

Niagara Falls twosome hoping to leave no stone uncurled

Niagara Falls Curling Club members representing Canada at under-21 mixed doubles championships in Sweden

By [Bernd Franke](#) Regional Sports Editor
Fri., April 15, 2022 timer 3 min. read
Article was updated 9 hrs ago



Victor Pietrangelo and Jessica Zhang won't just be swept up in curling while representing Canada at an under-21 mixed doubles championship this week in Sweden.

Before the long-time friends and Niagara Falls Curling Club members take the ice to begin preliminary-round action on Wednesday, they will already have synched their internal clocks to the six-hour time difference and taken in some sights in Stockholm and the area.

They are guaranteed seven games at the Nordic Junior Curling Tour (NJCT) international tournament but hope to advance and go deep into the playoffs that wrap up Sunday.

After competing at two recent qualifiers, the pair, both 19 and graduates of A.N. Myer Secondary School, are used to the pressure of facing elimination. Their latest success came earlier this month when they topped a field of eight at a qualifier at Dundas Valley Golf and Country Club to clinch one of Canada's two berths at the under-21 championships in Sweden.

Canada's other mixed doubles team – one female, one male – is from the Maritimes.

Mixed doubles, a “newer discipline,” was developed by Curling Canada's Warren Hansen in 2001 and the first world mixed doubles championships were held in 2008. It was added to the Winter Olympics lineup in 2018.

“Instead of traditional four-person curling, you have two pre-placed stones and you only throw five,” Pietrangelo said. “Jessica, my partner, will throw the first and last stone, then I will throw the middle three.”

In mixed doubles, the team that throws the final rock – the hammer, in curling parlance – put a rock at the back of the four-foot line. The team that doesn't have the hammer places the other stone to serve as a centre-line guard.

Pietrangelo, who is also a member of the men's curling team at Brock University, didn't have much time to switch his mindset to two-person curling after competing at the Ontario University Athletics championships in mid-March.

“It was quick. We only had two weeks to prepare,” the second-year accounting student said of the turn-around.

While he finds two- and four-person curling equally demanding mentally, four-person takes a backseat when it comes to giving participants a workout.

“Mixed doubles is definitely really physical because it’s only two people.”

He has become used to switching to mixed doubles from the traditional four-person version of the sport.

“Obviously, we all start out with four-person but my partner and I have played together for four or five years,” the second-year accounting student said. “We know the game pretty well.”

Are they able to read each other’s minds after all this time together on the ice?

“Pretty much. People say we’re like an old married couple on the ice,” he answered with a laugh. “I’ve known her forever, since Grade 9, so I guess we’re kind of like at that point.

“We definitely do compliment each other.”

When there are only two curlers on a team, communication is crucial to success, as is the ability to make shots.

“Shoot-making-wise, I would say you need to be pretty well-rounded.”

Zhang, who is in her second year studying software engineering at the University of Waterloo, ranks teamwork as among the pair’s greatest strengths when they compete as a mixed double.

“Since we’ve known each other so long, we know how to communicate with one another,” she said. “If we’re going anything wrong, we can tell one another without it being awkward or anything like that.

“We’re very good friends off the ice, too.”

Pietrangelo was introduced to curling as a sixth grader.

“I tried it for a year at the curling club.”

At the time, Pietrangelo was more interested in gymnastics but competitive gymnastics got to be too much by the time he reached high school.

That's when he rediscovered curling, albeit not directly.

"It's a funny story actually," he recalled. "I didn't even try out for the team in Grade 9, but right before the first tournament, somebody dislocated their shoulder so they were looking for someone new to bring on to the team."

Zhang didn't pick up a curling stone until her first year at Myer. By Grade 10 she and Pietrangelo were paired together as a mixed doubles team.

Their trip to Sweden is being funded by the Junior Slam Series.

Bernd Franke *is a St. Catharines-based journalist and the regional sports editor for the Standard, Tribune and Review. Reach him via email: bernd.franke@niagaradailies.com*