

THAT BRONZE MEDAL FEELING

west student represents the united states at the 2024 youth olympic games

story by grace huggenvik

Fifteen hours from Wisconsin, the Gangneung Curling Centre in Gangneung, South Korea awaited the arrival of young athletes from across the globe. Spanning from Sweden to Qatar, people of all different backgrounds, ethnicities, and cultures were gathered together by one variable, the 2024 Youth Olympic Games' (YOG) event, mixed doubles curling. Among them, Wausau West junior Ella Wendling, and her partner, Benji Paral, represent the United States of America.

The Wendling family is Wisconsin curling royalty. Wesley Wendling, a 2022 West graduate, is on Team Wendling, the USA Men's Junior National Team. In December of 2023, Team Wendling qualified for the 2024 World Junior-B Championship, where they placed second. This placement secured them a spot in the World Junior Curling Championships, both in Finland. They finished in fourth place. Wesley's goal is to one day make it to the Olympics.

James Wendling, father of both Wesley and Ella, is a Wausau West High School teacher and varsity curling coach. In 2024, he was named "Breakout Coach of the Year" by USA Curling. James had coached two runner-up finishes at the U18 National Championships, but in 2023 his team - led by son Wesley - went on an undefeated run to win the Men's U21 Junior National Championship.

Ella, who has been curling for 11 years, is currently a varsity curler at Wausau West. On the curling team, she claims the role of skip. A skip is an acting captain of a curling team who calls the shots and determines the strategy. Her extreme talent in the sport extends outside of just school. She is a part of the Team Viau, a U21/U18 women's curling team that has qualified for the U.S. National Championships. Wendling

curls almost every weekend and misses spans of school due to her intense travel.

"I'm pretty much always behind in school," Wendling said. "It's hard to miss so much, but my teachers are very understanding and helpful as I try to catch up."

Her YOG partner, Paral, curls out of the Eau Claire Club and is a sophomore at Memorial High School. In addition to his partnership with Ella, Paral is a part of Team Hebert which is a U18/U21 men's national team that is made up of Eau Claire natives. They are two time gold medalists at the U18 Nationals in both 2023 and 2024, and earned a silver medal at the U21 Nationals in 2023.

Ella and Paral have rotated in the same circle for five years. Team Viau and Team Hebert were both at U18 Nationals in Lafayette, Colorado in 2023 and. The two even competed on a mixed four person team in September of 2023 for the 2024 YOG Trials.

They did not qualify, but the experience prepared Ella and Paral for the mixed doubles trials, held in Bemidji, Minnesota in November, 2023.

"We qualified for the [Youth Olympic Games] by winning a qualifying tournament," Ella said. "I throw the first and last rock and [Paral] throws the middle rocks, we just tried it out and it worked best for us."



CURLING QUEEN

Junior Ella Wendling sweeps the rock towards the house. Wendling and her partner consistently dominated foreign competition in their matches leading up to their bronze medal game.

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design by caitlyn horgan



LEAVING A LEGACY

Junior Ella Wendling prepares to embrace father and coach James Wendling. “It’s great to have him just there,” Ella said to WSAW-TV. “He’s always very supportive, very helpful. He’s been there every step of the way and it’s just great to have him there all the time.”

photo credit to wcf photographers

Leading up to YOG, Ella and Paral traveled around the midwest to practice, scrimmage and participate in other tournaments. Most notably, they placed second at the CK Cup Championship in Duluth, Minnesota. During this time, they established the most efficient strategy that they would take with them to South Korea.

On January 23rd, 2024, the USA Youth Olympic mixed doubles curling team boarded the plane that would take them across the ocean and vast time zones.

“The plane ride was long, boring and uncomfortable,” Ella said. “It was a 15 hour direct flight. The time difference was hard to adjust to since it was so large. Though, it was definitely harder once we got home to adjust back to [Central Standard] time.”

When they arrived in Gangneung, Ella and Paral, accompanied by their coach, James, boarded a bus and headed to the Olympic Village, the place they would live while they see through their experience as olympians.

“The village was like a bunch of big, tall dorm rooms with a cafeteria,” Ella said. “For the first two nights, my roommate was from the other USA curling team, the mixed four person team, and then I was by myself in a room.”

On January 26th, Ella and Paral had their last practice before competition.

Their first game was against Sweden. A tough matchup that ended in a 6-5 win and set a victorious tone for the rest of the games. They went on to play one match a day against Qatar (13-1), Norway (8-3), Ukraine (9-1), Slovenia (12-0), and Czech (8-7). Their first loss against Denmark came down to centimeters. The final score was 5-6. This had Ella and Paral headed to the bronze medal game.

“Our toughest game was probably Denmark, which is the one we lost in the [semifinals],” Ella said. “Since we were just having a bad day and [Denmark] had control the whole time.”



BESTOWED THE BRONZE

Looking down at her medal, junior Ella Wendling takes in the moment on the podium. photo credit to wcf photographers

Their bronze medal game ended in a 7-4 success over Sweden. Ella knew they won when Sweden had an unfortunate last end. This win assured Team USA a third place finish.

“I felt proud of the way we represented the United States,” Ella said. “I hope curling is a part of my future and this experience made my love for it a lot bigger.”

After their victory, Ella and Paral embraced to the tune of Korean pop music. The following days included a closing ceremony, where Ella carried the American flag, and then another 15 hour flight back to Wisconsin.

Wausau West welcomed Ella back to the country with a ceremony prior to the start of class. She walked through door 9 into the fieldhouse, cheered on by friends, teammates, teachers, and peers, to the victorious sound of the U.S. national anthem. Ella will continue to curl, both with Team Viau and Wausau West, following YOG.

“There’s a lot that goes into [curling] and it’s a great team sport, it’s fun to play with different people and get to know so many fun people,” Ella said. “Curling has given me a ton of cool experiences with all the travel and competition. Curling has given me a lot of appreciation for more things than I have ever had before.”