

Curling – why it's so gripping to watch

[by John Harris, Glasgow Caledonian University](#)

Curling has been described as [chess on ice](#). It is a game of great strategy and skill. A steely nerve is required to deliver the stone when the pressure is on and there is no room for error. The cultural theorist Raymond Williams [once remarked](#) that he would keep his television set for the sport alone. The former wrestler and A-Team actor Mr T also recently revealed that [he's a fan](#).



Photo by Ben Kua

At the 2002 Salt Lake City Olympics, almost [six million people](#) across the UK stayed up late into the evening to watch a team of Scottish women secure a [gold medal](#) for Great Britain and Northern Ireland in the curling. Once only covered in Scottish local newspapers, the sport suddenly adorned the front pages of Britain's most popular media. Rhona Martin and her team captured the attention of the nation and briefly became [celebrities](#).

The [Winter Olympics](#) may not have the same hype or glamour as the Summer Olympics but for two weeks, viewers can temporarily

become winter sport enthusiasts – armchair ones at least.

Sporting events frequently feature among the list of biggest television audiences. Sport is a particularly powerful tool for bringing together an imagined community of millions through the performances of [national teams](#). South Africa's victory in the 1995 Rugby World Cup [is a powerful example](#) of this.

All sorts of sports have captured the attention of television audiences. In the UK, the huge popularity of darts and snooker during the 1980s saw some unlikely sportsmen prominent in television schedules. But this is not to suggest that curling is just like darts or snooker. The modern-day curler, funded in the UK by UK Sport, is an athlete with a rigid strength and conditioning programme and a battery of sport scientists behind every facet of their schedule. If you don't consider it to be physically challenging, try to play it and then see if you still have functioning hamstrings the next day.

Curling works well for television because the slow pace of the game and the close-up camera shots of the players allow us to share in the emotions of the event. There is the drama of victory and defeat. There is the teamship and camaraderie that so clearly comes across on the screen.

Nothing wrong with ordinary

One of the main reasons that the 2002 gold medal winners were so readily embraced by the British media was that they appeared to be so ordinary. In an age of hyperbole and overstated claims, the word ordinary is often now used as a derogatory term. But we really need to reclaim it.

In some ways, to be an ordinary Olympian is something of an oxymoron, as Olympic athletes have extraordinary talents. In an age where "celebrity" athletes are ever more distant and dislocated from the communities that originally nurtured and

supported them, there is something reassuring about sportspeople on the television who are in many ways more like us than multi-millionaire super athletes. For example, the [Muirhead siblings](#) are a big part of Team GB's 2018 curling teams, but still require support back in Scotland to keep things in order.

Curling does not have the high-risk thrills and spills of ski jumping or skeleton where athletes career at [great speed](#) with seemingly little regard for personal safety. And curling has had some quite negative press in the past, with the [sweeping action](#) – used to warm up the ice and reduce friction – likened to “cleaning a house” in comments that fail to recognise the great skill involved.

At a time when there are more and more television channels available, but often with seemingly nothing at all worth watching on them, the Winter Olympics offers a temporary reprieve from the trials and tribulations of everyday life. Of course, sport comes with its own [politics and diplomacy](#), particularly when the Olympics are held in South Korea. And the battle for supremacy at the top of the medal table speaks to a wider jockeying for position in the world order.

Marge and Homer Simpson [took to the ice](#) in The Simpsons in 2010 ahead of the Olympic Games in Vancouver and helped take curling to a wider audience. Four years earlier, the website of US Curling crashed as so many people attempted to access the site after watching Team USA on television. [Curling is cool](#), and those who govern the sport will hope that more people will give the sport a try now it's back on the world's TV screens.

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