

BEIJING OLYMPICS

How to watch curling

Graphic by C.J. SINNER, MARK BOSWELL and RACHEL BLOUNT • Star Tribune

Whether you hit up the local curling club once for a birthday party five years ago, or you think it's just shuffleboard on ice (why is it called "curling" anyway?), we'll help you talk smart to your friends as the U.S. men's and women's teams look to medal in Beijing. Team play begins Wednesday morning, in the same arena where swimmers raced in the 2008 Summer Games. Then dubbed the "Water Cube," it has been renamed the "Ice Cube."

PLAYERS AND EQUIPMENT

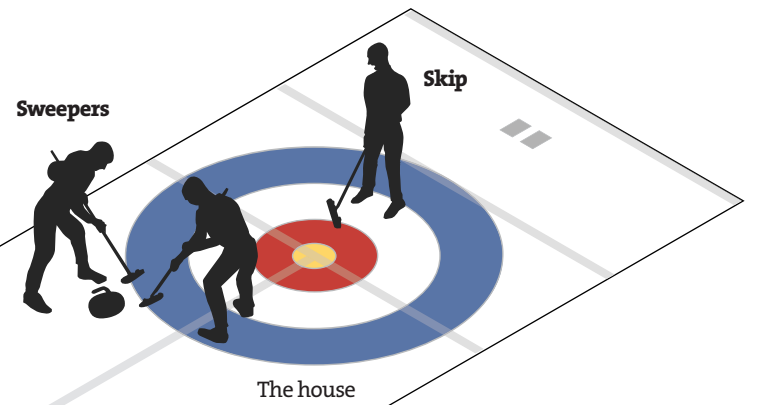
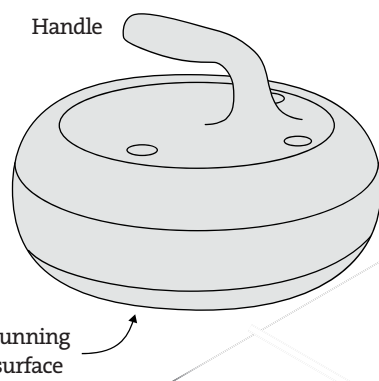
Four team members work together to move stones across a long sheet of ice. The shooter "throws" the stones, pushing them from one end of the sheet toward the "house," a series of circles at the opposite end. Two sweepers move with the stone and use brooms to adjust speed and direction. The skip directs play from the far end of the sheet with commands and signals.

STONES

Also called "rocks," the stones are about 44 pounds of granite quarried in Scotland. The stone's "running surface," or bottom surface, is cleaned and sanded to the players' preference to control for speed and the amount of curl. Stones are numbered 1 through 8 but can be thrown in any order based on the unique characteristics of the rock.

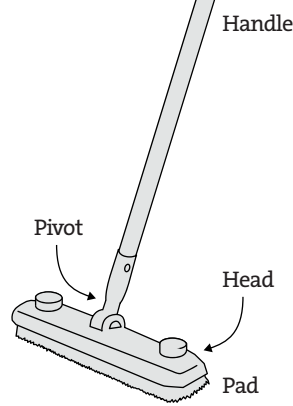
A truly straight path down the ice is technically impossible, so putting purposeful spin, or curl, on the stone allows for more control — hence the name "curling." The faster a rock moves down the ice, the less it curls. Slower speeds mean it will curl more.

The striking band around the middle takes hits during play. A stone is "burned" if anything touches it as it moves down the sheet — but it's often the decision of the opposing team whether to keep it in play or remove it.



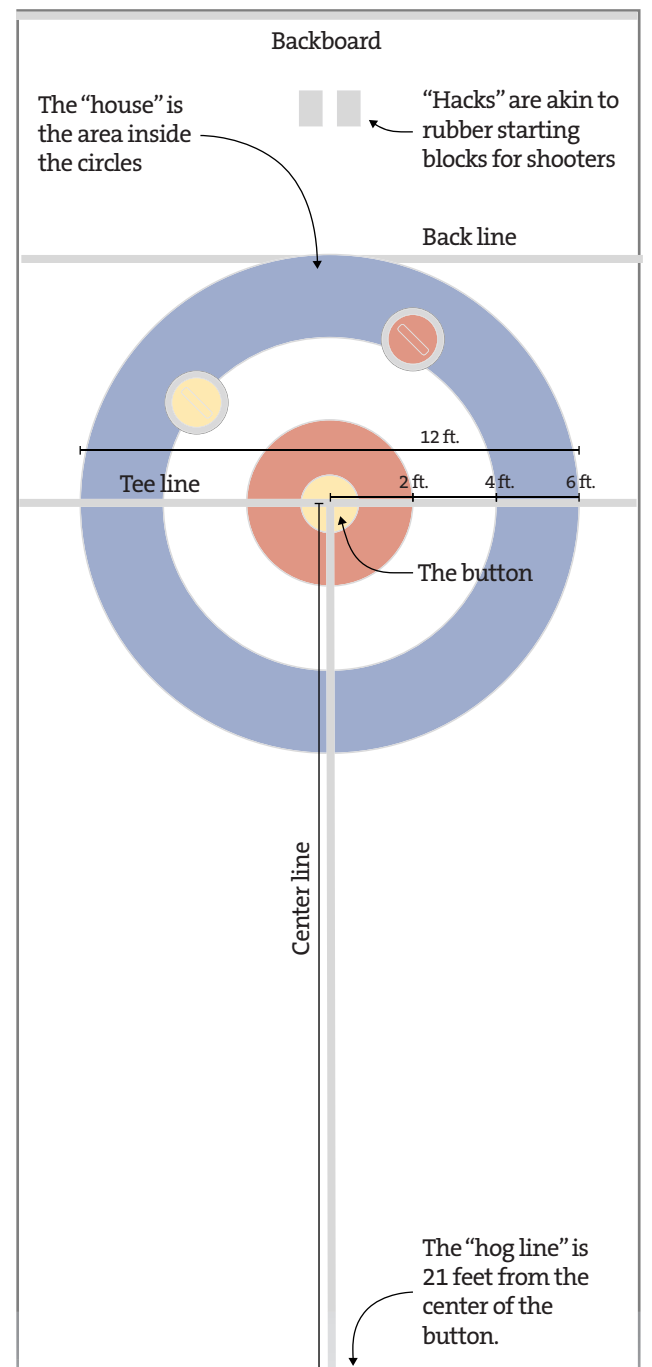
BROOMS

Sweepers use modern brooms with carbon-fiber handles and synthetic bristles to brush the ice rapidly ahead of the stone, heating the surface enough to make the stone go faster or influence the direction it curls in.



THE SHEET

The "sheet," a 150-foot-long lane of ice, has a pebbly surface rather than a smooth one, achieved by misting water over fresh ice. Throughout a game, players pay attention to evolving ice conditions to estimate how fast or slow a stone will travel.



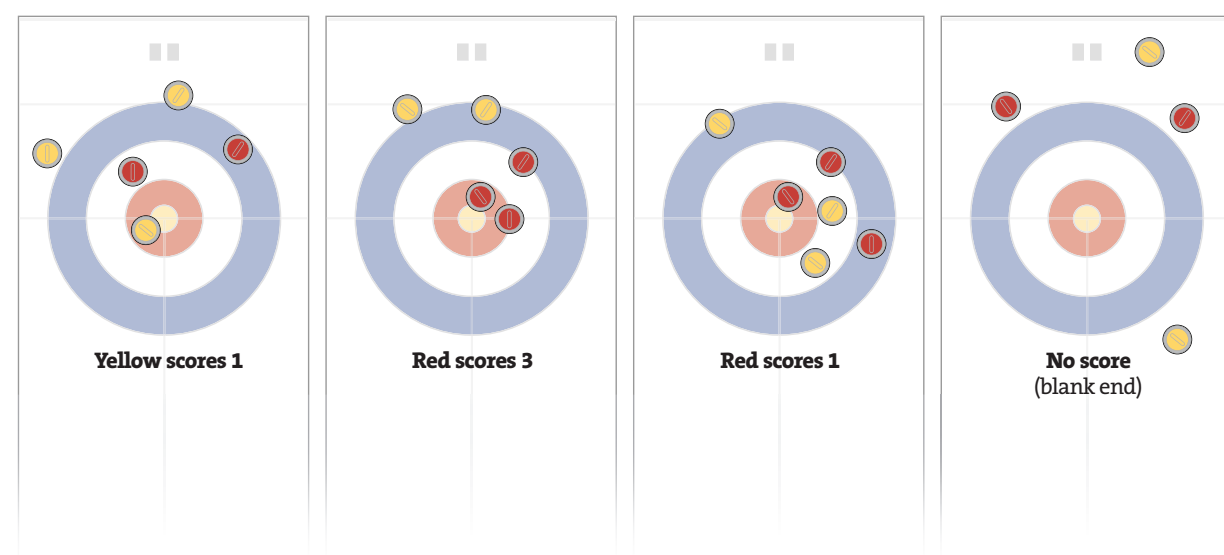
GAME AND SCORING

In four-member team play, each game in the Olympics consists of 10 rounds, called "ends," during which shooters take turns throwing eight stones apiece down the sheet from the hog line at one end into the house at the opposite end. This is slightly different from mixed doubles play, which recently finished.

Each stone is thrown and positioned strategically to get closest to the bull's-eye or "button," but players also try to knock opponents' stones away or out of the house altogether. Stones knocked beyond the back line are removed and won't count for points.

After all 16 stones have been thrown, the ones left in the house are measured to see which are closest to the button. Whichever team's stones are closest count for a point each, usually resulting in 1 or 2 points in an end, up to all eight stones (although 8 points is incredibly rare).

SCORING EXAMPLES

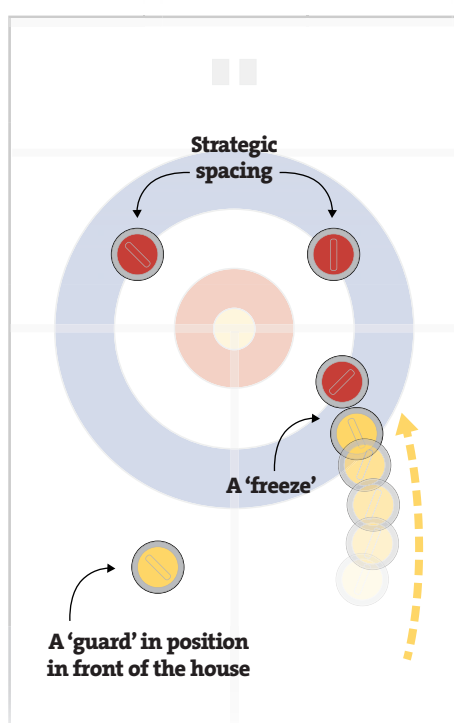


STRATEGY

Offense and defense can seem counterintuitive, but teams think at least one move ahead for placement, much like chess, said Tyler George, a member of the 2018 gold medal men's curling team in Pyeongchang. Throwing a stone into the house first can be seen as a defensive move, he said, while putting a stone in the "guard" area in front of the house can be a strategic offense.

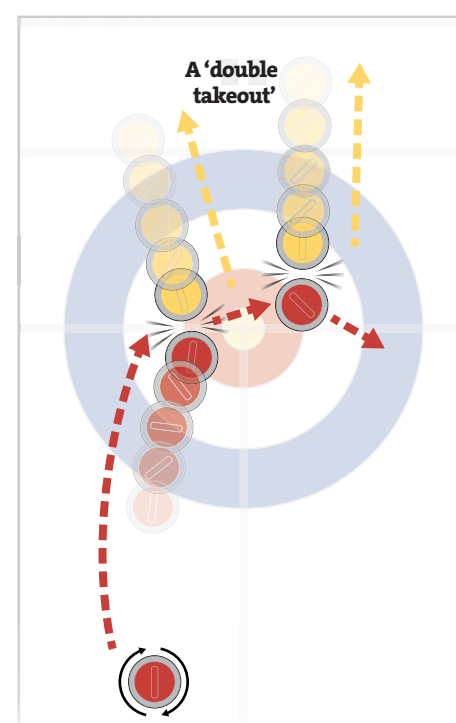
SPORTSMANSHIP

Although there are officials present, a great deal of disputed situations are decided by team members themselves. This puts extra emphasis on camaraderie between teams, George said.



One strategy may be to keep stones spaced far apart to minimize possible strikes by the opponent.

Conversely, placing a stone directly in front of an opponent's, known as a "freeze," can block the next shot.



A "double takeout" can occur when a stone knocks two of the opponent's rocks out of the house in one fell swoop.

The most important shot in the game is the last, called the "hammer." It can — and often does — dramatically change the outcome of a game, George said.