

RAMA, Ont. — The King of the skins (cash for ends) curling format regained his crown during the fourth annual TSN Skins Game at the Entertainment Centre of Casino Rama on Sunday.

Alberta's Kevin Martin and his rink of third John Morris, second Marc Kennedy and lead Ben Hebert dethroned defending champion David Murdoch and his rink from Lockerby,

Scotland in Sunday's final by giving up the first three skins before rallying in the second half of the match to upend the only rink in the event not from Alberta \$31,000 to \$11,000.

The final game victory also earned the Martin rink, which also claimed the gold medals in last year's Vancouver Olympic Games, a \$15,000 bonus and a cheque for \$57,000 for their two weekend victories.

Martin also failed to register a skin in the first three ends of his semi-final match with Olympic silver medalist Cheryl Bernard before rallying in the second half of that game for an \$11,000 to \$10,000 victory.

Each game in the three-game tournament consisted of eight ends and there was a break after the first four ends in each which gave Martin a chance to refocus his rink and that proved to be the difference.

"Skins curling is much different to regular curling," said Martin. "Skins is all about making adjustments throughout the game and we were fortunate that we made the right changes midway through both games that led to victories."

Martin, who lost in the semi-finals to Murdoch last year when the Scottish skip was making his first venture into skins curling, entered this year's event with a total of \$360,000 in skins winnings and pushed that to \$417,000 over the weekend at Rama.

Murdoch, who finished fifth in Vancouver with his winning skins rink from last year, brought a whole new squad for this year's skins event with the retirement of second Peter Smith after the Olympics and the replacing of third Ewan MacDonald and lead Euan Byers.

His team this year included vice Warwick Smith, second Glen Muirhead and lead Ross Hepburn. The foursome pocketed \$25,000 for their second place finish after Murdoch's 2010 squad picked up \$70,500.

Saturday's semi-final matches, with \$21,000 up for grabs in each of the games, featured a major scare to Martin's weekend and dramatic changes throughout the day to the ice conditions which allowed Murdoch to swipe a victory and advance to Sunday's final.

In the opener on Saturday afternoon, defending Canadian and World champion Kevin Koe and his Alberta rink of third Blake MacDonald, second Carter Raycroft and lead Nolan Thiessen controlled much of the match and were up \$2,500 to \$1,000 through five ends but couldn't pull off the big shot when needed while Murdoch made some key save shots and was lucky on a couple of others to win the sixth end worth \$6,500 and cruise to a \$14,000 to \$7,000 victory.

Both teams struggled with ice conditions which proved to be as unpredictable as the casino slot machines and changed almost end by end.

Murdoch, who finished fifth in Vancouver and was fourth in the previous Olympic Games in Turin, Italy, admitted to stealing the match while personally shooting just 59 %

"I feel a bit like Robin Hood," said the Scottish skipper after the game.

"It was very tough ice out there."

Koe finished with the \$7,000 from the semi-final match and added another \$1,000 more from the pre-event draw-to-the-button contest.

In the nightcap featuring Canada's two medal winning teams from last year's Olympic Games,

silver medalist Bernard and her foursome of third Susan O'Connor, second Carolyn Darbyshire and lead Cori Bartel out of Calgary had Martin and his rink shaking their heads after taking the first three skins and leading \$3,500 to nothing.

After a carry over in the fourth and some key strategy talk through the midway break, Martin's group got back on track, stealing the fifth skin and then salting the match away with a big \$7,500 skin in the seventh on route to a victory of \$11,000 to \$10,000.

The Martin and Bernard foursomes, who teamed up to help North America defeat Team World in the recent Continental Cup, showed their respect and friendship for each other throughout the match, but when push came to shove, neither wanted to go back home to Alberta after just one game.

"That was close, wasn't it," Martin said after the game. "And it's not even the money, it's all my friends. So much pressure there to win because of that. It sure was a lot more pressure than expected, especially when she took the first three skins.

Bernard then won the final skin to give her four overall, but she still fell short on the money chart.

"It was lots and lots of fun," said Bernard. "We got to play against the best and look what we did. I'm really proud of my team."

Jennifer Jones of Winnipeg played in the Skins Game two years ago and managed just one skin to take home \$1,500.

First-time spectators noticed a drastic difference in the format to what took place during the Olympics. In skins curling, which is really a made-for-TV event, teams compete for "skins" rather than points. A team can win a skin (cash) by stealing an end or scoring two or more points in an end while with the hammer. The TSN Skins Game was first held in Newmarket in 1986 and took place annually in various locations until 2003. In 2007, the popular event was revived inside Casino Rama and three previous events have been held leading up to this year's competition.

Martin skins competition - Toronto Sun

Written by Administrator

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