

Report on the 2021 World Mixed Doubles Curling Championships

Aberdeen, Scotland

May 17-23, 2021

Team Palancca/Kiss

Hungarian National Champions

While I am not exactly sure of the specific expectations for this report, I will offer a review of elements before, during, and after the event, as well as a number of comments and observations.

I respectfully thank the Committee members for inviting my participation, and I apologize for issuing it in English. I know that my Team member, Dori Palancca, will attend the online meeting and will be aware of the contents of this report, so she can easily elaborate and fill members in if there are questions or missing elements. If there are further questions or notes for me personally, I would be happy to have them and to respond by email (davidwills12@icloud.com).

Team Palancca/Kiss set out this season with the main task to retain the title of National Champions (for a 3rd consecutive year) and optimize our chances to earn a spot at the 2022 Olympic Winter games in Beijing.

Our training program was developed interactively, and included all aspects of sport preparation in measured ways. Team P/K effectively combined work with a physical trainer, a sport psychologist and a technical/strategic coach to build and refine a full and dynamic approach to their sport. The specifics of each week have already been made available to the Board, but each week featured 20+ hours of dedicated physical and analytical work, plus frequent practice games (this was in addition to the other curling-related elements of their lives such as play & practice with other teams, consulting, umpiring and coaching).

The uncertainty of travel made it mechanically awkward and stressful to compete in high quality events this season. A quick look at the WCT tour schedule shows that numerous events were cancelled or suspended. Happily, in the fall of 2020, we were able to attend some in Switzerland, Slovakia, and Poland. Later, we managed to play in Russia, at home in Hungary (Westbay), in Latvia, and in Estonia. Not all events ended in victory, as we worked to refine some elements of our game for consistency at the elite level. However, there were several excellent results including the retention of the Hungarian National Championship, the gold medal at the Westbay Cup, and the silver medal at the Tallinn Masters.

The mechanical preparation for the Worlds was complex. Most of the work fell to the team members (with some valuable support from Petra). We were required to follow the “bubble system”, arriving in time for testing and quarantine before the event started. In all we were absent from home for 13 days. All athletes followed the rules and, happily, the event happened without any covid-related incidents.

We were in Pool A, consisting of 10 teams, playing a full round robin. In the end, our record was 3-6 (victories over Korea, Czech, and Spain; losses to Germany, Canada,

Italy, RCF, Australia, Scotland). We also played an extra relegation match against Finland, which we won.

In the end, our record was not strong enough to earn us a spot in the playoffs or one of the 7 spots at the Winter Olympics. It would have required a record of 5-4 to place us in contention for this.

We entered the event with high hopes and expectations, and understood that we also carried the hopes of the Hungarian curling community. Accordingly, we left the event with great disappointment.

In examining the causes for our shortfall, there are several things worth mentioning. First, this was the first World event of this type. With only 20 of the world's best teams divided into 2 pools, there was incredible parity in the field. Objectively, there were at least 12 teams (including Hungary) present that could reasonably have contended for a place on the podium. Hungary was not the only team to leave feeling that a replay of the event could have produced a completely different set of medalists.

With that said, we must accept reality. Curling is curling and shots are shots; if a team wants to win, they must make the right shots with accuracy and consistency. Team Hungary did play well and were competitive in every game. Sadly, and too often, we missed some shots by small margins or failed to apply consistent pressure to our opponents.

Were there issues that can explain what happened? Yes.

Some technical elements of play, such as struggles with weight control and finding accurate paths on the ice had effects on the quality of shots and, over time, eroded the confidence of the players.

It is also important to note that, at the elite level, the level of mental fitness and focus of the players can often be a deciding factor. At this level, players must be mentally free to focus entirely and specifically on their task; to the extent that they are free to focus, with the support and encouragement of the Associations and community and families etc., their performance can flow freely and effectively. It is no secret that Team P/K has encountered numerous obstacles in the very environment that should be supporting them. Despite their being two of the most accomplished representatives of Hungarian curling (and despite their having won all National titles since the previous Winter Olympics), political manoeuvring and general indifference have generated persistent, deep feelings of frustration and stress. It is worth noting that, in addition to scheduling the National 4-player Championships in a way that denied both Dori and Zsolt the chance to support their (reigning National Champion) UTE teams, the fiasco related to the UTE Férfi 1 semi-final victory was an unavoidable source of stress and distraction... this happened in conjunction with 2 very winnable matches (RCF & Australia) which, had we won, would have taken our record to 5-4.

Summary

Preparation:

1. 3 ice sessions/week (mixed doubles)
2. 2+ ice sessions/week (4-player teams and coaching)
3. 2 practice games/month
4. 3 off-ice fitness & strength training/week
5. 2-3 running session/week
6. strategical training, in conjunction with ice training & online
7. 1 psychological training/week
8. Nutrition discussion/management
9. preparation tournaments (Mixed Doubles): 8 WCT tournaments plus National Championship; 2 gold medals, 1 silver medal.

Funding:

1. Funding is basically managed by Team members, with HCA support funds applied to ice rental and costs associated with training and tournament play (transportation, entry fees, accommodations, etc.)
2. Financial support from the HCA is generally not sufficient to fully cover costs related to support personnel, such as technical coaching, psychologist, etc.
3. An unexpected, but significant, extra expense came this season in the form of covid testing fees. Many airlines required tests prior to travel, and events often required tests in order to participate. The costs varied with each event, but the range fell between 50-200 euro per person in each event (150-600 euro for the whole team). With the exception of the World championships, this expense was always the responsibility of the team.

While it would be easy to dwell on feelings of regret or negativity, our team is instead feeling positive. There are 2 Olympic spots still available, to be contested at the final Olympic Qualifying Event in December 2021 (location still not certain). WCF President Kate Caithness made a point of speaking to the team and offering her confident support to Team Palanca/Kiss as a team that “we need in Beijing”. We are already mapping out our ambitious and dedicated practice plans for the fall and (once the new WCT schedule is published) will add as many fruitful competitions as we can.

We look forward to getting a full and unprecedented level of support from the association as we prepare for this challenge.

With respect and appreciation,
David Wills
Coach, Team Palanca/Kiss