

Sprint for the playoffs

By **Larry Wood**
Heart Chart Editor

They call it Roundup Day at the Scotties Tournament Of Hearts. By 11 p.m. tonight, playoff teams will be decided and the eliminated teams will be dialing up airline schedules.

Heading into today's final three rounds of qualifying action, Alberta's Shannon Kleibrink of Calgary held a one-game lead on the field at 8-and-1 and had established herself as a playoff certainty.

Certain to be in the post-preliminary mix, too, is Sherry Middaugh of Coldwater, Ont., who has never missed the playoffs in four previous Scotties. Ontario was 7-and-2.

Marie-France Larouche of Quebec who has never missed the playoffs in two previous Scotties, was 6-and-3. So were Heather Strong's Newfoundlanders and Mary-Ann Arsenault's Nova Scotians.

Probably the only other team with a playoff shot is Manitoba's 2005 champion, Jennifer Jones. She won twice on Wednesday to improve her record to 5-and-4.

But the number of win-loss combinations involving the top teams today could be many.

Here's how it will wind up at the Brandt Centre today:

Ontario (7-2) tonight.

Nova Scotia (6-3) plays Newfoundland (6-3) this morning, Ontario (7-2) this afternoon.

Manitoba (5-4) plays British Columbia (4-5) this morning, Team Canada (4-5) this afternoon.

Kleibrink won Wednesday's feature, a 10-8 extra-end decision over Middaugh to break up a neck-and-neck battle at the top of the table. Alberta scored triples in the first and third ends for a 6-2 lead and had Middaugh chasing for the remainder of the afternoon.

"It's disappointing," said Middaugh, "because I look at the points we gave away, and they gave away some, too, but giving up two threes and still forcing it to an extra end shows a bit of our grit.

"We battled back and they weren't easy shots that we missed but you still have to make those in this competition. I'd like about three shots back and it might have made the difference."

The win was the eighth of the week for Kleibrink who agreed a playoff assignment was certain.

"That's No. 8 so I think we're in there somewhere," said the Calgary skip.

"But I've played enough years to know that it's never over . . . never. You never feel 100 per cent in a groove but this, right now, is as good as it gets."

She again credited the play of lead Chelsey Bell for setting up ends that have been responsible for allowing the Alberta team to assume the role of frontrunner, game-in, game-out.

"No matter what they (opposition) go with their first rocks, Chelsey wires them in there, and then they have to get them out," said Kleibrink. "That's the plan. And Chelsey's so good at it."

Alberta pummeled Sylvie Robichaud of New Brunswick 9-3 on the sunrise shift. Middaugh rebounded in the evening to shade Robichaud 7-5 with a deuce in an extra end.

"That was another tough game against a good young team," allowed Middaugh. Larouche suffered her third setback on the day's last draw when her Quebecers appeared to sustain a malfunction after building a 5-3 half-time lead. Arsenault and her Bluenose veterans outscored their opponent 6-1 over the last five and recorded a 9-6 decision.

Quebec earlier clobbered MacInnes of Kamloops 10-1 while Arsenault lost her third in the morning, yielding the steal of five in the eighth end which proved the difference in a 9-6 loss to the B.C. team.

Strong probably should have headed into today with only two defeats, but she was rushed by a dying clock in the morning



Peg Goss (left) and Cathy Cunningham of Newfoundland and Labrador put their backs into brushing Wednesday.

against Jones. The Newfs led by two playing the last end but Strong rushed her last rock, missed it, and Jones responded with a rousing raise double-kill to score three and a narrow 8-7 decision to stay in contention.

The Newfoundlanders rebounded nicely and defeated Michelle Englot of Regina 7-5 in the afternoon.

"I was frustrated because I thought we played well and time is such an easy thing to correct," said Strong of the day's exchanges. "It was too bad. It's one of the reasons we brought a sports psychologist, Dr. Baz Kavanagh, with us, to help us get over those things and let them go. Our coach did a good job over lunch and shifted our focus to this afternoon's game."

Strong said that if she'd blown one like the morning duke 10 years ago when she made her Scotties debut in the same building "we might have self-destructed". But she added, "I've come along way since then."

Jones handed Saskatchewan its fifth loss in the evening, by the same 7-5 score, likely eliminating the Green Machine from contention.

"That was probably our best team game all week and that's nice going into the last day, hopefully a terrific Thursday," said Jones.

"It was a winning Wednesday after a terrible Tuesday. We just capitalized on our opportunities. We picked up for each other which we weren't doing on Tuesday.

We need to keep it going and we need the right people to lose but we can only control what we can control. I try not to look at the combinations, they're too complicated. We'll just try to focus on winning."

Also down and probably out of the title hunt was defending champion Kelly Scott of Kelowna who suffered a jolting 8-5 loss to Suzanne Gaudet's young Prince Edward Islanders on the late docket.

Gaudet hammered three on the board in the fourth end, stole one in the fifth for a 5-2 edge and never looked back.

"We may be down, we hope we're not really quite out, but we don't know," said Scott. "We just ran into a sharpshooting team in this game. Now we want to finish well. We've had a tough week. It has been a bit of a struggle."

Scott's outfit double up on the winless Territories team of Kerry Galusha 10-5 earlier in the day. Gaudet made it two in a row after a 9-8 extra-end conquest of the Polars in the morning.

'You never feel 100 per cent in a groove but this, right now, is as good as it gets'

— Shannon Kleibrink



Alberta (8-1) plays P.E.I. (3-6) this morning, Saskatchewan (4-5) tonight.

Ontario (7-2) plays Nova Scotia (6-3) this afternoon, Newfoundland (6-3) tonight.

Quebec (6-3) plays New Brunswick (1-8) this afternoon, Territories (0-9) tonight.

Newfoundland (6-3) plays Nova Scotia (6-3) this morning,