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CHRISTOPHER PIKE/BRANDON SUN

Neil Andrews was at the Brandon Curling Club yesterday afternoon, taking in the final of the Guild Insurance Brokers October Classic. The two-time provincial men's senior curling champion, who was diagnosed last month with a rare and fatal disorder that attacks the brain, is one of the co-founders of the event.

Curling champ keeps positive outlook in face of rare disease

BY ROB HENDERSON

As Neil Andrews intently watched the action at the Brandon Curling Club on the weekend, it was obvious he would much rather be on the other side of the glass, holding the broom and calling the shots.

A partner in a successful business, two-time provincial senior men's curling champion and manager of the Ora Dental Marlins senior baseball team, Andrews has never been one to watch from the stands.

But a one-in-a-million twist of fate changed that.

Andrews was diagnosed last month with classical Creutzfeldt-Jakob Disease, a rare and fatal disorder that attacks the brain. Early symptoms of the disease, for which there is no cure, can include memory and mood swings as well as difficulty maintaining balance.

Andrews can't get around well without help these days, but that hasn't stopped him from keeping busy.

He still heads into the office whenever he can and spent a good chunk of the weekend at the curling club watching the Guild Insurance Brokers October Classic, an event he helped found.

"I don't want to cry. I don't want to talk doom and gloom," Andrews said Sunday, shortly before watching his childhood friend and former provincial championship teammate Ron Westcott play Neepawa's Kelly Robertson in the final.

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Classical CJD is believed to be caused by an abnormal gene on a single chromosome that modifies the production of a protein.

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not feeling sorry for himself

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Unlike variant CJD, which has been linked to beef contaminated by BSE, most classical cases appear to occur randomly, although the disease can be hereditary.

The disease, which affects about one person in a million, most often is diagnosed between the ages of 45 and 75. Andrews is 58.

He first noticed something wasn't right a couple of years ago, when he had trouble keeping his balance during his curling delivery.

As his symptoms continued to confound doctors, he was referred to the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minn., where the disease was diagnosed after a week-long stay.

Although he was prepared for bad news, Andrews said he could not have expected the outcome.

"As the tests were going on during the week, they were saying, 'Oh, there's nothing here, nothing here, nothing here.' And I thought that was all good stuff," Andrews said.

"And it wasn't. They were looking for the link and they didn't find it."

Andrews said doctors believe he has until around November of next year.

Although he would dearly love more time to spend with his family, he is proud of what he has accomplished so far.

Andrews doesn't want to spend his time feeling sorry for himself and he doesn't want others to do so either.



FILE PHOTO

Neil Andrews (foreground) is shown competing in the Canadian senior men's curling championship in 2004.

He said his reception this weekend at the curling club was just the way he likes it.

"I came up here. (The curlers) knew I couldn't curl and some of them thought that before," he said with a chuckle.

"And almost every guy took the time and stopped and talked to me and talked to me

openly about the disease and that was good. They tried to understand.

"I'm one of the unfortunate ones who's going to die, but they considered themselves lucky."

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