



TAKING THE LONG WAY BACK TO THE PODIUM

TO UNDERSTAND THE SUCCESS OF THE Canadian national wheelchair team's 2019-20 season, it's helpful to review how last year ended.

At the 2019 World Wheelchair Curling Championship in Stirling, Scotland, Canada held a .500 record heading into the last draw against the hometown Scots.

"Our fate was in our own hands," says Canadian skip Mark Ideson. "A win would take us into the playoffs and a loss would leave us back in the middle of the pack."

They lost and fell into a four-way tie for seventh place — just shy of the top-six spots needed to reach the playoffs. But it got worse.

"There was a perfect storm of bad luck. Based on who beat who, and all the tiebreaker formulas, we actually ended up 10th," says Ideson.

The bottom three teams — in this case Canada, the United States and Germany — were relegated to B Group at the 2020 world championship; a position Canada's wheelchair program had never been in before.

"We were one shot away from being in the playoffs," recalls head coach Wayne Kiel. "You

miss that shot and all of a sudden we're in the relegation round. We were surprised to end up there, but that's how the chips fell. The process then became to prepare ourselves to do what we had to do at the Bs, which was a new experience for us."

"The goal of this season was simply to get back to A Group," says Wendy Morgan, head of Curling Canada's national wheelchair team program. "That meant we had to compete at the World B Curling Championship in Finland and end up in the top three."

Ideson says, "I certainly feel like it motivated us to regroup and approach the following season a bit differently."

This presented a number of challenges for the team, mainly that the World B Curling Championship vastly accelerated the season's competitive schedule. The A Group event is in late February; the B Group's take place in late November.

"We normally have some competitions in the early season in B.C. and Ottawa," says Ideson. "They're usually international competitions, but

With a 6-1 victory over Sweden in the final, Wayne Kiel, Marie Wright, Mark Ideson, Dennis Thiessen, Ina Forrest and Jon Thurston earned Canada its first World B Wheelchair Curling Championship gold medal in the program's history.

a world championship where the result mattered really raised the intensity level much faster.”

“It moved our season up,” says Jon Thurston, who’s now entering his second year on the national team. “Typically, our world championship is late February into March, and now we were working for something at the end of November.... Normally we wouldn’t really get that heavy until January or February. We did really well to ramp up, with some off-ice adjustments and then get everything working with some new on-ice stuff – ways to practise and experience some competition sooner than normal.”

One of those adjustments involved a lineup change that had been discussed during the summer. Ideson had been skipping and throwing fourth for the past two years – including at the 2018 Paralympics in South Korea – but this season, rising star Thurston took over the last two stones.

“In Mark, we have probably the best lead in the world sitting on our team,” says Kiel. “For him, it was a move back to a position where he’s been very successful, and it also took away a bit of that pressure that might have come with throwing the last two. We looked at Jon and his shooting percentages and his confidence and thought it was the right thing to do.”

Ideson says he feels “super comfortable throwing lead. My skill set is such that the lead position suits the way I throw it. Jon is such an excellent hitter and technically probably one of the best throwers in the game right now. So it made sense for him to throw last. I’m really comfortable calling the game and continuing to learn and grow at that position. It just made sense for me to set up the ends and for Jon to finish them off.”

Thurston says “it was a big change, but with Mark still skipping it made the transition easier. We had to wait until September before we could put it into practice. I had the mindset to do my best and earn the trust of my teammates.”

With a new five-player lineup in place and a few practice events under their belts, the team headed to Lohja, Finland, for the World B Wheelchair Curling Championship, which ran from November 27 to December 2, 2019. Paralympic veterans Marie Wright, Ina Forrest and Dennis Thiessen completed the team.

Canada lost only once in the six-game round robin, which earned the team a spot in a semifinal against the Czech Republic. After a decisive 10-4 victory, the Canadians faced Sweden in the final, knowing that they’d already qualified for one of the top three spots and would advance to the A Group world championship.

“I’m pretty sure we were all confident we would make it through the Bs, but you’re always a bit hesitant, maybe superstitious, about planning too far ahead,” says Ideson. “Nobody wanted to jinx it.”

With a 6-1 victory over Sweden in the final, Canada earned its first B Group gold medal in the program’s history.

“We felt a lot of validation for all the work we’d put in,” says Thurston. “It was the first real true test of me throwing at that position at that level of competition. We worked really well and it gave us some confidence that what we were doing was working. It was actually a really good experience.... But never again! We don’t want to have to do the B Group again!”

A world wheelchair medal drought that had been ongoing since 2013 came to an end thanks to a silver-medal performance by Canadian skip Mark Ideson, fourth Jon Thurston, third Ina Forrest, second Dennis Thiessen, alternate Collinda Joseph and coach Wayne Kiel.



PHOTOS: WORLD CURLING FEDERATION/ALINA PAWLYUCHIK

Taking a 7-4 round-robin record into the playoffs, Team Canada defeated South Korea in its quarterfinal matchup and Sweden in a semifinal to secure a spot in the gold-medal game against Russia. All even after seven ends, the Russians stole their way to victory when Canada's Jon Thurston — looking to remove Russia's shot rock — wrecked on a front guard.



The championship in Finland was more than just a qualifier for the A Group World Championships in Switzerland. It was also a dress rehearsal of sorts.

“Just to have that opportunity — to have two world championships in one season — it helped with everything,” says Thurston. “Our routines, schedules, meetings, travel and just to be in that environment. Also, we had a lot of information from Finland about what needed improvement, it was so beneficial to have that.”

The team’s assistant coach, Mick Lizmore, says the World Bs “helped us identify some short-term gaps. We made some little adjustments to schedules and routines. We tried to build on some lessons learned, that we could adjust to, trying to move the yardstick even a little bit.”

Ideson says that even though they’d lost only one game, they “looked at all the film and constructively criticized the game-calling, so we could learn from it and build and grow moving on to the A championship.”

After a small break over the holidays, the team regrouped and focused on its next task — the 2020 World Wheelchair Curling Championship in Wetzikon, Switzerland. The competition, which began on February 29, featured a 12-team round robin, leading to a six-team playoff. This time, Collinda Joseph made the trip instead of Wright, who was kept at home by some medical issues.

Far from a typical event, the championship was feeling the worldwide effects of COVID-19, which were just beginning to become known. With the outbreak spreading beyond China, many European countries were beginning to see their first cases.

“We felt lucky to get our world championship in,” says Ideson. “They handled it really well. They were disinfecting everything and there were hand-washing stations all over. Obviously, people were nervous as the weeks went on, and cases were showing up in Zurich.”

Morgan says the championship organizers “were on top of it, as much as they could be. I think we were very lucky that we didn’t contract something, knowing what we know now. I don’t think we realized how fast-moving it was.”

Despite the concerns, the championship went on. All subsequent world championships were cancelled.

With a 7-4 record, Canada qualified for a quarterfinal matchup with South Korea. After a win, they faced the same Swedish team they’d defeated for the B Group gold medal in Finland. With a spot in the final against Russia assured, it marked the first time since 2013 that a Canadian team had earned a medal at this competition.

“Any Canadian team at a world championship is going to want to be on top of the podium; nobody will be shy to tell you that,” says Lizmore. “But we were more focused on taking care of what was in front of us at any moment. You’re trying to focus on the process, but there are obviously benchmarks along the way. Make the playoffs, get in a position to earn a medal and, hopefully, you get to that position, and focus on that game.”

Tied, playing the last end with hammer, Thurston had a difficult come-around tap to move a Russian stone off the button. The weight was perfect, but the stone over-curlled and ticked the guard, giving Russia the win.

“We were a half-inch away from winning it!” says Morgan.

“Sure, we would have loved a gold medal,” says Ideson. “But we made it to the final and anything can happen in one game. But it was a huge success and everybody in the program had some involvement in that.”

“Just to medal was big,” says Thurston. “It was the first time since 2013 that Canada had won a medal. Obviously, we wanted that to improve our world ranking, but it also brought a lot of confidence to the group.... And we left a bit of room for improvement next year.”

With a B Group gold medal and a world championship silver, Canada has officially earned a spot in the 2022 Paralympics in Beijing. And as that event approaches, Canada’s wheelchair program has a new head coach leading the way. Lizmore, who was an assistant coach this season, has traded roles with Kiel, who has stepped into an assistant-mentor role. Together, along with team leader Morgan, they’ll guide the program to the 2022 Games.

“No sooner had that rock stopped, we were already thinking about what adjustments to make moving forward, what we could learn, moving into the off-season and into next year,” says Lizmore. “Qualifying for Beijing is a nice thought to have in your mind but it doesn’t mean we don’t have to try hard anymore. If we’re not competing between now and 2022, just being there won’t matter very much. It’s good to hear that we’ve qualified, but we’ve got to use that time to keep pushing and striving to get better, and the rest will take care of itself if we fulfil our roles like we plan on doing.”

Brian Chick, author of Written in Stone: A Modern History of Curling, is a curling professional in Toronto and a frequent contributor to Curling Canada projects



“The goal of this season,” says Wendy Morgan, head of Curling Canada’s wheelchair team program, “was simply to get back to A Group,” and that meant a top-three finish at the World Bs.



Mick Lizmore has taken over head-coaching duties for Canada’s wheelchair program this season and, together with Wendy Morgan, will guide the program to the 2022 Paralympics.