

Roth embraced women's curling

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Posted: Aug. 15, 2004

In the early 1940s, Bernie Roth was a stay-at-home mother, but one visit to the Wauwatosa Curling Club and the Elm Grove woman knew what she would be doing for her lifetime.

Roth discovered curling after visiting the club with golfing friends whose husbands were club members.

Envious of how much fun the men seemed to be having, she fell in love with the sport. Within 10 years, she formed Milwaukee's first women's curling club, founded and served as president of the first national women's curling association and held the first mixed bonspiel - men and women competing together - in the United States.

Roth, who remained active in curling organizations well into her 80s, died Aug. 4 at her home in Milwaukee. She was 97.

The former Bernice Stark was born in Chicago on New Year's Day in 1907. She married Edward L. Roth of Cincinnati in 1929. After the couple moved to the Milwaukee area, Edward Roth, a metallurgist, became president and chairman of Motor Castings Co. of West Allis.

"(Bernie Roth) was very active in community affairs," daughter Holly von Estorff said. "She organized the Red Cross chapter in Elm Grove during World War II. She was a Brownie and Girl Scout leader."

After that fateful visit to the Wauwatosa Curling Club, Roth was inspired to join the club and eventually helped form the U.S. Women's Curling Association, the first of its kind, serving as the association's president from 1947 until 1949.

When a Milwaukee Curling Club member told her in 1947 that Milwaukee should have a women's curling club, it was all the encouragement she needed to start a club in the city.

She and her husband moved to Milwaukee's east side. At the time, women could play only if their husbands were club members, so Roth persuaded her husband, who was not a curler, to join the MCC so she could begin organizing a women's club.

The men were supportive, but cautioned that Roth and the other women had only one year to "prove" themselves. By January 1949, the Milwaukee Kilties were born with 15 charter members. Roth was the club's president.

With the success that followed, Roth organized the first mixed bonspiel in 1951 with enthusiasm and support from club members. From then on, mixed bonspiels were held every year, with junior bonspiels beginning about 10 years later.

A cross between bowling and shuffleboard, curling is played on ice with teams of four competing to score points by sliding a round granite rock across a 140-foot ice sheet to a 12-foot target. Landing rocks closest to the center of the target scores points.

Roth's love for curling has been passed down to younger generations. Both her granddaughter, Kristin Severson of Milwaukee, and Severson's husband are avid curlers.

Von Estorff said Roth remained active until recently. She played golf and swam into her early 90s. She was inducted into the Curling Hall of Fame in 1996. Memorial services will be held at a later date. There will be a private burial ceremony at Forest Home Cemetery, 2405 W. Forest Home Ave.

From the Aug. 16, 2004, editions of the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel