

## A Man & His Ice

Story & Photos By Eric Nixon, Hayter-Walden Publications  
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All ice is definitely not created equal. Mac Webster, the Ice Technician/Manager at the Forest Curling & Social Club, is proof positive of that fact. Webster is believed to be the longest serving ice technician working continuously at one facility in Canada and has been providing his excellent skills to the Forest club for over 40 years. As such, he's heard a lot of opinions about the differences between good ice and bad – probably more than he cares to remember.

Webster loves telling the story about the time he told an out-of-town curler they have 200 members at the Forest club. The gentleman commented, “Then you have 201 ice makers, don't you?” Webster laughs because he says everybody thinks they know how to do the job but, in reality, it's one he's still learning, four decades after he started.

The 58-year old first took on the job in 1972, just after he got out of high school, although he'd been helping out at the club since he was 14. When he was in Grade 12, the previous Ice Manager died and the club asked him if he'd like to try his hand at it. He started immediately and had no training, mostly finding his way through trial and error. “There's a lot of learning curves,” he explains.

It wasn't until he'd been doing the job for almost 20 years that Webster decided to actually take some professional courses but, by then, he discovered he knew everything they had to teach - and much more. It was some welcome validation for all the work he'd been doing since he was a teenager.

After Webster's many years of honing his skills, Curling Club Past President Al Belanger proudly says, “Forest is well known in the curling world for having excellent playing ice,” a great tribute to the longtime Ice Technician.

However, Webster admits it wasn't always that way: “Years ago, the ice was pretty crappy.” He says rocks would tend to slide toward the wall, no matter what turn you put on them. “The old timers kind of liked that, because when the out-of-towners came, they didn't know,” he jokes.

Webster likes to call himself a Professor of Ice – not only because he knows a lot about his job, but also because he works from September to April, the same schedule as university professors. That's not the way it started out, however. For his first few years, he did construction work during the summers, then worked at the Forest Golf & Country Hotel for 20 years, retiring from that position about a decade ago.

He says the dual roles at the two clubs worked out well for many years, but then there started to be too much overlap and it became difficult managing both facilities at the same time. “I worked 14 months out of the year,” he says.

Today, his full concentration is on the curling club. His job begins in September, a full month before curlers arrive. This year he started the compressors and other equipment back on September 17<sup>th</sup> in preparation for the club's first event, the 11<sup>th</sup> Annual Swing N' Sweep, which ran from October 17-19.

Webster begins the long process of getting the ice ready by freezing the cement floor. He starts with a light mist of water and gradually builds up the ice. Once he gets some floods going, he spray paints the ice white. He explains, “A lot of people actually think ice is white.”



**Mac Webster has been the Ice Technician/Manager at the Forest Curling & Social Club for over 40 years, believed to be the longest tenure at one facility in Canada. Pictured, Webster lays down Ontario Curling Association logos in early October as he prepares the ice for the season.**

In reality, he lays down three coats of white paint in this order: first coat, mist, second coat, heavier mist, third coat, seal down 20 times. The reason for the mist? “If you threw heavy water on there, it (the white paint) would just wash away,” he explains.

After that, he scribes the circles, which is almost like using a compass. Once the circles are drawn, he hand paints them all using two coats of water-soluble paint. Next, he makes the corner scribes where the rocks are kept during games, installs the hacks where the rocks are thrown from, and puts in all the lines, then he adds the Ontario Curling Association decals and sponsor advertisements.



**The curling circles are all painted by hand, a laborious job that requires Webster to be on the ice for five to six hours at a time.**

“Painting is always the big chore, since I’m the only guy who paints,” says Webster, adding with a smile: “My back aches as soon as I hear the word ‘painting.’”

During the painting process, he’s on the ice for five to six hours at a time, which takes its toll on him. “I’m not getting any younger,” he says.

The final ice surface is just slightly thicker than an inch, as opposed to hockey ice, which is 2.5 inches, because hockey blades are a lot tougher on the surface. Hockey ice is also much colder, about 10 degrees Fahrenheit difference, says Webster. He explains the curling rocks glide better when ice is a little warmer: “If it’s too cold, it gets frosty.”

Once the ice is ready, Webster says the heavy work is done. When the 600 or so curlers per week start the season in late October, he just maintains the surface with a planer that scrapes the ice, then they add fresh pebble.

“Scraping’s a big thing,” he explains. “We used to just scrape on a Friday and that was good for the weekend.” Now he scrapes every morning, sometimes twice a day just to keep the ice fast. He says with all the developments in ice technology, people don’t even have to lift the rocks anymore.

One of his biggest challenges is keeping the ice clean, along with making sure everything runs smoothly, including the compressor and pumps. “If one thing breaks down, everything’s down,” he says.

Webster is pretty humble about his work, despite his long history and the fact that everyone who plays at the club comments on the great condition of the ice. “I maintain it pretty good and try to take pride in it,” he says.

Over the years, he’s been honoured to be invited to help out with the ice at several Briars and other big events around the province. Two years ago, Forest hosted teams competing in the Strathcona Cup, the oldest international curling event in the world and one that takes place every five years alternating between Scotland and Canada.

Al Belanger says about some of the Strathcona Cup curlers, “They admitted that they were intimidated when they got off the bus and saw Mac in his sweater covered with all the awards.”

Webster also curls four times a week himself, which helps him see how the ice conditions are. “You’ve got to read the ice,” he says, which seems highly appropriate for the ‘Professor.’

Belanger says the club is extremely popular with active mature adults: “Curling is the greatest winter past-time for seniors wanting to stay active. I retired in 2012 and was then able to curl in the daytime as well as evenings, as much as the body can take. A double-edged sword: staying active daily keeps you moving but the body also tells you when you have had too much.”

Webster is a big part of the Forest club’s continuing success and is proud of his long tenure as its Ice Technician. “Most ice men last eight to nine years at one club. That’s their maximum,” he says. In that context, his 43 years look pretty amazing.

After all those years, Webster still says the best part of his job is meeting a lot of different people. As well, he values the independence the role of Ice Technician/Manager affords him. “It’s nice being your own boss,” he admits. “I get to do what I want.”