Sobkowicz joins elite hometown company

Winnipeg's latest Canadian champ goes from underdog to top dog

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Manitoba skip Chris Sobkowicz takes a shot during the final game of Canadian wheelchair curling championship at Jasper Place Curling Club on Sunday.
Photograph by: Rick MacWilliam , The Journal

Talk about Canadian curling champions hailing from Winnipeg and people like Jeff Stoughton, Jennifer Jones and Kerry Burtnyk come to mind. You can add Chris Sobkowicz to the list.

"There were a lot of people who were naysayers about our abilities and that we were underachievers, so we really came into the season in not really a good position," said Sobkowicz.

But Sobkowicz and his rink of third Dennis Thiessen, second Melissa Lecuyer and lead George Hornning proved doubters wrong in Sunday's final of the Canadian wheelchair curling championship at the Jasper Place Curling Club by defeating Alberta's Bruno Yizek 8-7 in a thrilling contest.

With Alberta lying shot rock, Yizek came up inches short when he attempted a difficult come-around tap-back on a buried Manitoba stone to score three and get the win.

"It was a draw for a tie and, if I was just a hair heavy, then a tap would maybe have been enough for us to get three," Yizek said.

Despite the loss, the reigning Paralympic and world champion skip said he wasn't upset by finishing second for the third time at nationals.

"I'm not bitter at all," Yizek said. "It's a game of inches and I've been here before and Chris and his team, they curled awesome, but I'm proud of my team. I think we curled awesome as well."

Manitoba's victory ended a seven-year run of British Columbia-based teams winning the championship. It was Manitoba's first win in the event.

After forcing Alberta to take one in the first end, Sobkowicz played a quiet tap-back to score two in the second end and take a 2-1 lead.

The Manitoba lead was short-lived because with his last rock in the third end, Sobkowicz wrecked on a cluster of rocks at the top of the 12-foot. That mistake gave Yizek an open draw for three to put Alberta up 4-2.

Yizek, whose team plays out of the Ogden Legion Curling Club in Calgary, forced Manitoba to a single in four, but the team out of the Assiniboine Memorial club came out strong in the fifth end.

With his last rock of the fifth, Sobkowicz executed a tremendous hit-and-roll to leave Manitoba sitting four with a trio of their own stones guarding the rings. Yizek tried to sneak his final rock into a pocket, but it rubbed off a guard and gave Manitoba a steal of two for a 5-4 lead.

"In the third's rocks we got one buried at the back of the rings, and then the second shot for our third stopped top four and they were all in line," Sobkowicz said. "It made it really difficult for Bruno to come in and dislodge it."

Alberta got its deuce back in the sixth, but Manitoba responded in the seventh. After Yizek was wide with his last rock of the end, Sobkowicz made a perfect draw to the four-foot to give Manitoba a triple of its own and an 8-6 lead coming home.

Alberta still had a chance in the eighth, especially after Sobkowicz's first rock missed everything, but it was not meant to be for Yizek.

"There was a lot of great shots today, but I think our three in seven was probably the deal-breaker," Sobkowicz said. "They made a few errors and we jumped on that."

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