

Two capital curlers

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The Simcoe Curling Club has seen a lot of accomplishments over the years, and this season two members are adding another to the list.

In February, veteran member Donna Hawkins and newcomer Mike Vrooman will join forces with three players from Hamilton to compete in the Canadian Vision Impaired Curling Championships.

As an international-level blind golfer, Vrooman met and became involved with curlers out of the Hamilton region last year, and even competed with the group in the provincial and national championships last season. When the group began to come to Simcoe for games and practices, it wasn't long until Hawkins -- a five-year player -- jumped on board.

"Hamilton blind curlers came here and somebody was at the club one day, called me and said, 'You need to be here,' and so that was the beginning of all of this," explained Hawkins.

A high placing at last spring's provincials allowed the team to qualify for the nationals in Ottawa, where two of the five are originally from including Vrooman, who has since become a regular at the Simcoe club.

"I decided last year I wanted to join here and get involved and it just went from there," Vrooman said.

"There's some great teachers amongst members of the Simcoe Curling Club, they just have the knack of explaining things properly. It's getting people out to try it."

Last season, Vrooman and his team tied for third place on the national stage. The fivesome has undergone some change since then with Hawkins being added of course. The new rink was in Simcoe Wednesday to play one of their final tune-up games prior to the national competition.

Though distance has kept the team from being able to develop perhaps as much as others rinks, Hawkins said they have ability and desire in spades.

"I think everybody wants to play, and I think that's a key element. We just have to play together," she said.

"I think we have five great individual curlers, it's just bringing it all together."

The game itself consists of a coach with standard eyesight helping relay messages from the skip at one end to the shooter. The coach also helps set up the shooter and notifies which turn to use, and the Hamilton/Simcoe team uses a number system to clarify distance and weight of throws.

The ultimate goal for Hawkins and Vrooman is to start a team based out of their home centre.

"We know there are at least two people in this club that are headed to where we are and so that's been an open door for them," said Hawkins. "At some point, we really hope that we can field a Simcoe team."

Having a duo from the same town on the same team, Vrooman said, would not only better their performance on the ice, it will help get the word out to potential players.

"It means a lot more, simply because we can get together with some of the other (players) from the club to practice and we've got someone to work with," Vrooman said. "Donna is a much better curler than I am, and when she's vice, she knows what my strengths and my weaknesses are. You just keep building on those."

The top team in the country is out of Kelowna. Gary Saxon, president of the Hamilton Blind Curlers, called the group "the pinnacle" of what teams in Canada are striving for. Though Vrooman and Hawkins haven't been in the game that long, their love for the sport helps level the playing field.

"The fact that they both practice or play four or five times a week here, when we come together it's now just a matter of working it though. Their experience and their energy is crucial," Saxon said.

The team's relationship extends beyond the rink too. Many Hamilton members golf and even sail together.

"Once we can get people interested, it opens up so many doors for them because one sport leads into another, leads into a third," explained Saxon. "It's just a matter of getting people aware and then communicating. It's not rocket science, and we have a lot of fun."

Joining Vrooman and Hawkins will be Mardie Campbell, Tim Young, Geoff Hodgson and coach Darlene Woods.

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