‘Buff boys’ with brooms: Shifting representations of masculinity in Canadian men’s curling

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This paper explores a shift in masculine sporting identities associated with the sport of curling in Canada. We argue that as curling has become increasingly professionalized, there has been a corresponding shift in representations of male curlers that valourizes youth, strength and aggression, in contrast to a previous emphasis on maturity and sportsmanship. After a review of the history and context of curling’s popularity as a sport in Canada, we recount these representational shifts, drawing on official documents of curling associations and media coverage of the sport. At the same time, we suggest that extending conventional forms of sporting masculinity to curling sits uneasily beside new initiatives to encourage lifelong participation in sport. We draw on critical masculinity studies and sport studies to argue that age needs to be taken into account when mapping the diversity of masculinities. We further argue that sport is an important context for understanding complex intersections of age and gender, especially as physical activity is increasingly posited as essential to ‘successful aging’. We suggest that curling provides an instructive and under-studied example of how these issues conjoin in constructing aging male embodiment, and suggest some directions for further study.

Keywords: aging, masculinity, embodiment, curling, sport, media
‘There is a gentleman of mature age and portly stature, standing with a huge broom in his hands…’ (Cleaver, 1911, p. 38)

‘They lifted weights, ran on the track and worked the cardio machines til sweat poured from their skin and their muscles ached. It was a daily routine that earned the curlers a nickname: The Buff Boys.’ (Wyman, 2014, chap. 6)

This contrast between the ‘portly,’ ‘mature’ gentleman curler of 1911 and the ‘buff boys’ of 2014 encapsulates the shift in masculine identities associated with the sport of curling in Canada that we explore in this paper. According to historians, the Scottish developed curling as early as the start of 16th century, with Scottish immigrants introducing the sport to North America in the late 18th century (Reid, 2010; Tate, 2011; Wieting & Lamoureux, 2001). Once better associated with older, sociable – and usually beer-drinking – parents and grandparents than brawny 20- and 30-somethings, curling’s image has shifted as curling associations and the media have increasingly featured the bodies of younger, muscular men. Consider, for example, the television advertisement for the 2015 Ford World Men’s Curling Championship, endorsed by the Canadian Curling Association (CCA): elite curler John Morris (born in 1978), sweat running down his forehead and dripping from his nose, does bicep curls and rows with a roughly 20 kilogram curling stone. Dramatic percussion lends a sense of intensity to the ad, while the narrator remarks, ‘To be the best at your sport takes big commitment. You need to be fit. You need to be focused.’ As Morris punches two curling stones at the camera, the narrator continues, ‘You need to know when to throw ‘em and how to lift an entire nation.’ The links the advertiser

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1 The ad may be viewed at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v-wV40wWWf4
attempts to draw between musculature, intensity, aggression, youth, and curling play on new norms of fitness and gender – specifically masculinity – within the sport.

In this paper, we examine these shifting representations of masculinity in curling, mapping the relationship between masculinity in the sport and its increasing professionalization. We argue that as curling moves increasingly into the realm of professional athletics, associated representations of masculinity narrow. Furthermore, curling’s new focus on the accomplishments of the fit and active bodies of younger and more muscular curlers works to diminish the visibility of old(er) athletes and their achievements. We argue that this shift entrenches hegemonic masculinity in a sport that in some important ways has worked to celebrate a unique form of sporting masculinity, tied to the lives of older men.

Methods

The idea for this paper stems from our role as teachers of undergraduates and in the case of one of us, as a recreational curler. Shortly after the Sochi Olympic Games (February 2014), a student brought to our attention an interview with the Canadian men’s Olympic gold medal curling team broadcast on Canadian national television. The representation of curling masculinity presented during this interview, described in detail below, broke with prior popular understandings of curling masculinity. The curlers both physically embodied a strikingly new kind of curling masculinity and proudly celebrated it throughout the interview, leading the interviewer, Canadian television icon George Stroumboulopoulos, to declare the team ‘four of the biggest dudes from Sochi’ (Dettman, 2014). The student, an elite-level curler and coach herself, noted that this team marked a decisive shift in men’s curling identity, something that

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1 Although Morris’s age may not mark him as youthful in ways commonly associated with other professional men’s sports, in curling a man in his 30s with a muscular body and renowned fitness regime does signal youthful masculinity.
those within the world of elite curling and its governing bodies had noted. Over the next few years, we began to investigate this apparent change in men’s curling culture and its meanings for old(er) men’s sports and their public celebrations.

As Grindstaff and West (2011) suggest, ‘hegemonic masculinity is at once cultural representation, everyday practice, and institutional structure’ (p. 859). In a similar vein, Michael Messner (2002) claims that examinations of gender and sport need to be attentive to the various ways that the structure, performance, and representations of sport support and affirm certain gender expressions. Therefore, we sought to examine gendered and age-linked expressions of curling in various cultural representations, in its institutional structures (such as national and regional curling associations) and in its embodied practices. The research presented here, representing just one piece of our ongoing examination, focuses on an analysis of popular media representations of men’s curling, articles published on the Canadian Curling Association (CCA) website and the publicly available minutes of annual general meetings with the Ontario Curling Association (OCA) from 1982–2014.\(^1\) We focused our institutional analysis on the most populous and popular curling spaces. Although curling has a presence in many European countries and in the United States, its popularity in Canada is unmatched (Wieting & Lamoureux, 2001). While Canada is the leading country in curling popularity, the province of Ontario is home of the country’s largest curling association. When examining the popular representations of curling masculinity and men who curl, we limited our search to popular

\(^1\) Unlike many other professional sports, in Canadian curling there is no distinction between amateur and professional curling in terms of their governing bodies. The CCA and the OCA govern curling for all genders and levels in Canada and Ontario respectively.
sources from 1998 to 2016, coinciding with curling’s reinstatement as an Olympic sport. We conducted a search using online databases (such as the Canadian Business and Current Affairs database), with the keywords men, curling, brier, and Brad Jacobs. Approximately 50 relevant articles were located, with the vast majority originating in the Canadian press. We then analysed these articles in addition to material on the CCA website and the minutes from the OCA. Drawing on work by Hsieh and Shannon (2005), we conducted a directed content analysis, beginning with the idea that popular expressions of curling masculinity may be changing. We concluded that ideas about appropriate masculinity have indeed shifted in relation to the professionalization of the sport. The new masculine identity for the sport privileges an alignment between male curlers and other widely celebrated professional male athletes such as hockey players (see author, forthcoming). In this regard, it is instructive to examine this new curling identity through the lens of theories of masculinity as scholars have applied these to the general field of sports.

Masculinity

Hegemonic masculinity, as developed by Raewyn Connell, is an important concept to our analysis. Breaking with sex role theory, it defines hegemonic masculinity as normative, based on ‘a hierarchy of masculinities … [and] not a pattern of simple domination’ (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). In this respect, it may not be the most widely expressed form of masculine expression in a given place or time. Furthermore, hegemonic expressions of

1 The International Olympic Committee (IOC) introduced curling as a medal sport during the 1924 Winter Games. However, they demoted it to an Olympic demonstration sport in 1932, and it disappeared until 1988 and 1992, when it returned as a demonstration sport. In 1998, the IOC incorporated curling into the Games as a full medal sport and it has sustained this status ever since (‘Curling at the Olympics,’ n.d.).
masculinity vary by time and place and are subject to challenges from both women and marginalized men (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). The concept has not been without controversy, with scholars criticizing the extent to which it truly captures the idea of hegemony (Demetriou, 2000; Howson, 2006; Pringle, 2005). Others have argued that it cannot address both internal and external expressions of masculinity, that it sustains gender binaries, and that it overlooks more marginalized gender expressions (Demetriou, 2000; Christensen & Jensen, 2014; Peterson, 2003; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Thus, it remains both a useful and contested concept for gender scholars.

An important broadening of the theoretical conception of hegemonic masculinity comes from work by Jeff Hearn (2004). Hearn (2004) argues that we need to move ‘from hegemonic masculinity to the hegemony of men’ (p. 43). He asserts, and Christopher Matthews (2016a) confirms, that hegemonic masculinity and its scholarly applications do not always insist on an examination of the ways various social force work to produce the social category of men and related expressions of masculinity. Accordingly, one needs to interrogate the taken-for-granted assumption that men exist (and that their existence is beyond the social) and examine how this assumption is reproduced by various actors and institutions. Hearn (2004) argues that as part of this project, scholars should (in part) interrogate the ways that social institutions (like sport in this case) work to produce men as a ‘natural’ category; the ways some men come to be privileged over women and other men; and the ways some men’s practices come to be privileged over others.

In this regard, our study of aging sporting masculinities is indebted to Hearn’s work, in that we begin by viewing sport as a social institution that works to naturalize the social category of men through the divisions and rigorous policing of the gender categories ‘man’ and ‘woman’
(see also Pronger, 1990). These divisions are even present in the sports activities of young children (Messner, 2002). However, scholars rarely include age when mapping the diversity of masculinities, particularly in relation to sport. Some important exceptions include work by Spector-Mersel (2006), who argue that in spite of the fact that most researchers examine hegemonic masculinity in ‘early and middle adulthood’ (p. 73), they need to examine masculinity across the life-course in order to highlight the various ways that men do gender in later life. Similarly, King and Calasanti (2013) argue that scholars have not tested Connell’s concept of hegemonic masculinity in regards to age. They assert that ‘growing old can cost men the status and citizenship that they had recognized in younger years’ (p. 706–7). However, even their otherwise exhaustive list of ‘structuring activities’ that organize intersecting age and gender relations for men does not include sport. Phoenix and Smith (2011), on the other hand, do explore the intersections of aging and sport in their important investigation of aging bodybuilders, claiming that the body builders’ narratives pose significant challenges to the popular assumption that aging is inevitably tied to physical decline. However, they do not explore these narratives as gendered, overlooking the ways that expressions of masculinity intersect with bodybuilders’ stories of embodied aging.

Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) argue that sport is a foundational field that produces and publicly celebrates exemplars of hegemonic masculinity (also see Connell, 1990; Messner, 1990). Sport sociologists have a long history of examining both dominant (Bowley, 2013; Burstyn, 1999; Messner, 1992a; Jansen & Sabo, 1994; Gruneau & Whitson, 1993; Young, 2012) and marginalized (Adams, 2011; Grindstaff & West, 2011; Pringle & Markula, 2005; Pronger, 1990) expressions of masculinity in sport. However, scholarship on masculinity and sport mostly focuses on dominant masculine expressions. One of the reasons for this is that sport in the West
has is widely associated with the activities of young, hard, able-bodied, and ostensibly straight men. Importantly, hegemonic masculinity, particularly in the context of sport, is connected to the bodies of men (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Bordo, 1999). As Connell (1995) notes, ‘true masculinity is almost always thought to proceed from men’s bodies’ (p. 45). Sporting events, as cultural celebrations of strength, power, and most importantly extraordinary physical skill frequently display the exceptional bodies of male athletes (Bordo, 1999). Visible muscles, for example, are emblematic of appropriate masculinity, while in contrast the cultural understandings associated with softness are tied to inappropriate displays of masculinity and related femininities (Bordo, 1999). As hard-bodied athletic men are exemplars of masculinity, public discourse widely celebrates them.

As Michael Messner (2002) asserts, to understand sport in the West, one should ‘follow the money’ (p. xviii). He argues that the sports that garner the most public (and academic) attention, are generally highly professionalized men’s sports, oftentimes sports that privilege violent and aggressive play. Importantly, these sports are central to social understandings of what sport is and how appropriately masculine men should express themselves as athletes. As Christopher Matthews (2016b) argues, scholars should still consider sport a ‘male preserve,’ asserting that ‘sporting spaces … can be considered as sites produced by the performance of behaviors that are symbolically associated with patriarchy and are increasingly restricted outside of these contexts’ (p. 318). Messner (2013) stresses the importance of sports media here, arguing that the ‘sports-media-commercial complex consistently sells boys and men a glorified package of what masculinity is and should be’ (p. 115).

A small body of literature on sports communication has drawn out the significance of representations of aging athletes in sports media, including studies of sports celebrities in
baseball (Trujillo, 1991) and tennis (Atkinson & Herro, 2010). While age is not an explicit dimension of his analysis, Trujillo (1991) tacitly invokes it as he uses the framing of hegemonic masculinity to examine media coverage of American major league baseball player and sports celebrity Nolan Ryan over his twenty-five year career. Media commentators remarked positively on his development as he aged, describing how he learned over time to control his powerful pitches. However, when he pitched a no-hitter at the age of 43, it was his emulation of youth that took centre stage, with USA Today reporting that ‘nearly 4 million 43 year olds woke up feeling young’ (cited in Trujillo, 1991, p. 303).

Men’s team sports have a long history of association with normative masculinity and the appropriate socialization of boys (Pronger, 1990; Kidd, 2013). However, as Demetriou’s (2001) critique of hegemonic masculinity suggests, much of the academic work on masculinities has focused on the ways its dominant expressions work to marginalize women. Indeed, Connell’s original conceptualization of hegemonic masculinity demonstrates this kind of bias (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Demetriou argues that one of the results of this is that marginalized expressions of masculinity remain under-examined. More specifically, he contends that researchers tend to overlook the ways marginal expressions of masculinity work through a dialectical process to influence and shape what ultimately becomes hegemonic. In his words, it is important to consider the ways hegemonic masculinities, or a ‘masculine bloc’ (p. 343), ‘attempt to articulate, appropriate, and incorporate rather than negate, marginalize, and eliminate different or even apparently oppositional elements’ (p. 348).

As curling celebrates a new, more public profile, it exemplifies the potential to be an arena of complex and contested expressions of masculinity. Curling’s varying representations of masculinity, sometimes expressed through aging competitors, have the potential to contradict
other expressions of masculinity – specifically those associated with highly publicized professional sports and Olympic events. Therefore, as Demetriou’s (2001) work suggests, it is not surprising that Canadians may celebrate curling as a competitive winter sport that incorporates qualities such as age, thoughtful deliberation, and companionability while still celebrating its professionalization and rationalization through buff, young and sometimes aggressive men. The contradictions in public celebrations of curling therefore both disrupt and challenge as well as support dominant notions of an appropriate masculinity that includes aggression, physicality and youth. Our analysis, however, suggests that curling’s shifting masculine identity moves popular celebrations of the sport from sociable to rational, fat to fit and old to young.

**From sociable to rational: ‘I think I could win a gold medal in the thing with the broom’**

In spite of curling’s popularity, it has not attracted the same level of academic attention in the humanities and social sciences as other sports. Extant work includes some historical accounts (Maxwell, 2002; Mott & Allardyce, 1989; Pezer, 2003; Tate, 2011; Kerr, 1890), an analysis of the increasing professionalization of the game (Wieting & Lamoureux, 2001), an examination of the important role of curling in rural Canada (Mair, 2007), a health promotion study focused on rural women (Leipert, et. al., 2011), and a study of adult learn-to-curl leagues (Barrick, 2015). None of these studies give sustained attention to representations of age and gender (or their intersections) in the sport.

One of the reasons that academia may have overlooked curling is its relatively recent alignment with the world of professionalized (and commercialized) sport (Wieting & Lamoureux, 2001). Wieting and Lamoureux (2001) emphasize curling’s ‘long history of
sociability associated with bonspiels,\(^1\) or matches, wherein each one is associated with liberal hospitality by the host rink or club’ (p. 146). Recently, some media commenters expressed concern about the growing professionalization of the sport and the impact of that professionalization on curling’s traditional sociability. For example, a headline in a Canadian national newspaper asked, ‘Has curling lost its soul?’ (Fitz-Gerald, 2015; also see Gatehouse, 2014). Another journalist in a popular national Canadian magazine optimistically suggested that, ‘Curling will never be ruined,’ in spite of some Canadian play described by the author as ‘unseemly’ and ‘crude’ (Cosh, 2014, para. 3). However, his optimism waned throughout the article, as he later claimed:

The funny thing is that curling, even with money at stake, is formidably immune to most of the ugliness that modernity imposes on sport – the frantic marketing, the soul-killing training, the illicit performance-enhancers, the odiousness of billionaire ownership. Curling is unruinable … probably. (para. 4)

The shifting position of at least one curling association renders dubious the idea that curling is a sport immune from the corporate influence and commercialization of other professional sports. A review of the minutes from the OCA’s Annual General Meetings (AGM) from 1982–2014\(^2\) suggested a distinct change in the focus of the Association and its directors regarding promotion of the sport. In AGM reports from the 1980s, OCA directors described the importance of a masculine curling identity linked to ‘sportsmanship’ and ‘gentlemanly behaviour’. By 1991, these same curling authorities began to worry about two clashing curling identities, one emphasizing good conduct and the other aggressiveness and dominant expressions of

\(^{1}\) Bonspiel is the term for a curling tournament.

masculinity. At this time, the organization still privileged good conduct and ‘sportsmanship’, while citing concerns about increasing competitiveness in the men’s junior program. By 2010, the OCA seemed to resolve these competing claims for a dominant curling identity, celebrating curlers as conventional athletes and citing the future 2014 Olympic Games as ‘an excellent opportunity for promoting curling’ (OCA, 2010). The ‘manliness’ of curling thus narrowed to physical athleticism.

In line with growing concerns about the professionalization and rationalization of the sport, a Canadian provincial-level coach explained that after the 2014 Winter Games her province formally implemented a weight training program for its junior athletes. Likewise, in 2011, the World Curling Federation (WCF) boasted a renewed marketing agreement with Infront Sports & Media, citing 12 new sponsors, a new increasingly global awareness of the sport and ‘the sport’s entry into new markets,’ including China (World Curling Federation, n.d., para. 1). Over the same time period, the CCA published a report stating that curling clubs needed to ‘leverage’ the successful media attention generated at the 2014 Games into new curling members. For their part, they developed a new commercial advertising campaign and implored their members to develop club initiatives aimed at growing the sport in ‘new sectors,’ including establishing a social media presence (Curling Canada, n.d.).

At the heart of this contradiction in men’s curling identity is the need to attract large audiences to increase sponsorship dollars in order to maintain and promote the sport (Ontario Curling Association, 1991). As ‘buff boy’ Ryan Fry pragmatically asks: ‘If a sponsor is looking at a team that’s fat and out of shape, as opposed to a team that’s fit and looks like athletes, why wouldn’t they want to put money into our pockets?’ (cited in Spencer, 2013, para. 7). Fry
anticipates here our next theme – the connection between the professionalization of men’s curling and the shift in representations of curlers’ bodies.

**From fat to fit: ‘We don’t really see ourselves as curlers anymore, we see ourselves as athletes’**

Popular understandings of curling perceive it an inclusive sport, catering to all ages and fitness levels. Its reputation as an accessible sport is such that some people believe that almost anyone could compete at an elite level. As American actor Will Smith joked on *The Tonight Show*, ‘I think I could win a gold medal in the thing with the broom’ (Keith, 2014, para. 2).

There are several novel elements to curling that contribute to its popularity and accessibility, especially for those in later life. In curling, men and women can compete in gender-segregated groups (i.e., men’s and women’s curling) or non-segregated groups (mixed curling). It has modifications to accommodate those with various mobility issues, including handle and grip variations for wheelchair curlers and those otherwise unable to crouch to throw their stones. Curl BC, the governing body of curling in British Columbia (Canada), reported that people over the age of 55 years now comprise the largest group of newcomers to the sport (Curl BC, 2014). Furthermore, curling can be a relatively inexpensive sport, requiring little in the way of sophisticated equipment; community-based clubs offer the opportunity to curl for modest fees.

Curling clubs have capitalized on curling’s accessibility. In Canada, for example, it is one of the

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1 Curling is usually played in teams of four, with each player throwing two stones. At the club level, these can be mixed or same-sex teams, though elite curling is overwhelmingly sex-segregated. Mixed doubles – with teams of one man and one woman – will debut at the 2018 Winter Olympics.

2 Curling clubs range from private clubs, often associated with golf clubs, to the less fancy, volunteer-run community clubs that are common in small-town and rural Canada. Mair (2009) describes the latter as important community gathering spaces, with social areas more reminiscent of the ‘family rec room’ than the country club.
nation’s most widely-practiced and nationally-celebrated winter pastimes (Statistics Canada, 2005). Curling is not only popular in Canada, but with the rise of curling as an Olympic sport, the WCF has reported national curling organizations in 54 countries, including Qatar, China and Turkey (‘Member associations’, n.d.). However, the ‘ordinary’ bodies – and often aging bodies – that populate Canada’s curling rinks may be receding from public view.

In the recent past, curlers, even at the most elite levels, have challenged contemporary Western ideas of what an athletic body should look like. As Wieting and Lamoureux (2001) document, the cultural history of sport is about producing mythical athletic bodies – bodies, through rationalized training and comportment, that are exceptionally different from their non-athletic counterparts. Drawing on the work of John Hoberman, they argue that although athletic bodies differ widely by sport, they are linked through ‘mystical features of sport conduct, preparation and success’ (p. 145). Unlike other sports, which are tied to intense off-field training, leaving the body visibly changed, the potential ordinariness of the curling body makes it problematic in the world of elite-level sport. Furthermore, while other sports, such as swimming and wrestling, are premised on issues of bodily asceticism, Wieting and Lamoureux (2001) argue that curling has ‘extra-kinesthetic aspects of bodily style, comportment and training’ (p. 146). As many elite athletes rally around a sport ethic, celebrating ‘No Pain. No Gain,’ curling culture is instead tied to conviviality, drinking, and community building.

Although some in the press lament the increasing rationalization of curling visible in its new links to intense training and fitness, most have welcomed the shift in visibility of certain forms of bodies. Journalist Joe Pavia (2015), belonging to the former group, fêted Canadian and multiple world champion Canadian curler Randy Ferbey in the Edmonton Sun as the ‘last of a dying

1 In 2011 more than 650 000 Canadians curled (Canadian Curling Association, n.d.).
breed’ (para. 1). In the interview, Ferbey noted that serious training incompatible with imbibing in alcohol had usurped the social nature once central to curling’s identity, one that involved consuming alcohol with teammates and rivals alike. However, most journalists seem unalarmed by the increasingly chiselled bodies associated with elite men’s curling. For example, a headline in the Wall Street Journal proclaimed, ‘Curlers: They’re not so fat anymore’ (Costa, 2014). The accompanying article argued that this shift in curling identity might be attributed to the sport’s re-introduction at the Olympics. However, a statement by 1998 Olympic gold medalist curler Mike Harris belied this claim. ‘When I was in Nagano [for the 1998 Olympic Winter Games]’ he said, ‘it was crazy to think of anyone working that hard’ (Costa, 2014, para. 9). Reporter Brian Costa (2014) summarized the shifting nature of elite-level curling and the potential tensions created therein:

Curling … is one of the world’s most social sports. It is considered proper etiquette for the winning team to buy the losing team a round of drinks … But at the top level of the sport, the fitness boom is putting an end to that tradition. (para. 12–13)

As most in the media embrace this shifting bodily comportment in curling, they celebrate one Canadian curling team in particular as representing the new ideal type of curling masculinity and its associated corporeal style – the ‘buff boys’ we refer to in our title. During the Sochi Olympics, the Canadian media lauded Brad Jacobs and his ‘muscular teammates’ (Cole, 2013) for their commitment to intensity, aggressive play, and vigorous workout regimes (e.g. Hutchins, 2014; Associated Press, 2014; Cosh, 2014).¹ As recounted earlier, nowhere was this new curling style more widely celebrated than during the team’s post-gold-medal-performance

¹ Not everyone celebrated this new commitment to a ‘buff’, aggressive style of play. For example, the media also widely reported on the British curling team’s disdain for Brad Jacob’s boisterous comportment at the Olympic Games (Cosh, 2014; ‘Uptight British’, 2014).
interview with George Stroumboulopoulos (Dettman, 2014). During the interview, Stroumboulopoulos questioned the team on the culture of curling, pointing out the apparent shift in its masculine identity:

The era of the jokes that curling is in the Olympics because it means that someone’s dad can win a medal is different because there are videos of you guys lifting weights [shows members of the team working out in the gym] and being super agro, pissing off the British team [team laughs]. There’s a different tone from you guys that we haven’t really seen from a Canadian curling team before.

Team Jacobs’ lead, Ryan Harden replied: ‘I think for … our team, the fitness level, we try to do everything as high as possible … And, we think that’s a big part of the game and we don’t really see ourselves as curlers anymore, we see ourselves as athletes.’ Harden’s brother (Team Jacobs’ second) bragged that people in the Olympic village had mistaken members of the team for bobsledders and hockey players, boasting, ‘We’ve changed the perception a little bit’, a comment the CCA echoed on their Twitter feed shortly after the broadcast (Canadian Curling Association, 2014).

The press, the public, the CCA, sponsors, and even some elite-level curlers appear to laud this new normative masculinity, embodied by these buff weightlifting curlers who resemble bobsledders and hockey players. Canadian Industry Online, for example, claimed that ‘Curling organizations, like the CCA, have been working to promote healthy lifestyles through physical fitness in curling for many years (‘Canadian Curling’, 2014). Brad Jacobs said that in order to be a great curler, ‘you have to be in great shape’ (p. 10). Taking this one step further, during the Olympic Games, Maclean’s, a popular Canadian news magazine, posted a series of tweets from

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1 The ‘lead’ is the curler who throws the first two stones in each end of a match.
2 The ‘second’ is the curler who throws the second two stones in each end of a match.
Canadian national sports writers and the public praising curlers for their ‘jacked’ bodies (Hutchins, 2014). According to one prominent Canadian sports writer (Bruce Arthur), the curlers ‘look(ed) like they could literally throw the rocks’ (cited in Hutchins, 2014). The media celebrated these hard-bodied curlers as heteronormative masculine sex symbols with one fan commenting, ‘Ryan Harnden can have my children’ (@raingull cited in Hutchins, 2014). Despite the fact that hard bodies do not necessarily correlate directly with fit and healthy bodies, the media, CCA and Team Jacobs’ conflation of muscles with physical fitness is ableist, limited in scope, and not accessible for everyone. As curling’s movement towards more youthful, muscular, and hegemonic forms of masculinity captures the imagination of those engaged in curling and its associated discourse, it is important to ask what this shifting identity means for older men and understandings of their embodied masculinity.¹

**From old to young: ‘Too old to be an Olympic figure skater? There’s always curling’**

As noted in our literature review, there is a dearth of work critically examining intersections of aging and masculinity or asking, as Edward Thompson (2006) does, ‘To what extent is an elder man recognized as a man?’ (p. 633). Thompson’s question signals the struggles for both researchers and the public to understand expressions of masculinity and gender as broadly tied to the bodies of old(er) men, where, problematically, ‘aging over shadows gender’ (p. 633).

Although the reasons for this are multiple, Thompson (2006) argues that dominant expressions of masculinity (and specifically those tied to hegemonic expressions) often appear to privilege activities considered incongruent with the lives of old(er) men. Significantly, sport is a field where, for the most part, old(er) men seem to disappear from the public eye. Outside of an

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¹ Another phase of our research, currently in progress, is tackling these questions through interviews with older curlers and ethnographic work in local curling clubs.
Olympic year (where the activities of women athletes are more visible), the sports that national television in North America celebrates are the sports young, professional athletes generally play, while the activities of later-life men, women and others receive little to no public attention. Thus sports media coverage works to generate a common-sense idea that real sports (or the sports that matter) are played by young, aggressive men. Until very recently, curling represented an important challenge to this masculine sports hegemony.

Tate (2011) reports that newspaper coverage of curling in the 19th century frequently observed the predominance and importance of older curlers. An article in the Duluth Sunday News-Tribune, for example, remarked that ‘It is among the older players … that the present strength of the club lies’ (cited by Tate, 2011, p. 54). Popular understandings of (older) age and gender intersected in curling’s portrayal as a ‘manly’ sport in 19th century Canada (Mott, 1983). ‘Manliness’ was not just a reflection of physical prowess, but maturity of character – encompassing ‘decisiveness, clear-headedness, loyalty, determination, discipline, a sense of charity and especially the moral strength that ensured that courage would be used in the service of God and Right’ (Mott, 1983, p. 58).

Prior to the 2014 Sochi Games, the North American popular press remarked that curlers were often some of the Olympic village’s oldest resident athletes (for example see Deitsch, 2006; Friscolanti, 2010). An ABC News headline quipped, ‘Too old to be an Olympic figure skater? There’s always curling’ (Lupkin, 2014). Reporter Peter Applebome (2010) called curling ‘the Olympic sport for the rest of us’ (para. 2). Other publications focusing on recreational curling, such as Senior Living Magazine, extolled the virtues of curling for those over 55 years:

The rewards of curling are no different than those of most recreational sports – mastering a skill, exercise and the opportunity to socialize with friends. When the game concludes and handshakes
are exchanged, curlers head to the lounge for some refreshing libation and convivial conversation—a great way to finish off two hours of healthy recreation. (Blevings, 2014, para. 5)

Charles McGrath (2010) from the *New York Times* declared curling ‘a sport you can keep for a lifetime’ (para. 22), and community newspapers like *The Hamilton Spectator* and the *Coast Reporter* have featured stories of late-life curlers (aged 100 and 87, respectively) still enthusiastically engaging in the sport after decades on the ice (Milton, 2016; Hill, 2015). *The Edmonton Journal*’s recent story on Canadian curler Vern Hafso focused on his shift from elite-level men’s curling to senior men’s curling, calling Hafso ‘a walking, talking advertisement for the enduring appeal of the roaring game\(^1\) and how it can do a body good’ (Barnes, 2016, para. 5). Elite-level curler Randy Ferbey remarked that he would like to ‘restore the lustre of senior curling,’ citing the numerous benefits associated with the sport: ‘It keeps you out of the house and gets you social instead of sitting in the house all day watching television’ (quoted in Robb, 2015, para. 1 & 8).

Recognizing the athletic pursuits and experiences of older men is challenging in our current cultural context (Drummond, 2008). The downward age shift in the public celebration of men’s curling is evident in Team Canada’s contingent over the past three Olympic Games. For example, during the 2006 Olympics in Turin, Italy, Team Brad Gushue recruited and promoted 50-year-old Russ Howard\(^2\) to *de facto* skip,\(^3\) allowing him to call shots during their matches. The media focused on the positive relationship between Howard and the much younger Gushue,

\(\text{\footnotesize \(1\) Curling is called the roaring game because the stones make a roaring sound as they pass over the pebbled ice.}\

\(\text{\footnotesize \(2\) At 50 years, Howard is the oldest Canadian to win a gold medal at the Olympic Games.}\

\(\text{\footnotesize \(3\) The skip is the captain of the team, signalling to his/her teammates where and at what speed (‘weight’) to throw the stone and how hard to sweep ahead of the stone’s trajectory.}\

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lauding the experience and maturity a player like Howard brought to the team (Short, 2006). A headline in *The Ottawa Sun* even problematically praised Howard, claiming ‘No rockin’ chair for Russ: Forget the Viagra and Depends,¹ Howard’s going for gold at age 50’ (Lopresti, 2006).

When Kevin Martin, a 44-year old athlete, known as ‘the Old Bear’, led the Canadian 2010 Olympic men’s team, he commented: ‘I will not be a sex symbol … Maybe at an old-age home’ (Friscolanti, 2010). However, by 2014, the press coverage focused almost exclusively on Jacobs, the 28-year-old sex symbol and skip of the ‘buff boys’, for his commitment to fitness and pumping iron.

Similarly, while a 1998 article in the *Christian Science Monitor* championed Olympic curling as ‘providing a nice counterpoint [to other Olympic sports]’, claiming, ‘Curling is for the disciplined and not-so-hip’ (Looney, 1998, p. 4), by 2014 the Canadian media celebrated curling as ‘the new cool’ (MacGregor, 2014). Canadian author Roy MacGregor (2014) noted, ‘curling jokes are falling flat … curling is suddenly cool, it’s certainly sexy – and it’s increasingly young and fit’ (para. 1 & 3). He gushed, ‘And it is also getting younger, at times much younger’ (para. 11). Two years later MacGregor (2016) embarked on a wholesale erasure of curling’s once alternative sporting masculine identity. Associating curling with the sporting pursuits of the young and sculpted, he asserted:

The Brier might once have been considered a world of recreational curlers who smoked while playing and conceded early in order to get to the bar. There was even one infamous moment prior to the 1988 Calgary Winter Games, where curling was a demonstration sport, when two of our curlers had to be

¹ Stereotypes about masculine aging are clear in the writer’s choice of signifiers here: Viagra, a treatment for erectile dysfunction, and Depends, a brand of adult diapers used for bladder incontinence, are both conditions associated with later life.
ordered to lose weight after a fitness test found that neither could do as much as a single sit up. No
more. (para. 15-16)

Importantly, MacGregor is not erasing curling’s historic association with the achievements of
older people. However, his mocking of the practices associated with a once-revered men’s
curling culture does work to degrade the value, and ultimately the once-celebrated achievements,
of old(er) men in bodies more ‘ordinary’ than those associated with Olympic athletes. As he does
this, he ignores the profound skill and dedication of these athletes and instead lauds a muscular
masculinity in line with normative hegemonic sporting masculinity more generally. The results
of these tensions – between representations of curling as an acceptable sport for those who wish
to embody an alternative form of masculine expression and representations of the sport practiced
by the ‘buff boys’ of Team Jacobs – may be alienating for those men (specifically those in later
life) who will not or cannot express hegemonic forms of sporting masculinity.

Conclusions: ‘As for curlers looking more athletic, no one would argue that this change is
for the worse’

We have argued that there has been a significant shift in representations of men’s curling,
from sociable to rational, from fat to fit, and from old to young. It is important to question what
this shift in masculine athletic identity means. Common-sense understandings suggest that a new
curling identity emphasizing physical fitness is good for the sport, increasing sponsorship
opportunities while decreasing the waistlines of (male) curlers. Who could complain about a
sport that shed its ‘fat’ identity for one aligned with youth and strength? Reporter Brian Costa
(2014) asserts, ‘As for curlers looking more athletic, no one would argue that this change is for
the worse’ (para. 17). We contend, however, that this shift in curling identity works to reinforce
public celebrations of youth and masculinity within sports cultures, and as curling moves to
celebrate youth and strength as the dominant masculine style, it risks erasing old men and their
athletic accomplishments from public view. Alternatively, it places pressures on later-life men to develop visibly muscular bodies and fitness levels that may be difficult or impossible to sustain in later life. As sport culture in the West celebrates young men and their achievements (Drummond, 2008), curling has traditionally offered an important break with dominant notions of masculinity, providing one of the few opportunities for the public to admire a different kind of man and masculine style, one linked to conviviality, maturity and older bodies. Thus, drawing on the language of Mary Louise Adams (2011), we wish to problematize curling’s ‘macho turn’ (p. 30).

Our work suggests and highlights a number of opportunities for future research. For example, beginning in 2018, mixed curling will become an Olympic sport, providing a potential site for examining constructions of gender and age in media coverage of mixed versus gender-segregated sport. Furthermore, because recreational curlers include men and women who range from very young to very old, opportunities exist for the study of interactions of gender and age across the lifecourse, and of how these may forge new understandings of embodied aging. Finally, curling provides a locus for an examination of the ways that later-life fans engage with representations of sport. In Jaye Atkinson’s (2009) review of age in sport communications literature, she cites a study by Krizek, who argues that later-life fans value the ‘imperfect nature’ of baseball players’ bodies:

In baseball you still see guys with a belly hanging over their belt. You see guys who can’t run so fast, maybe because of an injury or maybe because they just don’t run so fast. But they still play. … You appreciate imperfection and it’s okay to a certain extent to be imperfect in baseball. (cited in Atkinson, 2009, p. 9)

In the same ways that baseball fans accept the imperfections associated with ball players, perhaps curling can present an arena of inspiration. If the media and sporting organizations
continue to positively represent elite-level curling bodies that are older and less stereotypically fit than the bodies of other elite-level athletes, more diverse representations of positive aging might proliferate.

To conclude, we argue that curling and its varied representations are an instructive site for academic inquiry, speaking directly to issues associated with sport, gender and age. As the media both produces and reproduces a new curling identity that celebrates the bodies of young, fit, muscular men, it is important to explore the potential impact of such a shift on curlers and non-curlers alike.
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