

## Stones in the house

**The BBC would have you believe that the best bits of the Vancouver Winter Olympics involve breakneck speed and multiple collisions packaged in short bursts either by the IOC or by their own producers. Thanks to the red button Mick Owen has developed an in-depth appreciation of the more sedate but fundamentally more satisfying sport of curling.**

"It is never difficult," wrote PG Wodehouse, "to distinguish between a Scotsman with a grievance and a ray of sunshine" and if you only sampled Great Britain's curling skips at the Vancouver Olympic Centre in the closing games of their respective campaigns you would say he was right. David 'Muddy' Murdoch and Eve 'Moody' Muirhead both defined 'saturnine' for large parts of their last few games as they struggled to make the medal rounds. Murdoch – who really is called Muddy by his team mates – made the play-off but Muirhead, whose only nickname seemed to be the rather inaccurate Ice Queen that someone in the crowd had sewn neatly to a Union Jack, ended in a tie for sixth place with Germany, Japan and Russia. Gloom descended and furrow-browed Scots used an impressive array of practised phrases to explain the poor results; Murdoch is world champion remember. However, despite Muirhead claiming the Olympics as "just another championship" and one of her team "looking forward" to the "big Scottish champs next week", nobody in a GB tracksuit was assaying optimism.

Unless of course you count the most positive person possibly in the world ever, Rhona Martin, who skipped Great Britain to a gold medal in 2002 in Salt Lake City. Thanks to the BBC's digital coverage of this year's events anyone with the necessary stamina and insomnia has been offered the opportunity to hear more from Rhona than perhaps from their own spouse over a similar period. Games of curling at this level go on for between two and three hours, there are longeurs aplenty as the players cogitate and with every one of the ten teams playing every other one there are a lot of games and a lot of pauses in the action. For every one of both the women's and the men's teams' total of 19 games Martin has been in the booth offering expert comment, insightful psychology and just plain banter with her lead voice, Steve Cram. What a combination: the BBC's head of athletics and a housewife from Ayrshire; one prone to dour premonitions of doom and one who reckoned, when the Swiss skip Miriam Ott was operating at 100% accuracy, "That can only go down."

Cram may not be able to match Martin's sunny optimism – "a seven-point lead is nothing in curling" – or her prescient knowledge of the myriad options – "three here" when there was precisely one GB stone counting – but he could match her enthusiasm for the sport which he was inspired to follow by Martin's 2002 success. Indeed, in a piece of television that bordered on surreal Cram spoke about his love affair with the game and shared insights with Carl Lewis, who claimed to share his fascination. While Britain and possibly Japan played out a standard fourth end, two athletics greats swapped news and gossip, although what went unsaid was as illuminating as Lewis's "I'm here with MacDonalds." Cram disingenuously asked Lewis his opinion on the latest star in the firmament of sprinting, Usain Bolt. Champion sprinter and world citizen Carl Lewis mumbled, "I don't see much of him" and went on, unbidden, for some minutes on how he likes to work with "the youth". Cram, a true diplomat, made no attempt to ask his question again and the speak your weight machine left the box when the end ended, allowing Martin back in to debate the best place to get lunch and plead, on air, that Cram forgo the chilli.

This is a gentle and courteous sport and there seems little chance that a curling commentator would remark, as the chap at the ski cross event did, that a participant had done well to come back from the injury sustained "when he fell down a ravine under the influence of alcohol". It's a bit like cricket: mannered, unhurried and more than a tad arcane. There are few joys to match an afternoon in the company of the BBC's Test Match Special team as they describe the movement of busses, the state of the nation's hedgerows and occasionally some desultory play but a late evening with Cram and Martin at the curling is one of them. Their daunder around the correct dress for recreational curling, inspired by the Norwegian men's pantaloons, was a masterpiece of vague relevance, topical reference (apparently pyjamas are more acceptable on a curling rink than at your local Tesco) and gentle humour. Martin is fascinated briefly by the USA's third's shoes; Cram gets amused at the "good Scots word" 'guddle'; Martin explains the GB attitude to substitutions (apparently we don't hold with them); and Cram gets her to explain the difference between "a canny tap back weight" and "hack weight", passing on a complaint from his oft-featured Canadian cousin who, despite each curler being individually miked, couldn't understand a word the British team said to each other.

Without doubt, the language is part of the charm of curling and the viewer has plenty of time to work out why the USA skip would be shouting down the ice for a 10 while tapping the ice, then a stone three yards away and finally lying the end of his broom at the edge of the house. The 'house', of course, is a set of circles and each circle is described both [www.theleisurereview.co.uk](http://www.theleisurereview.co.uk)



Dave Murdoch casts the first stone

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Eve Muirhead: medal prospects on ice

Photo courtesy of Steve Lindridge, Ideal Images ©

by its colour and by its distance from the centre, which is the 'button' – as in "should he draw the button and take his one or should he try for the double take out and blank the end?" Whichever he did it was always "vital" that he get it right and this is where the two British skips went wrong; that, and, in Muirhead's case, not dealing with the consequences of failure very well. When push came to shove – or draw came to throw – both British teams, and in particular their skips, kept getting it wrong. The pressure told. Murdoch made a bad decision in the tenth end of the play-off and then played the mis-chosen shot so badly that Niklas Edin, under huge time pressure, could pick off both of the British counters and force the extra end. The errors made by 19-year-old Eve Muirhead were certainly as bad but her reaction was worse. As the pressure mounted and her game deteriorated so her brow became furrowed, her stare became fixed and the fire in her eyes simply died. There was no need for her to kick a stone or break a broom for anybody who has brought up children to recognise a full-blown sulk. With the British chef d'equipe struggling to justify the £6.5 million budget that bought only one medal and the Royal Caledonian Curling Club reviewing its triumphal series of come-and-try events ("See [www.trycurling.co.uk](http://www.trycurling.co.uk)," says Rhona) the question springs almost unbidden to mind: "Did any of the £1.1 million spent on the Murdoch/Muirhead quest for gold get spent on a sports psychologist?" If so, he or she wants their legs slapping, as indeed did Eve.

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