

Hunt never ends for curling pin collectors

When Roger Degagne booked his trip to the 2011 Brier, his thoughts drifted to his own personal great white whale -- and the person who owns it. It was at the 2007 Brier in Hamilton when Degagne, one of the dozen or so pin collectors who've taken a curling-linked hobby to the extreme, met a woman who wondered about the value of a pin she had inherited. And there it was.

She held the door-pin -- handed out to fans at the entrance -- from the 1940 Brier in Winnipeg. The one he had sought. He offered \$1,500 on the spot. She turned him down. And he has been waiting for another shot ever since. He thought this might be the week.

"She lives halfway between (London, Ont.) and Hamilton," Winnipegger Degagne said. So far, there's no sign of her.

But even if the 1940 pin remains elusive, Degagne and the other seven "traders" at this week's Brier have plenty to keep them busy. They've set up shop in the ground-floor concourse of the John Labatt Centre, each displaying hundreds of pins, many of them decades old, and entertaining trade offers.



Pin collectors Roger Degagne, left, and Bob Barquest compare notes from their booth in the lobby of the John Labatt Centre during the 2011 Tim Horton's Brier on Wednesday.

Pin collecting appears to have become a part of the curling culture because most rinks would produce their own -- and the swapping became part of the sport's famously social side.

When Degagne got into the hobby a decade ago, in his late 50s, he had 56 pins -- he now has 7,000, most from Canadian clubs and major Canadian events. He figures the hobby -- which requires visits annually to the Brier and Tournament of Hearts to get official event pins -- has cost him \$70,000 in travel and accommodation.

The priciest pin? He spent \$800 for one from the 1942 Brier. He would spend even more to get the 1940 version, of course. And he's not alone.

Bob Barquest, 78, of Surrey, B.C., has 5,000 pins and he, too, recalls meeting that legendary lady in Hamilton with the 1940 Brier pin. "We pretty near fainted," he said. But unlike some collectors, Barquest and Degagne aren't competitive. Far from it.

Though they live in separate provinces, the two have become good friends through their intermittent meetings at big-league bonspiels. "If he lived next door to me, we'd be best of friends," Degagne said. "I come here because I enjoy meeting people like Bob and rekindling old friendships. The first four or five years, it was to trade pins. Now that's secondary.

"Now it's to meet these people all over again." He certainly doesn't go to watch the curling.

Degagne has tickets to every draw but, amazingly, has hardly watched any yet -- and he's not too keen on spending much time in the stands at all. "That would mean that I'd have to pack away my pins and drag them out again," he said. So the camaraderie is key. But the lure of that elusive pin is what keeps collectors motivated. "You never, ever, it seems, get everything," Barquest said. "There's always one, two, three elusive pins. That's what brings you back."