

Board Review

ACTIONS, DECISIONS, PROCESSES
Learning from 2022



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In 2022, a crisis within USA Curling and the curling community developed. It revolved around two issues: former CEO Jeff Plush and his tenure as Commissioner of the National Women's Soccer League (NWSL), and the relationship between USA Curling and the Grand National Curling Club (GNCC).

The issues, while not directly related, became conflated and deep fissures were created.

Plush had been the Commissioner of the National Women's Soccer League from 2015 through 2017, and the Yates Report, released in fall of 2022, revealed the extent of abuse by coaches of athletes. At the same time, the national organization was managing an issue surrounding the compliance requirements of regional associations in the USA Curling bylaws. The Grand National Curling Club refused to follow them, and they were removed as members of the organization. Members of USA Curling and the curling community were outraged about both the removal of a regional association and the continued tenure of Plush as CEO of USA Curling.

The fallout caused USA Curling to review its bylaws, membership model, operating procedures, and communications. On October 29, 2022, following a tumultuous virtual Annual Members' Meeting, the Board of Directors of USA Curling asked Plush to resign.



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Dean Gemmell, Director of Curling Development at USA Curling and a former High Performance program competitor, was named Interim CEO. Three independent directors on the Board of Directors resigned, including the Chair. Bret Jackson, a Detroit-based curler and the representative for the Great Lakes Curling Association and Midwest Curling Associations, was elected Chair of the Board. Olympian Colin Huffman was elected Vice-Chair.

During the 2022-23 curling season, the all-volunteer Governance 4.0 Ad Hoc Committee met regularly to develop recommendations for a new business model. An Athlete Health & Safety Working Group was formed and worked to implement new Response & Resolution procedures. An executive search firm was contracted to recruit and identify the best CEO for the organization. The CEO was no longer the contact for SafeSport issues. There was an extensive schedule of Town Halls with Gemmell and Board members. Communications to the membership and the curling community were greatly increased. The FY 23 Budget was revised to eliminate a \$400,000 projected shortfall. Highly compensated staff departed and operating efficiencies were found.

On May 1, 2024, following interviews with 12 candidates, Dean Gemmell was named CEO of the organization. A new membership model was introduced. Bylaw amendments related to this new model were ratified at the Members' Meeting in October 2023.



REVIEW OF BOARD AND STAFF MANAGEMENT OF 2022 ISSUES.

In November of 2023, USA Curling engaged David Patterson, Senior Governance Advisor at the United States Olympic & Paralympic Association (USOPC), to conduct a review of the events of 2022 with members of the Board of USA Curling.

Directors and staff had an open, candid discussion and shared thoughts on how the issues could have been handled more transparently and more effectively.

This report summarizes key points of that discussion, the conclusions that were made, and outlines how issues can be handled differently in the future.



The regional association and governance issue.

- The dispute with the GNCC turned very personal—the policy or priority frameworks somehow became secondary. For some leaders on both sides, it became about “winning” versus working constructively towards a solution.
- At the same time, the curling community wanted both USA Curling and the GNCC to “...grow up” and “...figure it out.”
- As an organization, we found ourselves not really knowing what a successful outcome looked like in relation to the differences with the GNCC. This deserved far more consideration and thought during Board meetings.
- There was not enough discussion about long-term impact, planning, and communications efforts related to the relationship with the GNCC.



The NWSL issue and the Yates Report.

- The Board needed expert guidance and assistance—legal counsel and a crisis communications firm were brought on.
- Managing a crisis with a human resources element was more difficult and complex than the Board might have thought at the time. It was relatively uncharted territory for the Board and the organization.
- Some members of the Board also felt there was “gatekeeping” that prevented distribution of all or key information. Decisions on strategic choices or communication tactics were not always shared.
- The Board was convening five to six times per week, often in meetings that lasted over three hours. Too often, the outcome of those discussions was not reflected in actions the following day. Those charged with execution often changed course—often in good faith, but in a way that did not reflect the preferences of the Board.
- Some members of the Board felt the focus of communications often seemed to be about “...making the CEO look good...”. This seemed to come at the expense of the organization.



“The connection with the curling community was lost.”

- Board members realized the curling community felt like USA Curling had become foreign to them - it was no longer “...their NGB.”
- COVID, COVID mandates, and post-COVID tension between Member Clubs and USA Curling exacerbated issues. There were financial challenges, philosophical differences, and lingering resentment. These issues put everyone on edge.
- The communication to members was not in the voice of the curling community, and failed to reflect the values and priorities of the people who play our sport. We failed to “...speak curling.”



**“The connection with
the curling community
was lost.”**

- The organization was not prepared to manage social media effectively.
- The Board and staff underestimated how much our community relied on social media to share opinions and criticism and failed to engage on our platforms or through other forms of communication (emails to members, news releases, etc.). By not responding to the feelings expressed on social media, it appeared that we were ignoring the curling community.



**Understanding our
WHY—future guidance
for the Board.**

- We need to know who we are and what is important to us. Spending time on that question, before a crisis, would make us far more prepared when we face difficult issues.
- We need to have clear expectations of our Chair as the leader of the Board. Directors need to directly express how they want to be led. This is a practice that can be built now and has occurred in the months since the crisis.
- We need to establish best practices for working with operational staff and outside experts. In the past year, the Board has discussed the reporting process of staff and will review how direction is provided to outside consultants and experts.



**Connecting with the
community today.**

- Our communications are much better now. We are working with our community in a way that resonates, and we have more back-and-forth communication than we did in the past.
- This approach needs to be maintained and nurtured so that we continue to build strong connections with our members.
- Curling does better when it speaks in the voice of the curling community.



How we avoid repeating the mistakes of past.

- As the leadership of the NGB for a sport we love, we are committed to doing better for the curling community and to learning from a difficult time.

Even a strong sport community will endure a bad stretch—how we come out of it is what is most important.

- We have learned from the process of rebuilding and have made overdue changes to governance and structure.
- If facing a similar situation again, we would operate and respond differently.



Looking forward: best practices for the Board.

- Talk regularly about our work and our values. As a group, be clear about our role and who we represent. Know that a value is something we hold so strong that we would be willing to lose something of value to preserve it.
- Continue to improve how we structure our meetings and how we receive information in our meetings. The structure of the meeting speaks to how the Board intends to work together.
- Ensure that agendas focus on the most important work and tackle key issues.

