

## The Riverboat Classic at Thistle-St. Andrews (TSA), Saint John, NB

In early 1982, a group of dedicated Thistle St. Andrews male club members got together and came up with an idea to hold a men's bonspiel at the start of the curling season. The group's goal was to give the club an early boost to its finances at the difficult time every year when the club needed to spend money on ice preparation and capital improvements. The men looked for a strong and durable theme for the event and settled on using the proud history of the steamboats of the St. John river (reference: <https://sites.google.com/site/kingstonpeninsulaheritage/home/st-john-river-steamboats>). The "Riverboat Classic" was born. A "Captain", "First Mate" and "crew" were named. Each of the founding members served as Captain during the early years and they enticed other members to join the crew to help out their club and many of those new participants became Captain during subsequent years. This is now an important "rule" of the Riverboat...the Captain may only serve once and therefore new crew members were needed every year to provide enthusiasm and energy for the event over time.

The Riverboat crew received strong support from many commercial companies over the years, many of whom continue to support the event to this day. Those important relationships have been maintained by the crew and many of the key contacts within the companies and in many cases, have been passed down to the next generation. These sponsors provide many services like supplying participant beverage tickets and prizes, special events, entertainment, and food. In particular, Moosehead Breweries and Corby's Distilleries were instrumental in providing some beverages for the kickoff event and strong support every year since. Without contributions from these two and major support from E&J Winery and East Side Marios/Wendys, the event would be a challenge to have every year. In addition, the crew receives support from teams themselves as they often bring snacks and treats from their communities to share with other participants. Prizes and trophies have traditionally been awarded to 16 teams each year, with a winner and runner-up in 8 sections. The trophies stay at the club and are updated with a plaque of engraved winning team member names every year.

Live musical entertainment has been a strong component of the Riverboat since day 1. The event traditionally kicked off with the Banjo Barons - a local group of men with banjos and guitars, tireless jokes, and good fun! They played every Thursday night at the Riverboat for 35 years. Originally a group of 5, they are now 3 and still able to put a smile on your face and a jig in your step. Many other groups and solo artists have entertained at various times over the years during each day and in the evenings, from Thursday to Saturday as teams go out for games and come in for a post-game refreshment and snacks. Participants and visitors enjoy listening to the music, meeting and chatting with old friends, and watching great curling out on the ice. We have been visited by many provincial, state and national champions over the years who really know how to curl and also have a great time!

The Riverboat started as a 32-team event with invited participants travelling from all over Eastern Canada and the north eastern USA. The focus was on hosting the best

combination of great food, entertainment, semi-competitive curling and great fellowship. Good friends travel to this event every year to have a great time... many of them bringing new participants with them to see and experience the friendly atmosphere of TSA and Saint John. Every year, the "alumni" of the event are honored at the Captain's dinner with 5, 10, and 25 year pins and we now have several participants with over 35 years of history at the event. Many regulars travel by plane and cars for hours to get to the bonspiel and several teams include extra players in their lineups.

The 20th annual Riverboat saw the most teams so far with 48 teams attending. More recently, the standard has been 40 teams but we expect to again have 48 for the 40th annual in 2021.

In 1999, the Riverboat hosted the first "reunion" event for members of the 1998 Strathcona Cup tour. These players, from all over Canada, traveled to Scotland to play for the cup, and when they returned home, a tour member and long time Riverboat man from Halifax NS suggested a reunion of the group at the Riverboat in Saint John. A few took up his invitation and enjoyed our hospitality so they returned the following year and brought more players from the 1998 tour. Many have returned in the 20 years since and in addition, the Riverboat has proudly welcomed players from the 2009 and 2018 Strathcona Cup tours who travel to our club from all across Canada. We look forward to their participation every year now.

Also in 1999, the crew introduced the now traditional "Captain's Jacket". A dark navy blazer with the Captain's Wheel logo proudly embroidered on it along with his customary white hat are presented to next year's Captain at the annual dinner on Friday evening. This dress uniform presents the Captain as a pretty sharp looking guy and when many Captains get together at the dinner or some other gathering, they are a very distinguishable group. This is a classic touch on a very unique curling event that is rarely repeated anywhere in the curling world.

In 2006, the crew introduced the "Rosie Dumouchel" award in honour of Captain 10. This coveted award goes to the participant that demonstrates the most sportsmanship and leadership on and off the ice during the event. Rosie exemplified the meaning of this award and we miss him dearly.

In 2009, the crew introduced the role of "Honorary Captain" as a way to recognize the long term support of a non-TSA Riverboat man at the event.

In 2018, the crew also introduced a Section "A" winner individual keeper trophy called the "Captain's Wheel" which is crafted in wood by one of the crew. A very unique memento to keep for many years to come.

Over the years, the Riverboat Men have been able to support a number of special projects at the club including contributions toward capital investments and the

development of junior curling. We have contributed toward TVs and camera systems, ice maintenance equipment, bar renovations, computer systems and the like... many of which the club might not have been able to do on its own. The event exists to support the club and provide a conduit of great fellowship within this group of special "Riverboat Men".

By Jeff Stewart