

FIT TO CURL

**SPORT-SPECIFIC TRAINING
FOR THE WORLD'S GREATEST GAME**



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By John Morris
with
Dean Gemmell

I first met Dean Gemmell during a phone interview for *The Curling Show*, his podcast that features conversations with top players and people who are heavily involved in our sport. It was 2005 and Dean called while I was killing time in my hotel room during a Capital One Grand Slam in Port Hawksbury, Nova Scotia. I was expecting the typical Q&A that I get with a lot of reporters but midway through the interview I realized this one would be different. Not only was Dean extremely knowledgeable about the game, his questions weren't softballs. They demanded thoughtful answers and I sensed that he wasn't afraid to tackle some of the more controversial topics that interest many curling fans.

After that first conversation, I became a regular listener of Dean's podcast and enjoy his interviewing style. You can tell that he has a real passion for the sport and he has some great discussions, especially whenever he has a guest who is one of the game's more colourful characters.

In early summer of 2007, I received an email from Dean inquiring about my approach to training during the off-season. Not long after that, he suggested co-writing a book about fitness and curling. I had experienced the transformation of the sport and I had seen how much the game had changed over the last decade. I thought this could be a great opportunity to provide information that would help people of all levels train in a way that allows them to play better and enjoy the game more. I also believed it was time for a book that reflected the truly athletic nature of curling.

It was several months of emails and phone calls as we organized our initial thoughts and developed a game plan for the book. Dean was always very good at incorporating my many ideas and somehow finding a way to make them clear and coherent on the page.

Throughout the whole venture, Dean was both tenacious and extremely patient with my busy curling schedule. I truly enjoyed working with him on *Fit to Curl*. We shared many laughs together and developed a great friendship along the way.

— *John Morris*

This book started, as so many things seem to these days, as an exchange of emails. After 15 years of living in places that limited my curling to about one bonspiel each winter, I had just finished up a full season back on the ice. But as spring came around, I was sore. I was also planning to play more — and a bit more seriously — the following season.

I had interviewed John a few times on *thecurlingshow.com* and I knew he was committed to fitness. If anybody could help my forty-something body get through a curling season with less pain and more performance, I figured that John could.

John, being John, didn't simply tap out a few notes on pushups and situps before hitting SEND. He provided specific instruction and encouragement. My questions — What's an H.R. Max? Bosu®? Are you sure you meant that many lunges? — received prompt and patient answers. Eventually, I suggested to John that we should consider doing a book about curling-specific training.

After drafting an initial outline, we had countless phone conversations, shared some meals, traded more emails and moved the book ahead whenever John's busy schedule allowed time to work on it. Like most who have curled with or against John, I found him to be one of the most engaging athletes I have met. In conversation, he is expansive and animated, especially when the topic is curling. He brought great thinking and smart ideas to this project every step of the way and once he commits to something, he dedicates himself to it 110%.

From the start, he insisted that this book would not be a memoir. Far too young for that, he said. What he wanted to do was create something that could help curlers of every level play better and enjoy the game more. And he wanted to make people realize that curling is pursued by serious athletes with ambitious goals.

I hope I've helped him do that. You can bet that he made sure we tried our best.

— *Dean Gemmell*

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NOTICE

All forms of exercise pose some inherent risks. The authors, editors and publisher advise readers to take full responsibility for their safety and know their limits. Before practising the exercises in this book, be sure that the equipment you're using is well-maintained. Do not take risks beyond your level of aptitude, experience, training and fitness. The exercise programs in this book are not intended as a substitute for any exercise program that may have been prescribed by your physician. As with all exercise programs, you should get your doctor's approval before beginning. Every effort has been made to ensure that the information contained in this book is complete and accurate.

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Photo: Dallas Bittie

How many times have you played in a bonspiel, won your first couple of games easily, then started to play poorly and suddenly found your team quickly eliminated? You probably figured your rink had a hot start before cooling off against better opposition. Or you decided that the breaks just stopped going your way. But was that really the case? There's a very good chance, even if you didn't feel particularly tired or sore, that your body just wasn't keeping up with your desire to succeed. Curling — especially the delivery of the stone — is a series of small, specific movements and it doesn't take much to throw things off. When you're fatigued, your balance suffers, your sweeping gets ragged and you start to make mental mistakes. Missed shots — and losses — are usually the result.

Curling has changed dramatically in recent years — new rules that encourage more stones in play, more consistent ice and rocks, Olympic status, increased prize money and sponsorship dollars. Among players who compete at the highest levels, so has the commitment to fitness. Just as Tiger Woods demonstrated that a strong physique and better cardiovascular conditioning are an edge in golf, top curlers have seen the benefits of training for their sport. But it's not simply elite athletes who can benefit from better physical conditioning — curlers of all levels will enjoy the rewards of a program that is designed specifically for the demands of the sport.

Tiger Woods credits his fitness levels for some of his extraordinary success and most professional golfers are no longer strangers to the weight room. I believe that fit curlers can enjoy an even bigger edge over less fit players than golfers do. While the mental stress in both sports is similar, curling requires athletic, physical movements — sweeping, delivering the stone — that tax the body considerably more than playing 18 holes does. And, of course, you can't use a cart when you curl.

If you care about winning your next curling game — and whether you're competing for cash on the World Curling Tour or the Monday Night League trophy, I'm going to bet you do — a program of curling-specific

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Since committing to curling fitness, I've had a significant improvement in my individual performance throughout the entire duration of a long event. With little or no physical training prior to the 2002 Brier, I played 85% for the week. Compare that to 2008, when I shot 89% during the Tim Hortons Brier in Winnipeg and 90% at the World Championships in Grand Forks. When winning or losing games can depend on just one or two shots, four or five percentage points are huge. Sure, I was playing third in 2008 and skip in 2002 but I don't think the difficulty level of my shots was dramatically different. Physically and mentally, however, I felt just as strong in the final game as I did in the first matchup of the round-robin.

training will help you immensely. It will also make the game far more satisfying. You'll make more shots because you'll be less tired after sweeping a stone from end to end. You'll be able to attempt a wider variety of shots because you'll drive out of the hack with more power and better balance. You'll play well in the final game of that weekend bonspiel because you'll still feel fresh.

To be honest, I wasn't always so passionate about the benefits of fitness. As a junior curler and even during my first years on the men's circuit, I didn't devote much energy to my physical conditioning. In fact, it's fair to say that my teams were usually more focused on having a good time off the ice than training specifically for curling.

At the risk of sounding immodest, I knew that my junior teams could win most games on raw talent alone. I was confident in my own abilities and my various teammates over those years — Craig Savill, Brent Laing, Matt St. Louis, Andy Ormsby, Jason Young, Mark Homan — were terrific curlers. We were well-coached, we usually missed fewer shots than our opponents and we had the confidence to play big-weight hits, finesse draws and an aggressive game strategy. Looking back, however, I realize that we could have been even better had we maximized our strengths and trained year-round in order to achieve peak physical performances throughout the major competitions of a curling season.

I may have done some jogging or lifted weights sporadically, but I never felt the need to commit to a curling-specific regimen. Coming from a family of sports enthusiasts, I played just about everything — curling, baseball, football, volleyball, soccer, hockey, tennis — all the way from youth leagues to university athletics and intramurals. I felt that competing in all those sports kept me fit and that training specifically for one sport was unnecessary.

And proper nutrition? Not a chance. With the benefits of an adolescent metabolism, I basically burned calories as quickly as I consumed them. My diet, if you could call it that, consisted of eating whatever food happened to be on a plate in front of me. A couple of hours between games? A cheeseburger with a side of fries was a typical choice. I have always been an intense player — some, of course, would say that's putting

it mildly — and I felt that I could find the will to succeed on the ice regardless of what I put in my system.

It started to change for me, however, when my Ontario rink — Joe Frans, Craig Savill, Brent Laing — lost the final of the 2002 Brier to Randy Ferbey's Alberta foursome. Our young team had been advancing up the ranks, winning over \$50,000 on the World Curling Tour and moving to sixth place on the money list that season. We believed we had the talent to go further. Admittedly, we were the underdogs going into the final, playing the defending champs who were on a roll, but our performance in that game could be described as lacklustre at best and I was disappointed in myself. While finishing runner-up in a Brier is a considerable accomplishment, I realized that we hadn't put ourselves in the best possible position to win. When we needed our very best performance, our bodies and minds weren't up to the task.

Admittedly, it was our first Brier and we had committed ourselves to establishing new standards for having a good time at a Canadian men's championship. We were young and we had decided that fun was definitely going to be a big part of our first experience at the event. But it wasn't just the extra-curricular activities of the week that cost us. Our lack of focused training both in the off-season and throughout the winter months meant that in the final game of an event that's draining even for players who aren't regulars in the Keith's Patch, we ran out of gas.

That's around the time when I started to realize the value of conditioning in our sport. For players aiming to compete consistently well on the World Curling Tour, fitness is essential. And for curlers of all levels, it can be a genuine competitive advantage.

Sure, there's no substitute for dedicating yourself to regular practice. And yes, it's true that there are no guarantees in curling. A team of good players who are less fit will still be a tough opponent. (In addition to that Brier final, I once lost eleven straight games to the team skipped by Randy Ferbey. He'd be the first to admit that his level of fitness is not especially high.) You don't step on a sheet of curling ice, strip down to a bathing suit, flex a bit and wait for some judges to decide a winner. Just as in other true sports, you still have to execute — shots have to be made



Photo: Earle Morris

As much as I believe in physical conditioning, fun is still more important than fitness when you're a Bantam curler. I'm not sure if I was smiling as a result of our victory or because I was fairly sure that Craig Savill's haircut was even worse than my own.

and a few breaks need to go your way.

But if that makes you think that a curling-specific training program isn't worth the effort, don't put this book down just yet. Consider how much the game has changed since curlers like the great — but not so fit — Eddie Werenich dominated the sport. Relatively recent developments have put a higher premium on fitness than 20 or 30 ago — it's probably even more important than it was just five years back.

Ice conditions have improved considerably, both in arenas where major events are held and at many curling clubs. Not only are the surfaces usually truer and the rocks more consistent, the ability of strong brushers to affect the path of the stone has been amplified. With the advanced design and construction of today's brushes— synthetic heads, carbon fibre shafts — good teams use sweeping to control rocks and shape shots. While just about every curler of a certain age occasionally pines for the rhythmic thwack of two corn brooms on the ice, there is no doubt that today's front ends can be more effective. Since sweeping affects the rock more, every team needs to gain as much advantage from it as possible. That's why we see most of the top leads, seconds, thirds and yes, sometimes even skips, with well-developed arms, upper bodies and core muscles. Not only is it important to be able to sweep extremely well, you should be able to brush the last rock in the eighth end with as much vigour as the first rock of the game. What's more, the solid curler needs to be able to handle the short spurts of full-out sweeping and then quickly recover to either sweep again or deliver a stone.

Coinciding with improving ice conditions was the introduction of the Free Guard Zone. This change has meant that more rocks are in play, so curlers now try shots that competitors of other eras would have never considered. Nowhere is this more obvious than in the prevalence of the big-weight shot, something that's essential for elite teams and a valuable tool for competitors at just about every level. Along with timing, this shot requires a sprinter's explosiveness and a hockey player's balance — two things that fitness can impact directly. It also takes a higher level of physical fitness to make the quick adjustment from throwing a big-weight hit to a quiet-weight finesse shot.

Those are just some of the on-ice developments. Off the ice, we've seen the game become a medal sport in the Olympic Winter Games. We've seen the growth of the World Curling Tour, with larger purses and more prestige. We've seen government dollars earmarked for athletes who are elite curlers. It all means that the opportunities in the sport are greater than ever before — your level of fitness indicates how seriously you plan to pursue them.

This book, however, isn't meant to benefit only the players competing at the highest levels of the sport. That's a small group and I wouldn't sell many copies of *Fit to Curl* if I wrote it only for them. Instead, it's designed to help all curlers: junior players and the coaches who are developing their skills, new curlers who have discovered a passion for the game and want to jumpstart their progress, senior curlers who want to maintain or even improve their standard of play, advanced curlers who want to move up to the next level. Even the club curler, the man or woman who doesn't play much more than Friday Night Mixed and a few bonspiels each year, will see benefits through this training. The more you commit, of course, the more you'll gain, both on the ice and in your overall level of physical health. You should see improvement in your game, however, even if you only have time for a few short training sessions per week.

To develop the *Fit to Curl* program, I have drawn on many resources — my own curling experience, other Tour curlers, top fitness trainers, Olympians from other winter sports, exercise physiologists and sports medicine specialists, my own education in fitness and kinesiology, and my time spent instructing at high-performance curling camps. In this book, you'll find precisely what you need in order to begin building a body —inside and out — that will maximize your curling potential.

MUSCLES USED: DELIVERY



Quadriceps (*Rectus Femoris, Vastus Lateralis, Intermedius, Medialis*)

Sliding Leg: Contract isometrically to maintain the sliding position

Hack Leg: Provide power during middle and final thrust from the hack

Glutes (*Gluteus Maximus, Medius, Minimus*)

Sliding Leg: Contract isometrically to maintain the sliding position

Hack Leg: Provide power during middle and final thrust from the hack

Hip Flexors (*Psoas Major and Minor, Iliacus*)

Hack Leg: Engaged to help stabilize the hips and the trunk during the slide (flexibility in the hip flexors permits full extension, allowing the glutes to provide maximum power)

Lower Leg (*Gastrocnemius Soleus, Tibialis Anterior*)

Hack Leg: Gastrocnemius Soleus provides power for the initial thrust out of the hack, Tibialis Anterior is fully stretched when sliding position is reached

Sliding Leg: Gastrocnemius Soleus plays a supporting role, stabilizing the sliding foot after exiting the hack

Hamstrings (*Biceps Femoris, Semitendinosus, Semimembranosus*)

Hack Leg: Involved when driving out from the hack

Sliding Leg: Engaged to help stabilize the leg during the delivery

Core (*Rectus Abdominus, External & Internal Obliques, Transverse Abdominus, Erector Spinae, Multifidus*)

Engage during the delivery to help maintain proper form and stability

MUSCLES USED: SWEEPING



Lower Body (*Calves, Hamstrings, Glutes, Quads, Hip Flexors*)

Provide a foundation for the athlete while sweeping
Propel the athlete along the ice while following a rock
Provide balance and stability while sweeping

Back (*Latissimus Dorsi, Trapezius, Rhomboids Major, Teres Major*)

Engaged throughout the sweeping motion — Latissimus Dorsi is especially important

Arms (*Triceps, Biceps, Forearms, Hands*)

Triceps are engaged when the athlete exerts downward pressure on the brush head

Biceps act as an important stabilizer of the elbow

Forearms/hands provide grip strength on the brush handle to facilitate high intensity brushing

Core (*Rectus Abdominus, External & Internal Obliques, Transverse Abdominus, Erector Spinae, Multifidis*)

Play an important role in stabilizing the torso while sweeping
Aid in providing balance and strength throughout the sweeping motion
Used heavily when stopping or starting to sweep

Shoulders (*Deltoids, Rotator Cuff muscles*)

Play a supporting role in producing downward pressure on brush head
Deltoids aid in coordinating the direction and speed of the brush head

Rotator Cuff muscles help to stabilize the shoulder joint

Chest (*Pectoralis Major & Minor*)

Pectoralis Major is critical for producing downward pressure on brush head

Pectoralis Minor plays a supporting role in producing downward pressure