



# MASTERING THE COLD

scott sellers talks to two experts about canada's icy obsessions: hockey and curling

**EVERY WINTER, CANADIANS TAKE TO THE ICE** to indulge their passion for two sports that have become synonymous with the country. One is a game of incredible speed, grace and grit, while the other is a contest of keen precision and strategy. From big cities to small towns, hockey and curling are the lifeblood of Canadian sports fans through the months of snow and sleet. And when we're not on the ice, we're at home, watching games on television, sending the ratings for the National Hockey League's regular season, the Brier, the Stanley Cup playoffs and the Scott Tournament of Hearts through the roof, year after year.

"Both [hockey and curling] are a refuge for Canadians in the long winter," says CBC sports commentator Scott Russell. "We not only escape the cold, we contain it in rudimentary buildings and fashion games out of it. Hockey and

curling are a testament to the Canadian will to master the cold months." Russell is the author of one of two exciting books this fall that reflect on our obsession with the games of winter. His *Open House* is an affectionate look at the unique place that curling has in the hearts of Canadians—men and women, young and old, Maritimers and Westerners alike. Meanwhile, Andrew Podnieks offers *Players*, a handsomely illustrated encyclopedia like no other that celebrates every player who has ever laced up skates in the history of the National Hockey League.

As one of the sport's most respected historians, Andrew Podnieks knows that hockey is more than a game in Canada: it is a way of life; a constant that links one generation to the next. "It's hereditary in many ways," says Podnieks, "and I believe that hockey really is a symbol of

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the Canadian family. The rigours of the morning games and practices, the camaraderie it develops, the strength and teamwork needed to play successfully all help to make us better people, whether we become professional players or not.”

A lifelong hockey fan, Podnieks, 41, started his career

underlying negative qualities, namely the dictatorship the players were subject to at the hands of the owners,” he says. “However, today’s game de-emphasizes skill much to its detriment. The 1980s, with speed and excitement, was probably the greatest decade the game has known. That’s the kind of play we should be aspiring to recover.”



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as a hockey historian through a more literary route. While teaching English at a Toronto community college, he received an offer to try something that he had always wanted to do. “About eight years ago, a colleague of mine at the college where I taught also ran a small press,” explains Podnieks. “He asked me if I’d like to write a hockey book for him. I said yes. I haven’t stopped writing ever since.” The author of numerous books on hockey and some of the sport’s greatest players, Andrew Podnieks undertook the most ambitious project of his career with *Players*, an exhaustive encyclopedia of hockey lore that will delight hockey fans both young and old.

From Antti Aalto, an Anaheim Mighty Ducks draft pick who has played the majority of his career in the minor leagues, to Andrei Zyuzin, a yeoman defenceman for the Minnesota Wild, *Players* is an A-Z guide to the nearly 5,700 players who have played in the NHL, from the time the league was founded in 1917, to the end of the 2002-2003 season. Each entry offers a unique overview of the player, including career highlights, little-known trivia, and detailed information of life after retirement. “Our idea was to put together the most complete book of player biographies ever published for the hockey world,” explains Podnieks. And *Players* is filled with the legends that have shaped hockey history: names like Morenz, Howe, Lindsay, Richard, Lafleur, Dionne, and Trottier. But the book goes much further, providing information that will surprise and fascinate readers. “We agreed that the lives of the one-game wonders and small achievers would be of as much interest as the Orrs and Gretzkys,” Podnieks points out. “So, slowly and surely, I collected and researched information. It was a daunting task, but the book’s uniqueness made the challenge worthwhile and inspiring.”

And what does Andrew Podnieks think of the state of today’s game? Does he long for the hockey of yesteryear that so many long-time fans speak of with such fondness? “I think that the purity of the Original Six era had many

Still, no matter how hockey has changed at the professional level, it’s still a game that stirs the passions of Canadians, and keeps us going back to the rink every winter. Nobody knows this better than Andrew Podnieks, who not only writes about the games he loves, but also plays it every chance he gets. “I always played as a kid,” he explains. “Today, I play two or three times a week, year round.” Podnieks stops for a minute and, in finishing his answer, sums up the feelings that are no doubt shared by millions of Canadians, “I could never *not* play.”

Scott Russell has forged a successful career as an award-winning sports journalist. He is a familiar face to Canadian sports fans who watch CBC sports programs, including “Hockey Night in Canada,” and is also a bestselling author (*The Rink*, with co-author Chris Cuthbert). Inspired by his high school memories of Friday afternoon sessions at the curling rink, Scott Russell’s new book, *Open House*, is a heartfelt journey across Canada to explore a game that is one of the country’s most popular sports.

Curling is also one of the country’s most misunderstood sports, and no one knows this better than Scott Russell. Growing up in suburban Toronto, Russell was a stalwart player for his high school basketball team and a dedicated hockey fan. Yet his athletic prowess was put to the test when a friend invited him to curl at the local rink with a group of schoolmates. Russell was intrigued by the invitation. Both of his parents were avid curlers, but he himself knew little of the game. Confident and cocky, young Scott was convinced that curling would be a snap. After all, wasn’t curling the sport that other students played when they couldn’t make one of the real school teams? But everything that could go wrong did go wrong with Russell’s first attempt at ‘the roaring game.’ From his inappropriate attire (tight blue jeans and running shoes) to his inability to throw a rock properly without slipping and falling, Russell quickly gained an appreciation for curling’s

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intricacies. “It was good lesson,” laughs Russell. “A humbling one, but a good one.”

In addition to the skill necessary to excel in the sport,

feel very familiar. They are designed that way,” says Russell. “The playing surface gives way to the social centre – the lounge. It’s like going into the recreation room of



**“CURLING RINKS FEEL VERY FAMILIAR . . . IT’S LIKE GOING INTO THE RECREATION ROOM OF SOMEONE’S BASEMENT.”**  
**SCOTT RUSSELL**

what has struck Russell most about curling is that it is a game that does not discriminate along the usual athletic lines of physical prowess, gender, or age. In fact, it is the rare sport that blurs the line between participant and observer. “It is accessible. That’s its huge strength. Anyone of any age can play,” observes Russell. “There aren’t many sports that you can say that of.” He was also impressed by the incredible sense of community that the curling rink provides for the men and women who play. “Curling rinks

someone’s basement. It just feels comfortable.”

In its celebration of curling and its unique spirit, *Open House* introduces readers to some of the sport’s greatest personalities, including the late Sandra Schmirler, Joan McCusker, Colleen Jones, Kevin Martin, Russ Howard, Randy Ferbey, and the enigmatic Guy Hemmings. Yet Scott Russell also goes beyond the spotlight to explore the lure the game has for Canadians from all walks of life. There is Suzanne Gaudet, the 17-year-old Canadian junior

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## THE GREEN JACKET

LORNE RUBENSTEIN ON WRITING *MIKE WEIR: THE ROAD TO THE MASTERS*

**“IT WAS A GUT CHECK ALL DAY,”** Mike Weir told me by phone from Orlando in late 1997, an hour after he had qualified for the PGA Tour for the first time. His entire career has been a gut check, which is one reason it’s been so interesting to get to know him and follow him for more than a decade, and now, to have written of his journey in *Mike Weir: The Road to the Masters*.

Mike has passed test after test, culminating with the putt he holed on the 18th green on Sunday of the Masters in April to get into a playoff with Len Mattiace, which he won. Two million Canadians watched from the edges of their seats. I was lucky enough to watch from the edges of the fairways at the Augusta National Golf Club, and then wrote my book. Mike gave generously of his time to me during a series of interviews, as he always has. He believes that

the road he’s taken can show golfers and non-golfers alike that they can achieve their dreams. It’s a matter of accepting the inevitable problems that arise on anybody’s path, and then finding the solutions to them. As he likes to say, it’s important to emphasize the solutions, not the problems.

There’s always been something special about Mike. I first wrote about him in 1993 after following him while he won the Tournament Players Championship on the Canadian Tour. That was his first win as a professional, and I remember thinking that he had what it takes to succeed at the highest levels of the game.

I mentioned Mike’s vast potential in that first column. It was obvious that he was going to do whatever it took to develop his game. Mike had believed in himself since he was a youngster practising until dark on summer evenings at the Huron

Oaks Golf Club in Brights Grove, Ontario, where he learned the game. Motivated by his belief, and animated by his resolve and vision, he looked to the long term and wasn’t discouraged by short-term setbacks. As he writes in his foreword to the book, he felt he would win the biggest tournaments in the game. He believed he would win the Masters in particular.

I’ve followed Mike throughout his career — his wins, his setbacks, and everything in between. There was the time he hit a shot into the water on the last hole at a 1996 PGA Tour event in Vancouver. Had the shot come off, Mike would have got into a playoff. There was the time that he was tied for the lead after three rounds of the 1999 PGA Championship with Tiger Woods, but shot 80 the last round to fall back into a tie for tenth place. I spoke with Mike behind the last green after he finished, and it was clear that,

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champion who carries the incredible pressure of representing the country at the world junior championship. There are the Robertsons and the Patons, two families who operate (sometimes against daunting fiscal challenges) the Foothills Curling Club in tiny Eagle Hill, Alberta – a community so small that it doesn't appear on a number of maps. And there is Omar Heggstad, a recent widower from Frontier, Saskatchewan, who in seeking comfort from his wife's recent death, attends every match during the 2002 Olympic trials. "In this country and this game, everyone is welcome and accepted," explains Russell. "Curlers, whether they are in it for recreation or the very best at the Brier, are normal, everyday folks. That is a great attraction for me."

During the course of researching and writing *Open House*, the curling bug bit Scott Russell once again. Almost twenty-five years removed from his high school curling days, Russell returned to the pebbled ice, though it was

with some trepidation that he found himself in the hack beside former Olympic silver medalist Mike Harris. And how did Russell fare? "It was difficult to curl again after being away from the game for so long," he confesses. "I was self-conscious and afraid that I was going to make an ass of myself because it is a game which requires a certain degree of skill and finesse." Russell says he had no reason to feel uneasy, though. "As awkward as I looked and felt, no one laughed, everyone was supportive and an Olympian guided me, no questions asked." A large smile then crosses Russell's face. "This sport is a bit like riding a bicycle. You get the hang of it again very quickly."

As the days grow shorter, the nights longer, and the temperatures colder, Canadians will once again come together in rinks across the country. Regardless of whether the equipment of choice is rocks and brooms, or puck and sticks, the games of winter will continue to fire the passions of Canadians. ■

while his play that day bothered him, he would learn from it and move ahead. Mike won the Air Canada Championship three weeks later. That was his first PGA Tour win.

The best part of my work is getting the chance to know some players, on and off the course. I've enjoyed talking with Mike about golf and other subjects. Years ago I started taking copious notes about him, and chatting with him whenever and wherever I could. I've had the chance to play with him and to see what golf means to him, and the sheer joy he gets out of improving and hitting all kinds of shots; he's a creative golfer.

What a treat it was to watch Mike hit so many fine shots and hole so many crucial putts during the Masters, and to see the defending champion Tiger Woods slip the green jacket over his shoulders at the prize ceremony. I enjoyed spending time

with Mike as I chronicled the road he's taken to becoming Canada's first player to win a men's professional major championship. We spoke for hours one night in his hotel room a few weeks after he won

### HE BELIEVED HE WOULD WIN THE MASTERS

the Masters, when he was returning to the PGA Tour for his first tournament since then. Every shot was so vivid; I felt as if I were again back at the Augusta National Golf Club during that magical week.

Mike's a major player, and a man meant to win majors, since those long days and nights when he practised at Huron Oaks. He chose his road long ago, and has travelled it with vision and determination. I've been privileged to travel along for much of the journey, and to write of his trip in my new book, *Mike Weir: The Road to the Masters*.



PHOTO: PETE PATERSON

