Outside of providing this guidance, it really is up to the clubs to ensure that the appropriate insurance was in place prior to re-starting operations.

Looking back over the past six months, what were the biggest ‘wins’ for your organization with respect to the return to sport process?

By far the biggest win has been the increased level of communication and collaboration through the entire curling community. From clubs to the provincial Executive Directors and with Curling Canada. The enhanced working relationships, willingness to collaborate, and open mindedness towards how to re-imagine club operations have put us in a great position for advancing the sport once the pandemic is over. The tone of conversation has completely changed within the sport community. As an example, we expected to get some push-back on our guidelines, in particular with changes to the sweeping rules. However, there have been no issues and participants are simply getting on board with the direction we provided. We truly are all going in the same direction and working towards the same end. Aside from the enhanced communication and collaboration, we would say that our early efforts to get clubs back to operations was also a big win for the sport.

On the other side of that question, what lessons have you learned or what would you have done differently?

While not necessarily specific to the pandemic, all of the public health restrictions concerning COVID-19 have highlighted the need to have a government recognized classification for high performance athletes within our sport system. Professional sports like the NHL, received some accommodation with how they could continue to operate during the pandemic. However, other Olympic and Paralympic sports are still largely viewed as amateur in nature but in reality, there are professional athletes in each of them. The financial viability of our top teams is attached to their prize money from events, TV appearances, and access to national team funding. Most of this was pulled away dramatically as the sport system had to adjust to the operating restrictions. This is an area that we are passionate about changing, and the pandemic has revealed that maybe we should have been more proactive about changing this cultural aspect of our sport. We should have done a better job of educating governments and policy makers about high performance sport and athletes in Canada, and how they may need special consideration in the event of a pandemic or similar situation. One other thing that we could have done better is with the clarity of communication early on. The language used by health authorities and medical providers was cumbersome and difficult for many of the leaders across our sport community. It took some time to work through the medical jargon and gain a clear understanding about the terminology being used. Perhaps we could have been more proactive in terms of creating resources that could be easily understood by the wider sport community, or at least creating a FAQ or terminology resource early on.

Do you have anything else to add?

We focussed on the return of our clubs throughout this conversation. The next chapter for us will be working towards creating an NHL-type bubble where we would have the opportunity for true elite competition like the Scotties Tournament of Hearts and Tim Hortons Brier as our women’s and men’s national championships respectively.