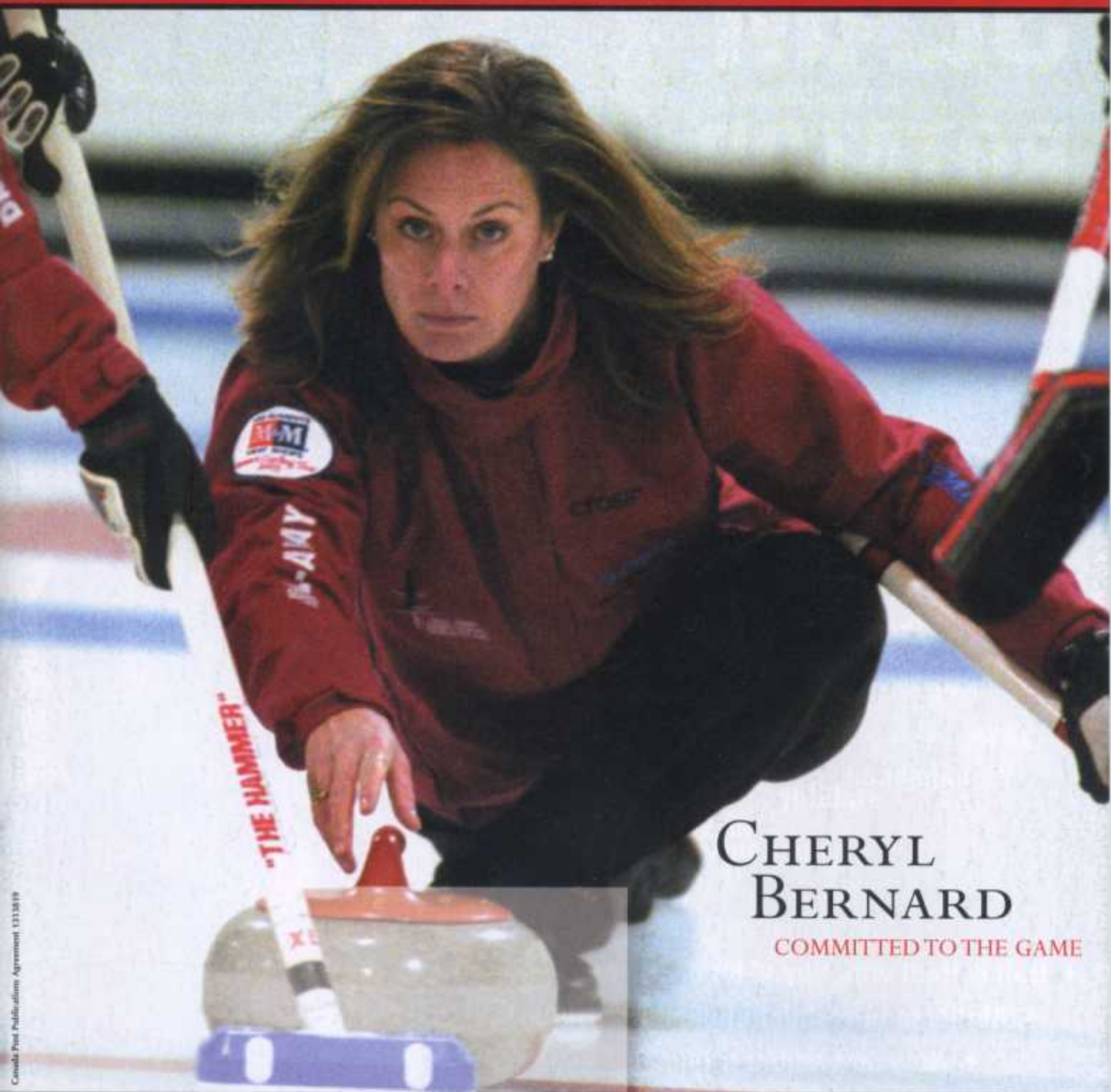


Opening Shot \* Money Chase \* Juniors \* Trivia \* Harry at Large

# SWEEP!

Jan/Feb 2004

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CHERYL  
BERNARD

COMMITTED TO THE GAME

What We Hear \* Cross Country \* Numbers Game \* Last Shot

# Cheryl Bernard

## CULTIVATING CONFIDENCE

Whether promoting, coaching or playing the game, Cheryl Bernard has an unbelievable passion for curling. Known by her competitors to be fairly quiet and intense on the ice, she more than gets in her required 25,000 words a day when talking about curling and especially the mental aspects of the game. If anyone qualifies for an honorary PHD in sports psychology, Cheryl would be in the final nominations.

This two-time Scott participant (1992 and 1996) feels her team is poised to get back to the Canadian championship. Curling out of Calgary makes this venture as tough as any region in Canada but her team knows they have as good a chance as any of the top Alberta teams. For the past 15 years, Bernard's teams have been consistent threats in Alberta, and Cheryl feels this current team is as good as any she has been fortunate enough to skip. It has been together for three years and its chemistry is as strong as any rink on the Canadian curling scene. Lead, Karen Ruus and Cheryl have been together for eleven seasons. Third Susan O'Connor and second Joanne Sipka have been with the team for three years. It's a very nice mix of youth (early 20's) and veteran savvy (mid 30's).

Cheryl is involved in many aspects of curling outside of her competitive team. She runs the official website for the M&M Meat Shops Women's Curling Tour/WCT. The site was started four years ago by fellow competitor, Heather Rankin. Cheryl took over the reins two years ago and says she puts in around 3-4 hours a week keeping it current. She also volunteers for the National Training Centre/NTC based out of Calgary. Cheryl is also the competitive coach on the NTC staff for many of the registered junior teams. This is a labour of love she really enjoys with teaching and motivating these up-and-comers of the curling fraternity. And, last year Cheryl and LeAnne Pipchuk created the first annual Curling For A Cure fundraising bonspiel for cancer in Calgary (see more on the Alberta page). Her father, Bernie, died of cancer a couple of months ago after a two-year battle. She came up with the idea while spending time with her dad and mom, Pat, in cancer clinics and seeing so many people being destroyed by this disease. The response from the community was over-whelming as the event raised \$147,000. Bernie was Cheryl's primary teacher of curling and the one who imparted to Cheryl her love for the game. She says one of her curling highlights was playing third for her Dad in 1991 on a team that qualified for the Provincials.

Cheryl could easily be a very proficient motivational speaker with her natural curiosity for learning of what makes the impor-

tant things in life work; like success, teamwork, dealing with pressures and adversities, and developing consistency. She recently sold an extremely successful insurance agency that she ran for close to a decade in Calgary having a number of people working under her direction. Cheryl said so many lessons on seeking to be successful in business and curling overlap, especially when it comes to cultivating team chemistry. She loves to read and study motivational, self-help, and sports psychology books and articles. It sounds like her library would rival that of sports psychologist Bob Rotella, or Pat Williams, the best-selling author and architect of the Orlando Magic. What I found fascinating, which is so rare in people that consume literature such as Cheryl, is her commitment to applying the lessons she learns in her personal life and out in the competitive world of sports. Because of her choice to study and be a practitioner, she is very believable and passionate in sharing her lessons from the ice and business arenas. I asked her why she hasn't pursued the speaking circuit a little more aggressively because she has so much applied wisdom to share with people. She responded by saying, "Sometimes I feel like I need to win a Canadian championship first to have more credibility." To which I had to reply: that she has finished second in Canada to Marilyn Bodogh at the 1996 Scott, has two Alberta Women's championships on her resume, has 5 consecutive top ten finishes on the WCT, has been to the JVC Skins Game, won the Bill Hunter sponsored Women's spiel in Red Deer in 1996 which pocketed her team a cool \$20,000 (the largest payday ever up to that stage), has qualified in over a dozen Alberta Southern Playdowns and six provincials winning two and finishing second on three occasions, represented Alberta at the Mixed with Terry Meek in 1993, and has been a legitimate threat to represent Canada for well over 15 years and counting. This competitor has the resume even if she has yet to win a coveted National title. It would be like saying Marcel Dionne isn't worth sitting down and tapping his brain for the lessons he's learned over the years even though he never won a Stanley Cup, or that Guy Hemmings is a loser because his team has never won a Brier.

Why are her teams so consistent? It was the main question I felt had to be answered. When I put it in the context of Cheryl's passion for mastering the inner game, my pen could hardly keep up. As we finally finished our second cup of cold coffee, we had eight rock solid points that any curler could glean some on-ice wisdom from. What Cheryl articulated isn't just a bunch of nice ideas to



Second Joanne Sipka, left, and lead Karen Ruus provide a mix of youth and veteran savvy

ideas to think about but is critical to her success on and, dare I say, off the ice.

#### Studying the Mental Game

Cheryl feels that 99% of successful curling is how well one can master the mental side of the sport. She emphasises the technical part of curling, but strongly feels that once the technical part of the game is grasped and gets to a point of competency that the difference at the elite level is how well a "team" can become proficient at the mental game. With Cheryl being a voracious reader and student of curling she knows that studying the mental nuances of the game is the key to creating a confident, aggressive team on the ice. She is very aware this doesn't come through the accumulation of knowledge alone but through applying the lessons one learns from reading, performing, observing, from winning and from adversity.

Her favourite book at present is *Mind Gym* by Gary Mack with David Casstevens. This is her 2003/04 book that travels with her in her curling bag for easy access. Others she likes to refer to are: *The Inner Game of Golf* by Tim Galloway, *Inside Edge* by Peter Jensen, *Toughness Training For Sport* by James Loehr, and *The Pursuit of Excellence* by Lance Armstrong. Cheryl is known as one of the first curlers to see the value of using sports psychologists and tapping into the wisdom of competent coaches. Their current coach is Dennis Balderston, who compliments this aspect of the game so well.

#### Perspective

Cheryl acknowledges that this can be a life-time struggle for passionate athletes, but she has learned so much in these last two years through her father's battle with cancer. She says, "Being with my Dad, and spending so much time in cancer wards over the last couple of years, has so ingrained in me that curling is just a game. Seeing people suffering and dying, especially children, will put things in perspective pretty quick. If a person is losing perspective maybe a walk through a cancer ward or doing some volunteer work will help that person not to take curling so seriously." Cheryl says that the more one can view curling as a game, and not as a life or death struggle, it's amazing how the results on the ice often improve in the win-loss column. There is less unnecessary pressure and the ability to focus in the more important games can become easier.

#### Physical Fitness

Cheryl feels she and her team-mates could compete at the highest of levels for the next 15 years or so as long as they stay committed to staying in good physical shape. She is convinced that, mentally, she is as good as she ever has been so the key will be to stay in shape. Her husband,

Russ Bischoff, besides being an Assistant Principal at a Calgary Elementary school, is a personal fitness trainer who has worked at World's Gym. He has designed a training program for the entire team. Cheryl says the team can already see the benefits, especially on those days where three games are a necessity on the WCT. Russ is a huge resource in so many ways for the team as his degree in Physical Education focused on Sports Administration. He understands the importance of being in top shape and the correlation to staying sharp mentally, which usually kicks in at the tail end of any significant competition.

#### Practise a lot

Practise has always been a high priority for Cheryl and her rink. She practises throwing rocks and fine-tuning her delivery at least five times a week. Cheryl is at the stage now where practise is more to bring a level of comfort or confidence going into a competition. She finds if she slacks off in practising that her confidence level will go down and the ability to manage the mental aspects of the game are that much more difficult to deal with. It all comes back to the mental side of curling for Cheryl.

#### Confidence

This covers a few different areas. Cheryl talks about the confidence she will need in her own ability in skipping the game and executing her shots. But it is also about building confidence among her team-mates. She would rather have a person who is a

hard worker, a fighter, and someone who tends to usually come through at crunch time than to recruit the perceived "best curlers" on the block. Confidence can be built in so many ways. Cheryl is an athlete who has learned the value of visualization and putting herself into a mindset where she feels she can make every shot and call a great game. She will often visualize in the middle of a game when she feels her game, or the team's, slipping away. She will remind herself of similar shots she has made successfully in the past, or of recent successes.

#### Thought Control

This is related to the confidence issue. This is a learned art of being able to keep one's enthusiasm up when the scoreboard shows otherwise, or when one's internal average-keeper intuitively knows one is about 20-30% below the average necessary to succeed. Cheryl says, "I have been learning to get my mind back when things aren't going according to expectations. A word I use a lot is 'cancel'. What I mean by this is to use the word 'cancel' to stop the negative thoughts that are beginning to take control of my mind. When I begin to get negative thoughts and am sitting in the hack about to throw I have learned to stop myself and say 'cancel' and replace the destructive thought with a more realistic or positive thought. It becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy that if the negative thought prevails I will usually miss, but if I replace it and get into the right frame of mind, I put myself in a position of usually making the shot. So I will get a picture in my mind of making the shot which reinforces to me that I am capable of succeeding. You have to trust your game and trust comes from confidence."

Cheryl says one of the most recent things she is learning is to get her mind to have only one dominant thought before she throws. There is much merit in knowing that a second shot is available if you don't execute your primary shot perfectly. Golfers call this "missing on the pro side versus the amateur side", or "missing well". Cheryl is trying to sharpen this sage advice a step further by trying to get in her mind the ideal shot and not to focus on what the best mistake will be. She has found that if her last dominant thought is the ideal outcome, she has found herself making more 4's than 2's or 3's (curler's scoring system of 0-4 per shot). What she is trying to do is not have two conflicting thoughts in her head but the one ideal thought, because the tendency is to execute the last dominating thought our mind goes toward and there are situations in curling that the ideal shot is the only alternative.

**Third**  
**Susan O'Connor,**  
**who won a Canadian**  
**Mixed title with**  
**Kevin Koe in 2000,**  
**joined Team Bernard**  
**three years ago.**

#### Pre-Game Preparation

Curlers at the club level tend to show up, put their shoes on, kid for a minute and step out on the ice and expect to perform like a Cheryl Bernard or David Nedohin. Hmmm!!! Cheryl, as most elite curlers do, has a pre-game ritual she likes to stick to. About a half an hour before the game begins the team will put some favourite music on. This filters out distractions and helps the visualizing process. Cheryl likes to imagine the scoreboard and her team in a winning position and she sees herself making all the



Susan O'Connor

draw shots. She will do a little deep breathing to get even more focused. It's a routine once again to build comfort and confidence and as we are learning this is the key to Cheryl's success. Confidence is a choice and an art to be created!

#### Dealing With Nerves

One could get the distinct impression that Cheryl is at the stage of her game where she relishes the opportunity to get nervous. Again, with all her mental training, she realizes how this part of the game is inevitable and can be harnessed to create consistent efforts. In talking about a big game or making that last shot she had this to share, "I focus on the process and not on the result or possible future events. I must be in the here and now. When I am in the hack for a last shot I focus very intently on these words; lift, back, slide, let go! I find it interesting that the bigger the game the more I have to intentionally focus on the process of what makes us successful. In a club game or non-playoff game the process comes easier because we aren't thinking about the overall worth of a big event. But in the do-or-die games, or a playoff situation, I have to make sure I get back to focusing on the process and trying to put the results out of my mind, or at least in the very back of my mind. And my deep breathing exercises and visualization always come back into play for me."

Cheryl is one of those players who has already experienced a slew of success but still feels like there is unfinished business. The Olympics are a dream and goal but the main priority is to get back to a Scott and have a chance to win it all and wear the Red and White. As Cheryl says, "We may not be Canadian champions yet, but in our minds we live like we are going to achieve it and we believe we are capable. Whether it happens or not, I don't think there is any other way for a team to think in order to have a realistic chance."