

High on the hog

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The StarPhoenix

While world-champion skip Randy Ferbey gushed this week about plans to adopt an electronic hog-line detector for the 2004 Brier, Kevin Martin pulled out a big, red Stop sign and started swinging.

Martin is skeptical -- to put it mildly -- after learning about the Canadian Curling Association's decision to use the new technology effective immediately. The detector, designed by a Saskatoon engineering firm, was tested in top-flight competition for the first time at last weekend's Continental Cup, and it will be used at all CCA championships this season, including the Brier and Scott Tournament of Hearts.

The CCA is so sure of its reliability it won't even bother bringing in human judges as backups.

But Martin, who hadn't heard about the plan until this week, objects on several different levels.

"They have to start with the players. That's why we have the Slams now; that's why the players boycotted (the Brier)," said Martin, who played a leadership role in a recently-completed two-year feud pitting the CCA against several top touring teams.

"I'm not sure this has been tested enough yet. I didn't even know about it. It's very pushy, and it's not right. You come up to me, saying they're going to put this in, and I'm saying 'What is it?' How can't I know? How couldn't I have played with this thing 10 or 15 times by now?"

"Let's be realistic. Implementing it four months after first use (in high-calibre

competition) . . . you could be asking for trouble. All hell could break loose."

But Ferbey, who tested the device when he played at the Cup, endorses it enthusiastically. His distaste for hog-line judges is well known, especially after a blow-up at the 2001 world championships that saw him get three rocks pulled in a 6-5 semi-final loss to Switzerland's Christof Schwaller.

Scotland's Sheila Swan was the only curler to activate the small red LED lights on the handle during last weekend's Cup.

"It's a wonderful device," Ferbey said from his Edmonton home. "I give it five out of five. I see no problems with it, and it was 100 per cent foolproof. I didn't hear one complaint about it."

"It basically confirms what we believe about curling, is that people generally don't go over the hog-line. Quite frankly, we even tried to push the envelope a couple of times, and we still never triggered it."

"Before the CCA puts anything into effect, they do a lot of testing with it to make sure it is working properly. They don't want egg on their face if it wasn't working properly."

GLOVES PRESENT PROBLEM

The device has two potential drawbacks. Firstly, the technology-loaded handles are designed to withstand heavy blows, but inventors still don't want curlers whacking them with their brooms. Secondly, some types of heavier gloves will negate the system, which includes a sophisticated touch

sensor on the handle and a magnet buried under the ice near the hog-line.

If a curler insists on wearing potentially-problematic gloves at the Brier, the CCA will appoint an official to serve as his personal hog-line judge when he throws. Martin, however, wants the system to be rejigged until it accommodates all glove types.

"It clearly doesn't work," Martin said. "If somebody's got a glove and they're going to bring a human out -- which involves human error -- while everybody else has an automated system that makes mistakes less often, it's not a level playing field.

"I like the idea that they're trying," he added. "That's good. Anytime there's innovation, that's good."

Counters Ferbey: "You can't worry about the small percentage who throw with a glove. If they want to continue to throw with a glove and beat the system . . . there's always going to be people trying to cheat the system no matter if it's in curling, baseball or whatever. But this is there to help curlers, and I believe it's done a wonderful job of it.

"I'd rather have this than the official, because the official's going to make more errors than the rock. With a human eye, there's still the element of error. That's absolutely gone with this."

The system, designed by Startco Engineering, will likely retail for \$10,000 per sheet. The CCA -- its first customer -- purchased 12 sheets worth, and will also use it this season for the Canada Cup along with the Canadian mixed, seniors and junior championships.

'GOOD FOR THE SPORT'

One long-term goal is to get the system into the Olympics.

Neil Houston, the CCA's manager of championship services and special events, says he ran into some World Curling Federation officials at an airport last weekend and they indicated they were interested in the detector.

Houston says he's convinced the detector is fool-proof, and he notes that the CCA will save money by not paying travel and living expenses for hog-line judges.

"As long as the system works perfectly like it did last weekend . . . it's good for the sport," Houston said. "It'll have nothing but a positive impact on the game."

Meanwhile, Startco -- a company that specializes in mining technology -- is getting its first real taste of wide public exposure. President Garry Paulson concedes that a failure at the Brier would be embarrassing, but he doesn't expect that to happen.

"It's a pretty public event, and if something goes wrong, all of a sudden you're on national TV," said Paulson, whose company tested the device all last winter at two local clubs. "But we're not too concerned. A lot of engineers have been involved in this, and there's a lot of experience in electronics design. We're designing stuff that goes on some pretty rugged mining machines and some pretty ugly environments. The guys know what they're doing."

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