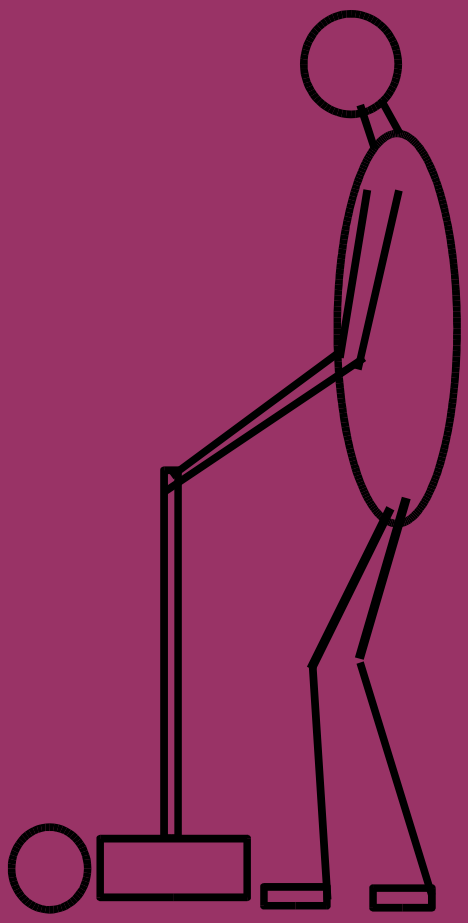
CROQUET: FINER POINTS



by John Riches

AUTHOR'S NOTES:

1. Although male pronouns are used throughout for the sake of clarity, they are intended at all times to include the feminine. In fact, many of the players alluded to in the various articles were female. The gender-inclusive male pronouns serve to protect anonymity and seem appropriate in cases where the sex of the player has no relation to the point being made in the article.

2. Any reader who considers that the author has made certain points with insufficient clarity and justification is invited to enter into correspondence with him on such matters. I will be interested to hear from anyone who is willing to take the time to inform me of their opinions, especially concerning ways in which the material or its presentation can be improved.

3. This booklet, like the author's previous booklets, has been written, typed, illustrated, photocopied, assembled, stapled, bound and published by him alone. For this reason print-runs are necessarily small, usually of about 20-30 copies. It is quite likely that errors found after one print-run will be corrected in the next, with the result that copies of the booklet may not be identical to each other. The electronic versions introduce further layers of cruft that biblioarchaeologists may wish to annotate at some stage in the future.

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INTRODUCTION

My aim in writing this booklet, as with the previous booklets, is to make people think by presenting to them some ideas which they may not have previously considered. In this way I hope to make a small contribution toward raising the general understanding of the game, and the standard of play in this country.

As with the other booklets, I have tried to avoid the temptation to merely repeat things which are adequately explained in other books on the game of croquet. Here you will find no detailed explanation of peeling or wiring or standard openings or the standard leaves after the first nine hoops have been made.

Instead, I have largely endeavoured to update and extend the material introduced previously in relation to technique, strategy, tactics, coaching and the psychology of the game.

Those who have not read the previous booklets may encounter a few unfamiliar terms such as "trap lines" and "ideal leaves", but this should not hinder them from understanding the main points I am trying to make.

The booklet consists of about 100 separate articles organised into sections which deal with various aspects of the game. Some of the articles could have been placed in more than one section, and occasionally there will be a small amount of overlap from one article to another, where an idea is repeated and explained in further detail.

Some of the articles (about 20 in all) have been previously published in the Australian Croquet Gazette, or the Queensland Croquet Newsletter, or the SACA Coaching Committee's newsletter. They are repeated here in order to make more complete the coverage of the particular topics under consideration, and for the benefit of readers who may not have had access to the above mentioned publications.

... John Riches

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

John Riches was introduced to the game in 1978 at Port Pirie in northern South Australia. Although he was still on a handicap of 15 (on the old scale, or 22 on the new), he was permitted to enter for the division 3 medal in 1979, because he was a schoolteacher and it was the only tournament scheduled during school holidays. He won every game and completed two triple peels, which resulted in his handicap being immediately reduced from 15 to 1.5 (or nowadays 22 to 6.5), which was probably the most rapid handicap reduction in history, and put him straight into division 1.

John gained state selection in 1990, but was later omitted from the team when he stated that he would be unable to practise on Sundays with the other members of the team.

His recent playing achievements include

* Winner: SACA division 1 medal 1993 and 1994
* Winner: Marion Mallets Tournament 1993 and 1994
* Winner: Broadview Club Championship 1994
* Winner: SA State Championship Singles 1993 and 1994
* Winner: SA State Open Singles Championship 1993 and 1994

Just prior to the first publication of this booklet John has again been selected in the state team to represent SA in Perth during March 1995, and this time it is expected that his unwillingness to attend Sunday team practices will not be an obstacle to his participation. (Later news: John won all his interstate singles games in Perth and also defeated world champion Robert Fulford in the quarter-finals of the Australian Open singles event.)

In the May 1995 official ranking list he was ranked no. 2 player in Australia, behind Dean Paterson.

In addition to playing the game, John has been active in trying to bring many new ideas to the administrative side of our game, and not surprisingly has at times had to face strenuous opposition from those whose ideas are more traditional and who do not want to see anything change.

He is currently (June 1995) serving as Chairman of the ACA Laws Committee, Chairman of the SACA Laws Committee and Secretary of the SACA Coaching Committee.

SECTION 1

TECHNIQUE

My first booklet "Croquet Technique" was an attempt to explain in some detail the way in which each of the basic shots should best be played, and the reasons for using the particular method recommended for each shot. The following few articles take things further, covering some of the finer points which a player needs to know in order to achieve greater consistency with his shots, and so that he will more quickly be able to put things right when they start to go wrong.

The reader may note that not every shot is covered here. For a fuller explanation of right-angled splits and the basic splits and rolls he is referred to the above-mentioned booklet.

Take-offs and hoop approaches are covered from the coaches' viewpoint in section 8.

I thank the National Coaching Director, Jane Lewis, for some of the ideas in the article "Swing high, swing low".

BACK TO BASICS: THE ROQUET

In previous articles I have stressed the importance of working on improving your tactics, as it is in this area that most games are won and lost between players of roughly equal ability. However, it is also important that a player knows how to discover quickly what is going wrong with a shot that is not working satisfactorily, and how to put things right.

This requires a sound understanding of the basic elements needed to ensure the success of each different type of shot, and a good coach can be of tremendous help, since the player is unable to watch himself to find out what he is doing wrong.

The science of "Error Correction" is probably the most important part of a coach's training, and is the reason why a player seeking help should always go to a trained and accredited coach rather than to just any good and experienced player. The likely causes of errors will vary from player to player, and the coach must not only be able to diagnose the error (which can require a great deal of expert knowledge), but must also know how to go about correcting it. Simply telling the player what he is doing wrong is not good enough, unless you can also tell him how to ensure that he puts it right.

For the roquet, there are many things to be considered, but the elements most likely to be the cause of error for most players are the following:

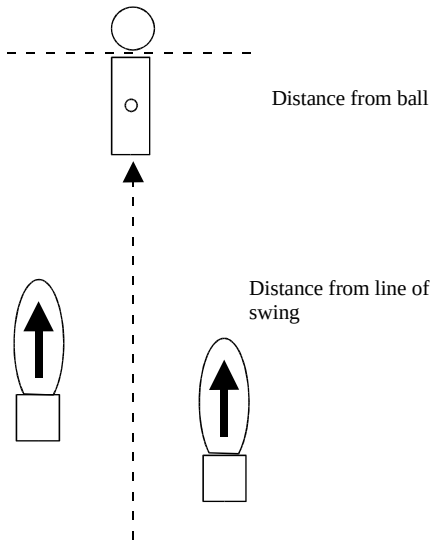
(1) Grip: Must be relaxed, not tense. There is a strong tendency, especially when nervous, to tighten the grip during the swing. The player is usually unaware that he is doing it, and the coach cannot see it happening; consequently it is an error which can be difficult to detect. When the grip is tightened the alignment of the mallet is almost always altered, so that it will no longer be in line with the direction of swing.

(2) Aim: When you have "stalked" the ball (to ensure that hips and shoulders are square to the line of swing) and checked that your grip and stance are correct, fix your eyes on the exact centre of the target ball. Then transfer your attention to the point on back of the ball where the mallet will contact it, and concentrate on hitting that point in the centre of the mallet face.

(3) Backswing: Must be slow, deliberate, straight and long. Many players use a backswing which is hurried and far too short. A short backswing means that the falling weight of the mallet will be insufficient on its own to provide the force needed to send the ball the required distance, so the player has to push with wrists and forearms to give additional force, and this reduces control of direction.

(4) Swing: The arms must swing freely from the shoulders, without any jerky use of wrists or forearms. The shoulders must remain still, and while body movement may not necessarily be disastrous, it is usually dangerous and represents a source of possible error. Many of the older books on the game warn of the danger of "lifting up your head" during the swing; but it is the shoulders, rather than the head, that you must concentrate on keeping still.

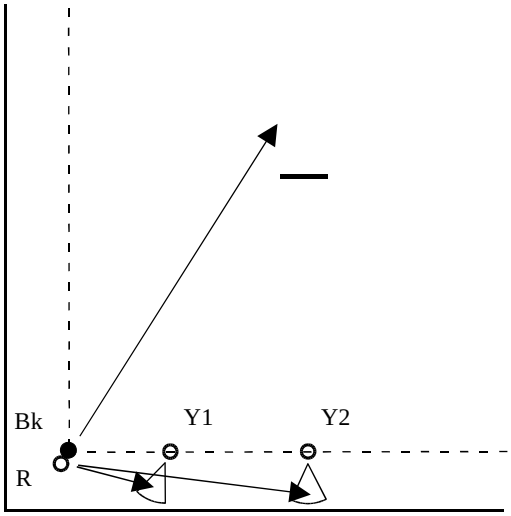
(5) Foot placement: It is vital for good roqueting that the player be able to achieve consistency of foot placement. The feet must every time be placed the same distance back from the ball, and the same distance out from the line of swing (see diagram). It is also necessary that the toes are always pointing in exactly the same direction in relation to the line of swing. In the diagram the toes are shown pointing parallel to the line of swing (see thicker arrows). This is not a necessity: many players have them pointing either outward or inward. The important thing is that you find a way of ensuring every time that they point in the same direction. just as a consistent ball toss is essential for a tennis player to serve well, so consistent foot placement is an essential precondition for consistent roqueting.



(6) Follow-through: The forward swing must be relaxed and unhurried, with a long, low follow-through. You should feel that you are trying to keep the mallet-head moving forward along the ground, maintaining contact with the ball for as long as possible. Avoid the type of follow-through in which the mallet finishes above your head. If your roquets have been a bit "off" lately, work through these basics one at a time, with an accredited coach if one is available, and it is likely that the problem will be discovered somewhere along the way.

BACK TO BASICS - THE STOP SHOT

Years ago it was common to see stop-shots with a ratio of 1:10 or even 1:12, but nowadays players seldom seem to achieve better than 1:6 or at most 1:8.
The main reason for this change is that the Dawson Mk 2 balls are noticeably less elastic (i.e. less "lively") than the older Jacques balls, and in order to cope with this change players are tending to use heavier mallets.
It is far more difficult to play good stop-shots with a heavy mallet than with a light one, but players feel that with the Mk 2 balls the extra weight has advantages which outweigh (!) any reduction in stop-shot ratio.
Some have wrongly suggested that the switch to more rigid shafts, rather than the older flexible cane or metal shafts, which has accompanied the increase in weight, can be considered as another factor; but such thinking is misguided. In fact, it is easier to play a good stop-shot with a rigid shaft than with a flexible one; and one reason for having a more rigid shaft is just this - it is necessary to allow the playing of a reasonable stop-shot with a much heavier mallet head. The error in thinking that the older flexible shafts permitted one to play better stop-shots seems to have arisen from the fact that the flexible shafts were usually fitted into lighter heads, and the weight of the head was the dominant factor.
Here are some hints which may help you to improve your stop-shots, even if you do have a mallet weighing well over 3 pounds:
(1) Try placing the striker's ball so that the roughest part of the knurling (i.e. the milling pattern on the ball) is in contact with the roqueted ball.
(2) This idea is difficult to convey in words without a demonstration; but try lifting the mallet up by hunching your shoulders, then jabbing it sharply downward at the back of the ball as if attempting to impart some backspin to the ball. However, do not slope the mallet forward so that you are hitting down on the ball. Keep the mallet head flat or else tilted up very slightly at the front.
(3) You could also try having a rough face on the end of your mallet. Years ago it was fashionable to have milling on your mallet face similar to the milling on the ball, instead of the smooth, shiny end faces we see today. This would also have a negative effect in that it would make rolls and splits more difficult.
If none of these hints work. you can always learn to plan ahead and play your breaks so that you do not need to play any sharp stop-shots, as some of our leading players are doing. However, the usefulness of stop-shots in getting balls into play and setting up breaks cannot be denied.
(4) In a game, is it wise to avoid wide-angle stop-shots as far as possible. When the angle between the directions of the two balls opens out toward a right-angle it becomes more and more difficult to stop the striker's ball short, and it also becomes correspondingly more difficult to control both the distance and direction of the striker's ball.
Appearances can be rather deceptive. The diagram below shows a wide-angle stop-shot played from the 1st corner, in which the player of red tries to send the black ball in front of 2-back and obtain a rush to 1-back on the yellow ball in position Y1. It seems that, because of the shorter distance involved, this should be considerably easier than obtaining the same rush if the yellow ball were instead at position Y2, which would make the shot into more of a roll rather than a stop-shot. In both cases the red ball would need to finish inside a small imaginary "target triangle" in order to create an acceptable rush.



In actual fact, the margin for error is greater for the roll shot to Y2 than for the stop-shot to Y1, and it is more likely that the rush will be obtained when the striker's ball travels the longer distance. The physics and mathematics which supports this conclusion is too complicated to explain here (those interested are invited to write to the author for a copy of the fuller explanation), but it means that in a match situation it is usually wiser to compromise and send black, not in front of 2-back, but 2-3 yards behind it, so as to narrow the angle of the stop-shot and allow a greater margin for error. This should be remembered in any situation where one needs an accurate rush and may be tempted to use a wide-angle stop-shot to obtain it.

SWING HIGH, SWING LOW

It is important for the beginner to understand that for most shots the height of the mallet BACKSWING should determine the length of the shot (i.e. how far the ball goes). Too often players try to limit the height of the backswing because they believe that a high backswing makes them inaccurate with their roquets.

There are several points to consider here:

If the player wants to hit a ball the longest possible distance, but only has a low backswing, then the extra strength needed for the desired result must come from the player's own muscles and body movement, instead of from the natural fall and follow-through of the mallet. Many players grip the mallet with their hands apart, which in itself may cause the mallet to be pushed off line, while the extra force used in hitting at the ball can cause jarring and tendon damage above the wrist. Sudden body movement forward can make the player unbalanced and tense. How tiring!

If the player feels that control is lost during the forward movement of the mallet, then PROVIDED THAT THE HANDS STAY TOGETHER, he could try moving them a short distance down the mallet handle. Keep the backswing high for long shots, reducing it for short shots. To move the ball only 12 inches, the backswing need only be about 6 inches. To move the ball fast across a distance of 35 yards, the backswing must be as high as the player's stature allows.

Well-meaning players often observe someone else (frequently their doubles partner) using a high backswing, and it is obvious that the mallet is being turned off line at the top of the backswing. They then suppose that this is a source of error, and suggest that a shorter backswing may enable the player to swing straighter and more accurately. In actual fact, very few players maintain a straight mallet line throughout the whole of their swing. While there is likely to be some advantage for the player if he can manage to keep the mallet head pointing in the right direction at all times, the only thing that really matters is the direction in which it is pointing (and travelling, which is not necessarily the same!) at the instant when it contacts the ball. The player will usually straighten the mallet well before the mallet reaches the ball, so the turning of the mallet at the top of the backswing need not be a cause for concern. It is also important to realise that a high backswing does not necessarily mean that the shot must be hit hard.

The principle to remember as a coach is that an unnecessarily high backswing is far better than one which is not high enough. It is quite possible to play even the shortest of shots with quite a high backswing, simply by bringing the mallet forward more slowly; but to play a long shot with a short backswing would require the player to provide force with the muscles in his forearms and wrists, diverting these muscles away from their more important task of maintaining the direction of the swing. Players should be encouraged to develop a high backswing and an unhurried forward swing. There should be no additional force imparted from the forearms and wrists as the mallet contacts the ball. The timing of the correct, unhurried swing can be practised quite easily by swinging the mallet with the top hand only. The bottom hand should play no part in pushing the mallet forward or hurrying it through. This hand should be used only to guide the direction of the swing. The grip should not be tight or tense, but should be light and comfortably relaxed. Some players think that a tighter grip will prevent the mallet from twisting if the ball is contacted off-centre; but it is far better to ensure that the ball is hit in the centre of the mallet face, which is achieved more easily by using a relaxed grip. The tension of the grip should be felt as a light pressure in the finger tips, and this tension should be evenly maintained during the swing without any tightening of the grip. When practising, the player should make himself aware of this tension and concentrate on maintaining it evenly, so that he will learn to do it automatically in a match situation.

All coaches are therefore urged never to suggest that a player shorten his backswing for single-ball shots such as roquets, rushes or hoop running. Even stop-shots should be played with a high backswing. The only possible exceptions are pass-rolls, and hampered shots where a high backswing is impossible.

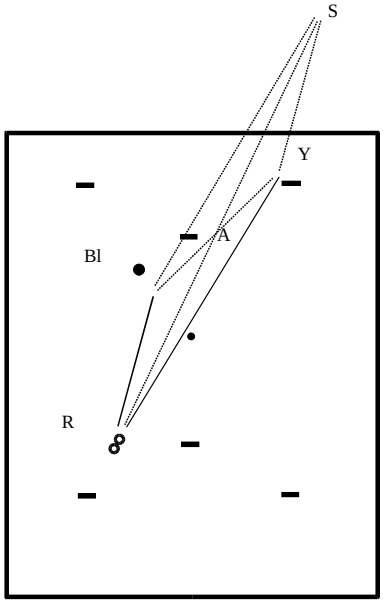
WIDE-ANGLE SPLITS

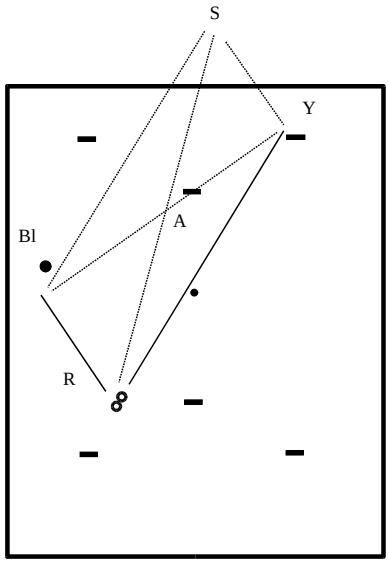
In many situations the best way to establish an immediate break is by playing a wide-angle split-shot. Unfortunately, one frequently sees players failing to take advantage of the opportunity because they lack confidence in their ability to control the shot, so they resort to a take-off or simpler type of split-shot which fails to load the following hoop accurately before making the current hoop.

This often means that they do not succeed in getting the break fully set up, and it is even more unfortunate that they later tend to attribute the loss of a game to missed roquets or failed hoop attempts instead of their unwillingness to play the correct shots.

The left-hand diagram below shows a situation where the player of red has made hoop 1 from his yellow partner ball and roqueted it at point R. Now he is about to send it to point Y near hoop 3 while the red ball goes to point B so that it can rush the blue ball to hoop 2. Most players do not find this shot difficult, but when confronted with the situation shown in the right-hand diagram it is a very different matter. Here the only difference is that the blue ball is in a different place, making the angle of the split much wider. The reason why many players would now hesitate to attempt the wide-angle split is that they do not understand the difference that the wider angle makes to the way the shot has to be played. The dotted lines on the diagrams are intended to give an idea of strengths of the forces involved in shots of this type.

Strength: The strength of the shot is represented roughly by the length of the line RS on each diagram. Though the red and yellow balls travel the same distances in each of the two shots, the line RS is shorter for the wider angle shot, so the shot does not need to be hit as hard as if the angle were more normal (i.e. narrower).



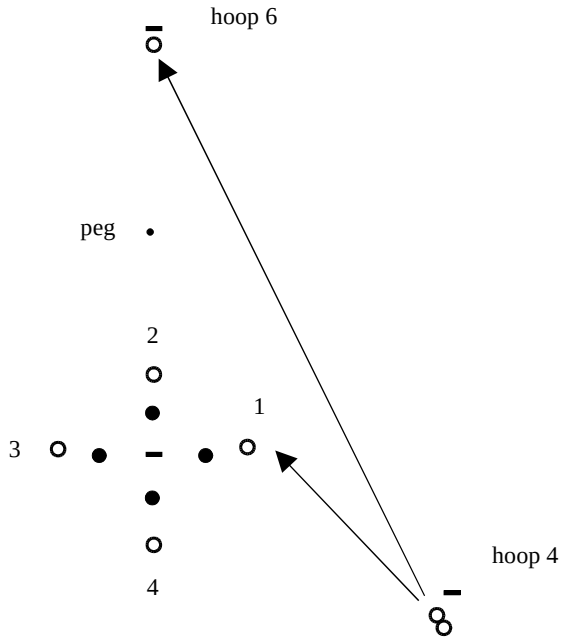


Direction: The mallet should be swung straight along the line RS in each case. Players often find this difficult because there is a strong psychological temptation to follow through around a curve, ending up in the direction the red ball is to travel. This temptation must be strenuously resisted if you hope to keep accurate control of both balls.

The simplest way to get the correct direction is to find point A, which is halfway between where you want the two balls to finish. It is far easier to find this point on the lawn than it is to imagine a parallelogram with its furthest corner (S) out on another lawn or behind a fence! Since RAS is a straight line, aiming at point A is the same as aiming at point S. Note that this line of aim does not halve the angle of split. Note also that in the first diagram the line of aim is about 2 yards to the right of hoop 6, while in the second diagram it is about 1 yard to the left of the same hoop. In addition, the direction will usually need to be adjusted slightly to allow for "pull" and spin on the balls. This involves swinging not directly at point A (or S), but a few degrees from this line on whichever side the striker's ball will go. In these examples the red ball is going to the left of the line RAS and yellow to the right, so the line of swing, allowing for "pull", will be slightly to the left of the line RAS.

Mallet slope: The most difficult and vital adjustment for the wider angle shot is that you must get back off the shot, so that your mallet has much less forward slope than for the narrower angle. (If you use the alternative method of accelerating through the balls instead of sloping the mallet forward, then you must use far less acceleration.) In the examples shown, the red ball travels almost half as far as the yellow ball, which requires a slight roll for the narrower angle. However, the wider angle shot in the right-hand diagram must be played as a very sharp stop-shot, with a flat mallet and the mallet stopping instead of accelerating. The reason for this is that when the angle is wider the yellow ball is no longer so squarely in front of the red (striker's ball), which will now go too far unless a stop-shot action is used.

ADJUSTING SPLITS



In order to play accurate split-shots, the player must first learn the simple mechanics of the shot, including:

* How to line it up, allowing for pull.
* How to control the relative distances the balls will travel, either by tilting the mallet forward, or (less desirably) by accelerating the swing.
* How to find the correct point of aim for the swing, and how to swing in this required line, without turning the mallet or curving the swing toward the destination of the striker's ball.

In addition, it is necessary to practise regularly the commonly occurring split-shots, e.g. the split from hoop 4 to load hoop 6 while going to a ball near hoop 5 as shown in the diagram at right, which is for most players the simplest of the basic splits. The player must understand the type of adjustment that needs to be made when the (black) 'target' ball is placed in different positions around hoop 5. Four positions are shown in the diagram, but other positions between the ones shown need to be practised as well, and the same should be done for other split-shots, from any other hoop to the following two hoops.

For position 1, most players will need to aim about a yard to the left of the peg, and have the mallet tilted slightly forward. This should be practised until good position for both balls can be achieved consistently.

Then the player should be able to adjust the stroke for position 2 by keeping the same line of aim, but increasing noticeably the forward slope of the mallet, which must be maintained as the mallet contacts the ball. This will give the striker's ball more forward roll, so that it goes further than previously. (An alternative method would have been to increase the acceleration through the ball.) The additional distance also requires that the stroke be played with a little more force, which is obtained by using a slightly higher backswing.

For position 3 it will be necessary to change the aiming point (i.e. line of swing) by moving it another yard or two away from the peg and toward hoop 5. The forward slope, backswing and strength of the shot should all be similar to those needed for position 2.

Position 4 can be achieved by using roughly the same aiming point as for position 3, or perhaps a very slight further adjustment away from the peg; but requires the player to use much less forward slope of his mallet (i.e. "get back off the shot"), and needs less force than the shot to position 3.

The player who wishes to achieve a high standard of accuracy should practise playing these shots, with the striker's ball going to any of the four (or more) positions, until the adjustments become more or less automatic. Then he can proceed to some of the harder splits, e.g. from hoop 2 to hoops 3 and 4; or from hoop 1 to hoops 2 and 3, learning to make similar adjustments for various positions of the 'target' ball. Note that in a game it may be necessary to make a further adjustment for the fact that the shot is being played from somewhere other than just behind a hoop, and this also needs to be understood. The split from hoop 5 to hoops 6 and 7 is complicated by the possibility of the peg interfering, and the split-roll from hoop 3 to hoops 4 and 5 will be hardest of all to control and adjust with any degree of accuracy.

After thus learning to adjust the splits for the required finishing position of the striker's ball, the player should be able to concentrate on more accurate placement of the croqueted ball which is being used to load the next hoop. Contrary to the belief of most players, this is actually the ball whose accurate placement is most critical to the continuance of the break.

Only after the type of adjustment needed in each case is fully understood will the player be able to play these shots with complete confidence that the balls will actually go where he wants them to go.

BACK TO BASICS: THE RUSH

Besides possibly roqueting and hoop running, the rush is a shot which can go wrong more easily than any other. In order to play good, consistent rushes and immediately correct any error that creeps in to the rushing technique, a player needs to understand and keep in mind the following principles:

1. Use a long grip. Any player who has developed the habit of playing rushes with one or both hands down the handle should be able to bring about an almost instantaneous improvement by re-learning the shot with both hands together at the top of the handle.

2. Use a flat swing. In particular, as the mallet moves through the ball, the bottom of the swing should be more or less parallel to the ground, and the follow-through as low as possible. Do not bring the mallet upward in the follow-through so that the head of the mallet finishes above head height, as some tend to do. The need for a flat-bottomed swing is the reason why players who use a short-handled mallet or a shorter grip than necessary will usually not rush as consistently as those with longer mallets and grips. (However, there are other considerations as well that must be taken into account when determining the optimum mallet length and grip for any particular player.)

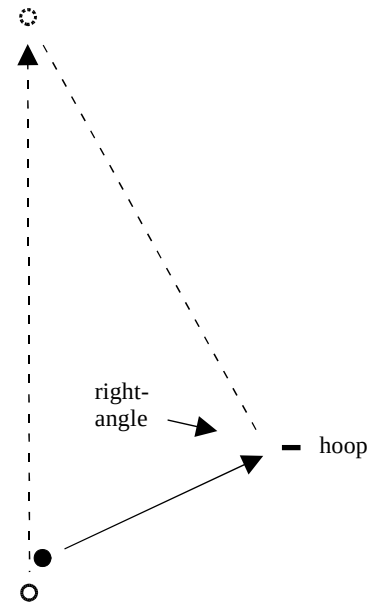
3. Use a stance that allows a long, straight backswing from the shoulders, not from the wrists; and also a long, low forward swing without overbalancing. Avoid any unnecessary body movement such as bending of the knees or trunk. The weight should be back, more or less on the heels, and most players are helped by standing a little further back from the ball than they would for a roquet.

4. Use the weight of the mallet alone to provide the necessary force. Any hurrying of the forward swing, by using muscles in the wrists and forearms, is likely to be even more disastrous in a rush than in other shots. The strength should come entirely from the weight of the falling mallet, and is controlled by the height of the backswing. It is an interesting fact that, depending on the grip and stance, a shorter mallet may in some cases actually allow a higher backswing which can partly compensate for the physical shortness of the 'pendulum' from shoulder to ball.

5. All muscles in fingers, hands, wrists and arms should be relaxed. This may need to be done consciously during preparation for the swing. There is always a temptation to tighten the grip during the swing, which can twist the head of the mallet off line and ruin the shot completely. This temptation is harder to overcome in the rush than in other shots, and may be another aspect of technique that requires conscious concentration in order to counter it.

6. Do not look up at the ball you are rushing. After having lined the shot up, fix your eyes on the place where the mallet will contact the striker's ball, and keep them there. Simply allow the mallet to swing through of its own weight in its own time, with confidence that if you get these basics correct, everything will turn out as desired.

7. When attempting a cut-rush, remember Tom Armstrong's dictum that "90% of cut-rushes are under-hit". To counter the fact that only a fraction of the force from the striker's ball will be imparted to the ball that is being rushed, use a noticeably higher backswing than you would for a straight rush of the same length; but be even more careful not to hurry the forward swing.



8. Some players may be helped by realising that, for example, in order to to cut the black ball to the hoop in the diagram at left, it is necessary to use at least sufficient force to send the striker's ball, if the black ball were removed, to the position shown by the dotted ball at the top of the diagram. This position is obtained, for those geometrically minded, by imagining a right-angled triangle with its right-angle at the hoop, and its longest side ("hypotenuse") following the direction in which the striker's ball is to be hit.

9. By aiming your swing through the centre of the striker's ball and the edge of the rushed ball, you should in most cases obtain a "cut" of 30 degrees from straight ahead. Players who are adept at judging the actual sizes of angles can make use of this fact in lining up their cut-rushes.

10. Of all these pieces of advice, the most important needs to be re-emphasised: Use the weight of the mallet, don't tighten the grip, and don't hurry the forward swing.

BACK TO BASICS: HOOP RUNNING

One often hears players attributing the loss of a game to the fact that they "kept sticking in hoops". The problem is usually best rectified by working on improving their hoop approaches, rather than their hoop running; but nevertheless there are several points that the player must get right in order to be able to run hoops confidently and consistently:

1. **Take a proper backswing**. Some players deliberately shorten the backswing when running hoops, and some misguided coaches have even advised it, but one of the most important principles of good hoop running is that the backswing must be high enough to provide all the force needed, without the player having to make any use of muscles in his fingers, hands, wrists or forearms. The mallet must be swung smoothly from the shoulders. It is far better to use a longer backswing than necessary, rather than one which is in any way shortened.

2. **Do not tighten the grip during the swing**. The mallet should be held with the desired grip tension - a comfortably relaxed grip - while the shot is being lined up. The player who has problems in this area should consciously "feel" the pressure of his fingertips against the handle of the mallet, and then maintain the same even pressure throughout the swing.

3. **Do not hurry the forward swing.** The tendency to "jab" is difficult for many players to cope with, and is best overcome by concentrating on maintaining an even grip tension as explained above.

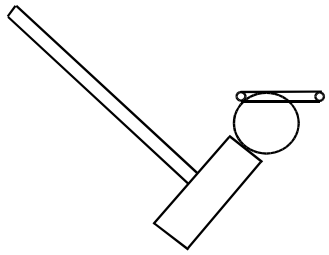
4. **Swing <u>down</u> through the ball with the mallet tilted slightly forward.** This will give the ball topspin which will help it "kick" through the hoop if it hits the sides. Do not use a flat forward "push", and do not try to hit upward at the ball, or through the top of the ball.

5. **Follow through low toward the hoop.** Never attempt to run a hoop with a stop-shot action.

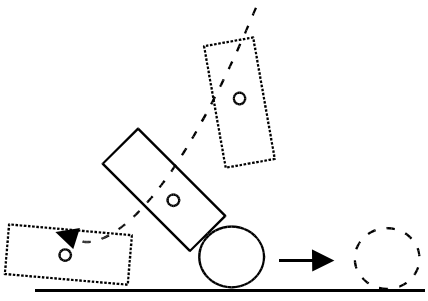
6. For fairly sidey hoops aim your swing through the centre of the ball **at the inside edge of the far hoop-leg.** This is much better than thinking about the need for the ball to miss the near hoop-leg. For very sidey hoops, learn to play jump shots with a relaxed, smooth, unhurried action.

7. It has been suggested that when you need to run through the hoop and right down to the other end of the court, the best way to do it is with a smooth, accelerating swing. I am not certain of the validity of this advice, but it is worth trying, at least in practice situations.

The "Pirie Poke" (top view)



The "Pirie Poke" (side view)



8. A shot developed by the author in conjunction with the late Vern Potter at Port Pirie (SA) and christened the "Pirie Poke" is worth passing on, though it is difficult to explain it in words without an actual demonstration. It allows hoops to be made from what may seem to be almost impossible situations, where the ball is in contact with a hoop leg, or less than 1 mm from it, in a position as illustrated in the top diagram at left.

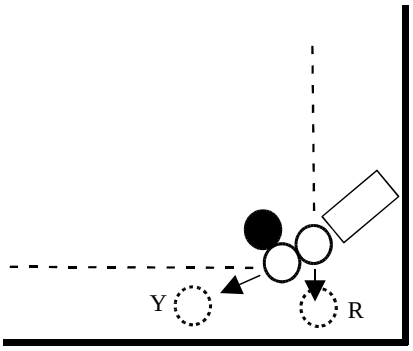
The mallet is used sideways, with the handle almost parallel to the ground, and as it contacts the ball the mallet is moving both downward and backward. It may seem surprising that it is possible to hit a ball forward by moving the mallet backward, but this is actually what happens, and this fact ensures that the ball will not be "crushed" against the far hoop leg. Because the mallet is moving backward away from the hoop leg, it cannot be still in contact with the ball when the ball hits the hoop leg!

It is important to select a line of aim which ensures that the ball is hit away from the near hoop leg. This is easier to do if the player can contrive to have his arms in what seems a rather awkward position, so that he can sight along the mallet head, which is directly in front of his eyes, as he contacts the ball. The shot is played while kneeling on one knee, and with one hand quite close to the mallet head.

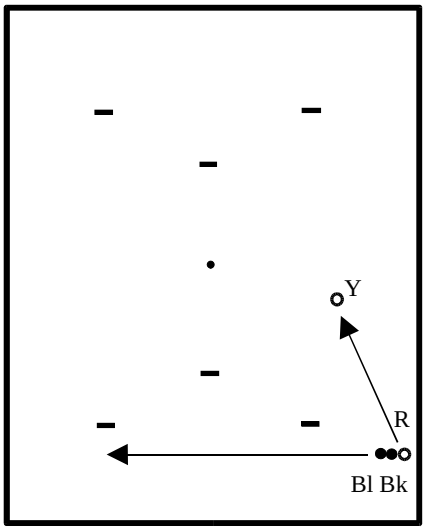
Readers who are interested in this shot are urged to use the information given here as a basis for experiment, but will probably still need the assistance of a coach who has been shown the shot and can can demonstrate it competently.

UNUSUAL CANNONS

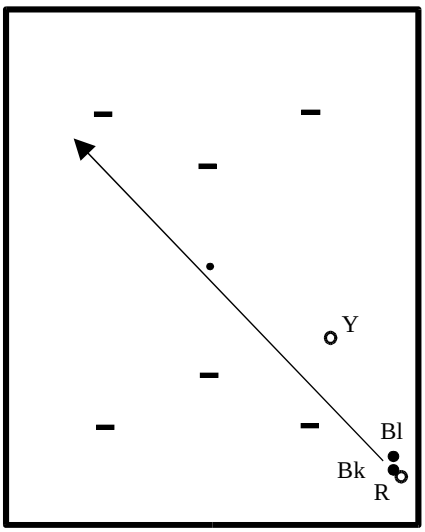
1. **Triangle cannon:** This is illustrated in the top diagram, and has replaced the older "banana" or "worm" cannon as the correct shot to use when you simply want to obtain an accurate rush to your hoop, leaving the roqueted ball behind rather than trying to use it to load the following hoop. For example, if you are playing the red ball which is for hoop 6 or 1-back, and have created a cannon in the 4th corner as shown, there is little you can hope to do except get a good rush on black to your hoop. If, for example, the yellow ball has been rushed into the corner where black was a corner ball, then the balls should be arranged as shown, in a tight triangle, except that there is a tiny gap, as required by the laws, between the red and black balls. The red ball is then hit with a gentle stop-shot action so as to move the yellow ball out of the way (even after it is yardlined) and simultaneously place red where it has a perfect rush to its hoop on the black ball **which does not move.** Note that the laws do not require that the third (black) ball in the cannon has to be moved, and it is easier to ensure that you get an accurate rush on it if you know exactly where it will be.

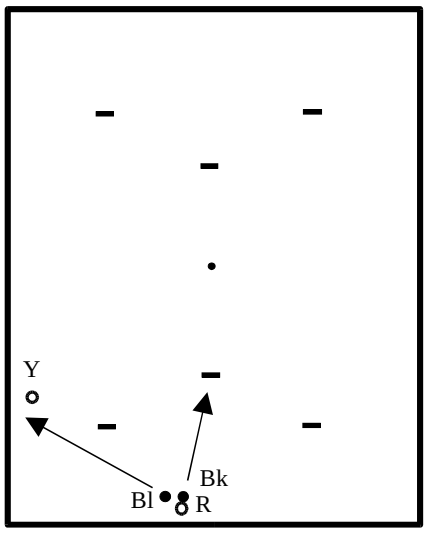


2. Promotion cannon: The second diagram shows a situation which occurs not infrequently near the start of a game, and where players often fail to find the best way to continue. Red, which is for hoop 1, has a cannon on the east border, and will send the third ball (blue) to hoop 1 without roqueting it in the cannon shot. Instead, red will go to the nearby yellow ball, which can then be roqueted and split to hoop 2 while red goes to make hoop 1 from the unused blue ball. The yellow ball may even have been placed there deliberately so as to facilitate such a cannon, as described in the later article on Opening Ideas. It should be realised that this type of shot needs to be practised, as the "feel" of the stroke is very different from a split-shot, in that the red ball has the full weight of two balls in front of it, making it come off at a wider angle and travel a shorter distance than one might expect.



3. **Delayed cannon:** This possibility is also frequently overlooked. The third diagram shows a situation where the player of red has tried to create a cannon, intending to promote blue to hoop 1 as described above, but just failed, since when measured onto the yard-line the black ball was not quite in contact with blue. In this case he can use a stop-shot to send black to hoop 2, and roquet blue in the same shot. Then he can play a croquet stroke in which red obtains a rush on yellow to hoop 1, again with a break set up.

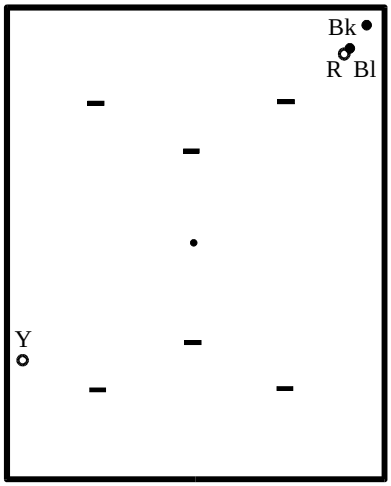




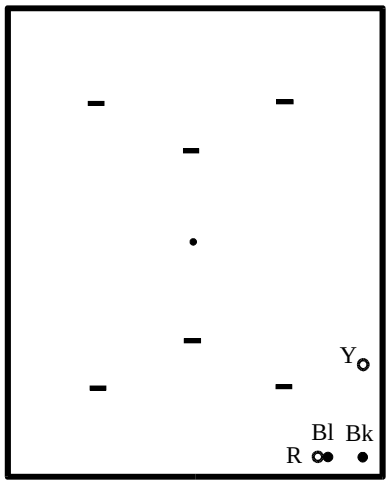
Another type of delayed cannon is shown in the fourth diagram. Here red is for hoop 4 and has roqueted black very close to blue on the south border. Black should be sent to load hoop 5 by using a shot in which blue is at the same time rushed out of court near the yellow ball on the west border. Then yellow can be rushed to hoop 4 to establish the break.

MORE UNUSUAL CANNONS

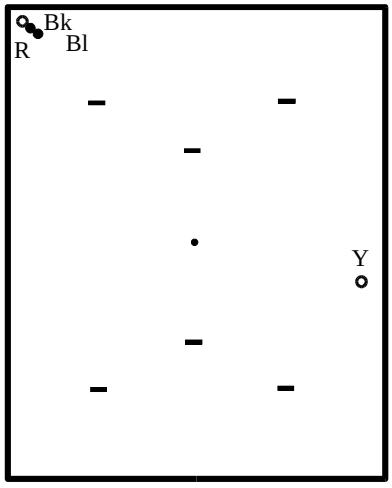
Cannon with a used ball. The first diagram shows a situation where red is for hoop 5 and yellow is for hoop 2. The player of red has taken off from yellow to the opponent's balls in the 3rd corner. He has roqueted blue, and had hoped to create a cannon by rushing it into the corner where black was on the corner spot; but blue did not finish in the corner as intended. Now he can take off from blue trying for a rush behind black to hoop 5, but sees little prospect of setting up a break in this fashion. He could also send blue to hoop 2 with a stop-shot, turn around and roquet black (a roquet of 4-5 yards which may not be a certainty), and then place black at hoop 5 before returning to yellow with an excellent leave in which there is an opponent ball at each of red and yellow's hoops. There is yet another option which most players would overlook. He can use a gentle stop-shot or roll to send blue into the 3rd corner square, yardline it so that it is in contact with black, and then roquet black gently without disturbing blue, so as to create a cannon in the 3rd corner in which black is the roqueted ball, and the third ball is blue, which has already been used. He can now move blue (he can indeed, though people who do not understand the laws may dispute this) and arrange a cannon in which black is split to hoop 2 and blue is simultaneously rushed to a position near hoop 5. Note that he cannot claim the roquet on blue, because he had used it previously, so he will finish the turn by hitting red out near yellow, and make a break on the next turn unless the opponent roquets. The player of red needs to be careful when playing the cannon to ensure that the red ball stays in the lawn, and also that he does not double-hit the red ball. Neither of these things would matter in a normal cannon, but either would end the turn when blue is a ball which has been already used.



In the second diagram the player of red wants to set up for yellow, which is for hoop 1. He would like to place the opponent's balls near hoops 1 and 2, and set yellow a rush to either of these two hoops. Once again, the best way, provided you have practised it, is by rolling blue into the corner square, then roqueting black to create a cannon with the used ball. Once this idea is understood, and has been practised, other situations in which it can be used will readily come to mind. The hardest part is to actually think of it in a match when you are under pressure!



Roll cannon. In the third diagram red has created a normal cannon in the 2nd corner by roqueting black. However, red is for hoop 6, and there is no way a normal cannon can be used to load 1-back while rushing blue to hoop 6. Instead of leaving black behind in the corner, red can set up a break by playing a "roll cannon". This shot is arranged by placing the three balls in almost a straight line (actually, black, which is the middle ball of the three, should be about 1mm to the right of the line through the centres of the other two balls when viewed from the corner), and using a pronounced pass-roll action to roll both red and blue to hoop 6. Black should finish near the 1-back hoop if the shot is arranged and played correctly. The shot is actually easier than it at first may sound, but the player will need some practice at it in order to convince himself that it requires much more of a pass roll than one might think, due to the weight of two balls, rather than one, in front of the striker's ball. Red may possibly roquet blue on the way to hoop 6, but most times it will at least finish close enough to make the roquet on the following shot. Note that it is difficult to fault this shot by "pushing", as the weight of the third ball causes red to remain in contact with black for quite some time.



SECTION 2

MALLETS

For some years I had the privilege of working with a mallet craftsman, advising him from the point of view of a croquet player on various aspects of mallet design. We tried out just about every idea you could think of, and some that would probably never occur to you. We discovered all sorts of things that do not work, including things like putting all the additional weight at one end, fitting the handle off centre in the head, sloping the handle at various angles, shaping both the handle and the head in various eccentric ways, and many more.

One of our ideas that did work - the "Magic Mallet" - was written up in the Australian Croquet Gazette and drew little comment or interest, until I won the SA Division 1 medal in 1990 using such a mallet. Suddenly there were protests about the legality of the "Magic Mallet", and when it was established after much argument that the design did not in fact contravene the Laws, moves were immediately made to have the Law relating to mallet construction (then Law 2 (e), now Law 3(e)) altered so that the "Magic Mallet" became illegal.

Most of the many things we discovered about mallet construction would be of little interest to anyone other than a maker of mallets, but in the following few articles some points are explained which may be of value to coaches and players.

PERIPHERAL WEIGHTING

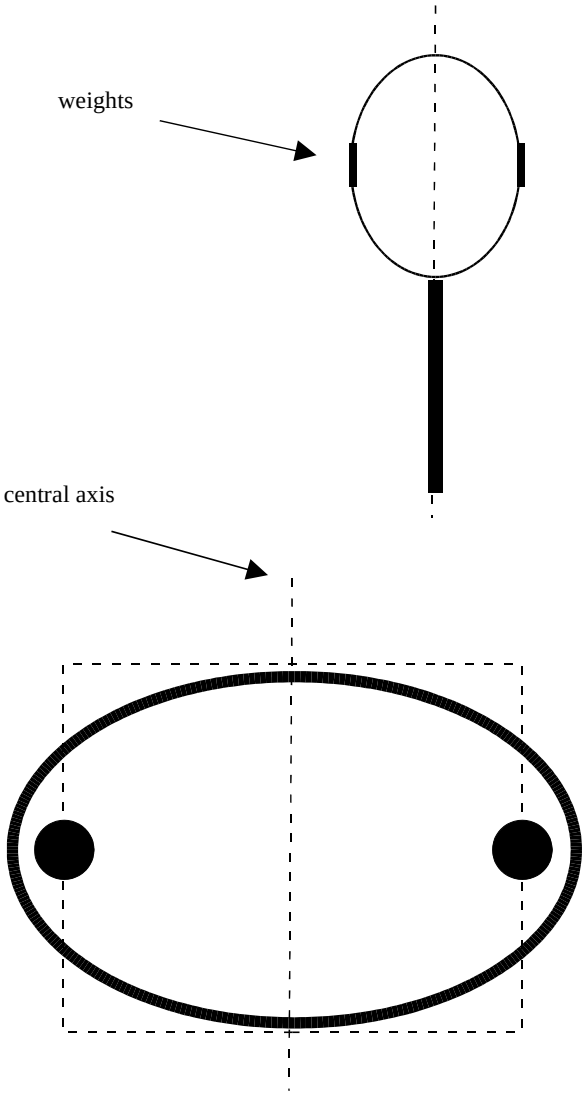
Coaches are frequently asked for advice on the ideal type of mallet, and there are many things which should be taken into account before giving such advice to a particular player. What is "ideal" for one player may be of little use to another whose height, strength, grip, stance and type of swing are all quite different.

Instead of dealing with these things here, which would require many pages of complicated information, I will pass on one idea which arises from recent researches in sports technology.

The Level 2 Coaches Manual contains an interesting section on "peripheral weighting". One problem in sports such as tennis, squash, cricket, badminton, etc., is that it is difficult to always hit the ball in the middle of the racquet or bat. When the ball is hit off-centre the racquet tends to twist in the hands and the ball goes in some direction other than the one intended. By distributing the weight as far from the central axis as possible it has been found that the effect of off-centre impacts can be considerably reduced. Those with an understanding of the laws of physics regarding momentum and inertia will readily understand why this is so, and will probably wonder why it took the experts so long to think of it.

The top diagram shows a latest-style tennis racquet with additional weight distributed on the sides of the frame. The same idea has been applied to other racquet sports, and both cricket bats and golf clubs are being produced with a scooped-out centre at the back of the bat or club, and additional weight added to the sides.

Some years ago, well before the Coaches Manual was published, one of our leading players had a similar idea and designed a mallet head with a flat, oval cross-section as shown (approximately) in the second diagram. A comparison with a standard square-faced mallet (dotted lines) will show how the weight has been removed from the corners of the square and redistributed on the sides, further from the central axis. The mallet head was made of very heavy Mulga wood and did not require the addition of lead weights, but if it had, then he presumably would have asked that they also be placed at the sides as shown by the small dark circles, rather than in the centre of the mallet face or with holes drilled in the bottom of the mallet head along the central axis as has commonly been done in the past.



Does it work? We can only offer the player's personal opinion that it does indeed serve to enlarge the "sweet spot" on the mallet face and increase the likelihood that the ball will travel in the desired direction even when struck slightly off-centre. He has not conducted any objective tests or come up with any evidence to support this opinion, except that he claims to roquet much better (most of the time!) than he did with previous more conventional mallets. This, of course, may well be due to factors other than the design of the mallet head, but the idea of using peripheral weighting in the design of croquet mallets is at least worthy of further consideration and experiment. The concept can be carried to a far greater extreme than in the mallet described above. e.g. by making the mallet head hollow, or of very light wood, and adding weighted strips along the sides of the head away from the central axis. We would be interested to hear any further ideas on this matter, or on any other aspect of mallet design which may help improve the general standard of play.

BAD WRISTS AND HEAVY MALLETS

In recent years there seems to have been an increase in the number of players with wrist problems. The reason for this increase is not clear: some believe that the less elastic Dawson Mk 2 balls have been a contributing factor, while others suggest that it could have resulted from the trend to more rigid mallet shafts instead of the older more flexible metal or cane shafts.

With almost all players being taught to use centre-style and play long rolls with the bottom hand well down the handle, flexibility in the shaft is no longer considered so desirable. Although the rigid shaft may possibly result in a little more jarring on some shots (this is debatable, as many insist that they get no jarring from their rigid shafts), the rigidity is preferred because it allows greater control and accuracy in rolls and split-shots, as well as a better stop-shot ratio. A player with a rigid shaft has one less variable - the whippiness of the shaft and its effect on the ball - to control, and this is what makes possible the greater accuracy.

Whatever the reason, coaches are likely to be approached by players with weak or injured wrists seeking advice on whether they should continue trying to play the game, and if so, what changes they should make in order to better cope with the problem.

While it does not come with any authority from a medical viewpoint, our suggestion is that the coach should consider offering the following two pieces of advice:

(1) If the player has been using an Irish or Standard grip, then he or she could be advised to try changing to the Solomon grip, and ensuring that the hands are together at the top of the handle. The Solomon grip has its own problems from a coaching viewpoint, but these will be compensated for by the fact that it tends to place far less strain on the wrists, even in shots that need to be hit with considerable force. This is because (a) the wrists are in a more relaxed position, and (b) the grip allows a higher backswing so that greater use can be made of gravitational force rather than muscular force from the wrists and forearms.
(2) Try using a heavier mallet. This may seem like strange advice to give to a player with weak wrists, and some may protest that they find it hard enough with their weak wrists to control a light mallet. However, contrary to their expectations, the fact is that a heavier mallet will put less strain on the wrists than a lighter one - provided it is swung correctly from the shoulders. This again is because the additional weight allows greater use of gravitational force.

The heavier mallet will also tend to swing more smoothly through the ball - similar to hitting a tennis ball with a croquet mallet or a croquet ball with a sledge-hammer - and this alone can markedly reduce wrist strain.

We suggest that instead of the average type of mallet which weighs under 3 pounds, the player could try one weighing around 3 pounds 4 ounces. Three and a half pounds would be an absolute maximum, as there are also disadvantages inherent in the additional weight: the player will find it harder to play stop-shots and harder to retain accurate control of "touch" shots such as long take-offs and delicate hoop approaches. These disadvantages should be offset by an improvement in roquets and rushes; and most importantly less strain on the wrists. Several players with wrist problems have tried this out and found that they were able to continue playing good croquet when it had appeared that they may have had to consider giving the game away.

For very long rolls on heavier lawns the player could try using a side-style swing. This is not normally to be recommended (though some leading players do it) because the additional force gained from the higher backswing which the side-style allows, is accompanied by a reduction in accuracy due to the increased difficulty of keeping the eyes and weight directly behind the shot, and achieving a straight swing and follow-through. A player without wrist problems, regardless of stature and strength, should not need to resort to a side-style swing for any type of shot. However, the player may find it necessary at times to trade off some of the accuracy he would otherwise be able to achieve in order to lessen the risk of worsening his problem.

ON BEVELLED EDGES

Many years ago mallets were made with wide bevels on the end faces and usually also with brass strips around them. The purpose of both the bevels and the brass strips was simply to stop the wood from splitting or chipping when the ball was struck near the edge of the mallet face.

In recent times hard plastic ends have come into common use, but many players and manufacturers have failed to realise that the bevels and brass rings are now neither necessary nor desirable. There are various hampered shots which will occur in games from time to time and can only be played satisfactorily if the mallet has no bevelled edge, so in such situations the bevels can be a distinct disadvantage. Brass strips are unobjectionable, except for the additional cost - but why pay for something you do not need?

WHERE SHOULD A MALLET BE BALANCED?

Mallets have traditionally been made so that they will "balance" horizontally when supported at a point about one-sixth of the way from the bottom of the head to the end of the handle. There does not seem to be any compelling reason why the fraction one-sixth should be better than any other fraction, and in fact some leading players have used mallets with additional weight added to either the head or the handle, causing it to balance at a quite different point.

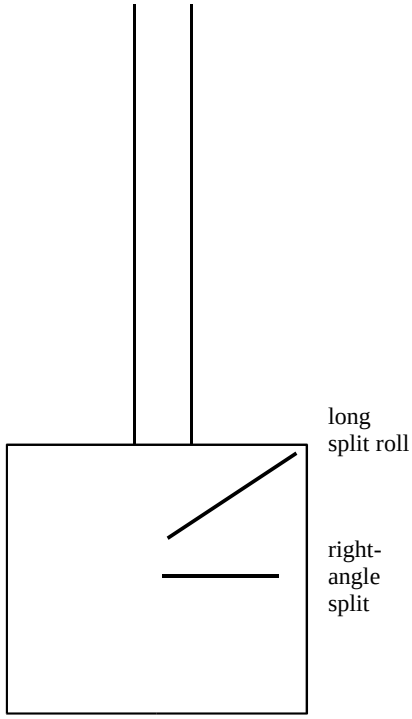
The advantage for a manufacturer in balancing all mallets similarly is two-fold: (a) The construction process is made more standard and therefore simpler; and (b) When a player switches from an old mallet to a new one he will be able to adjust to the feel of the new mallet more quickly if the balance is the same, even though the total weight may be different. Thus it is more likely he will be immediately satisfied.

It is also worth noting that in recent years there has been a trend toward heavier mallets, and this seems to have been a response to the reduced elasticity (or apparent "deadness") of the Dawson Mark 2 balls.

Most players have found that the increased weight needs to be accompanied by a more rigid handle in order to allow the playing and accurate control of stop-shots and certain split-shots.

THE END: ROUND OR SQUARE?

Some players use mallets with round ends, while others have a square, octagonal, 'half-round' or 'three-quarter round' shape. Since most shots are (or should be!) hit near the centre of the end face, it would seem that there is little reason to prefer one shape rather than another. As with many other things, it was Tom Armstrong who first drew my attention to the fact that if the balls were covered with wet paint, most croquet shots would leave a line on the mallet face starting near the centre and going toward the edge, as shown by the heavy lines in the diagram at left. The mark would in many cases end before reaching the edge, as the ball would have parted contact with the mallet by then; but for long split rolls, e.g. from hoop 1 to hoops 2 and 3, played (as they should be) with the mallet sloping well forward, the contact between ball and mallet may continue to the edge of the mallet face. The result of such a shot can vary markedly according to whether the ball leaves the mallet face at a point on the side face just below the corner as shown on the diagram, or a point on the top face, or at the corner itself. A rounded face avoids the problem, it there is one, of having to cope with this difference in the way the ball comes off the mallet for shots which in other respects are very similar. I suspect that this is at least part of the reason why, before changing to the oval mallet shape shown in the article on Peripheral Weighting, I found the split from hoop 1 to hoops 2 and 3 much easier to control than from 1-back to 2-back and 3-back.



My swing, like that of most players was probably not quite straight and symmetrical; and this perhaps caused the ball to come off the mallet face at slightly different points with noticeably different consequences. If the mallet face has to be square, then at least some rounding of the corners would seem to be justified by these considerations.

SECTION 3

LAWS

The material in this section drew a considerable amount of interest when published in the Autumn 1994 issue of the Australian Croquet Gazette. In addition to the amusement it provides, it may prove helpful to others who have not already seen it.

I must point out that the explanations in no way represent the official views or interpretations of the ACA Laws Committee, and the blame for any errors or misleading statements rests squarely on the shoulders of the author alone. For this reason the reader is encouraged not to take all of them too seriously, and to check them out for himself in the Laws book if he is in any doubt.

For those interested more seriously in the Laws and refereeing I have available a "Croquet Referees Guide" which was published in October 1994 and used by the SACA Laws Committee as a basis for their Referees Training Course. Further details are given on the final page of this booklet.

NOTE: Since this section was written the Laws of Croquet have been revised so that "folk-laws" 2 and 4 no longer apply.

It is now not possible for a hoop point to be scored in any faulted stroke unless the limit of claims has been passed before the fault is discovered (see "folk-law" number 2); and a fault will end the turn in some 'compound error' situations where formerly the turn would not have ended (see "folk-law" number 4).

There is now a 'five-second' rule which applies in determining whether or not a ball had come to rest before it moved (see "folk-law" number 16); but it applies only when the ball was stationary for 5 seconds or more in a position where it did not require testing.

FOLK-LAWS

The game of croquet abounds in folklore, which is a body of advice, rules, principles and experiences derived from the accumulated wisdom of players from the past and passed on by word of mouth to each succeeding generation.

There are sayings which relate to technique, tactics, equipment, administration, clubs, lawns, and any other aspect of the game you care to think of. The following is a collection of folklore items which relate to the laws and refereeing. See if there are any you have not heard before:

1. A ball in hand cannot commit a fault.
2. If a stroke is faulted, no point can be scored in it.
3. If your ball is interfered with by a moving ball from the other set, you have the option of a replay provided it had not reached its objective.
4. A fault overrides an error.
5. Crushes only apply when you are making a hoop.
6. It you pick up one of your balls in the mistaken belief that you have a lift, it must be replaced and you are committed to playing that ball.
7. A shot which damages the lawn is a fault.
8. It is a fault if you hit the hoop with your mallet.
9. A hammer shot is a fault if your arm touches any part of your leg.
10. You cannot claim a roquet on a misplaced ball.
11. If you play with a ball misplaced you have condoned its position.
12. Failing to place a clip correctly is an error.
13. A referee called to watch a hoop shot should not tell the player if he plays the wrong ball or makes the wrong hoop.
14. When moving balls in because you do not have a stance, you must have your back to the lawn.
15. The peg can only be straightened if the position is not critical.
16. If the ball rolls back into the hoop after you have removed your clip (or counted to four), you can count the hoop as having been made.
17. Spectators are not permitted to talk to players during a game.
18. You are not permitted to run onto the court (or between shots) to save time.
19. In a time-limited game a player may not retrieve the adversary's ball if it leaves the court.
20. If you hit your ball during a practice swing it is a fault (or you have played your stroke).
21. A ball must complete the running of one hoop before it can begin to run the next hoop.
22. If you take croquet from the wrong ball you must go back and take croquet from the correct ball.
23. If you play a ball from the other set your turn ends.
24. If you have pegged a ball out you are not entitled to claim a wiring lift.
25. You can claim a baulked ball if your adversary has used your ball and there is no ball you can possibly roquet with it.

You will probably have heard almost all of these sayings many times. Perhaps you will be able to add to them many other common croquet platitudes. One could probably make a similar list covering other areas of the game, e.g.

Technique: "To give your ball topspin when running a hoop, lift your mallet up through the ball."
Tactics: "Never set up in the middle of the lawn."
Handicapping: "You are likely to ruin a young player if you bring his handicap down too quickly."
And most famous of all: If you can't roquet, you can't play croquet", meaning that if you want to win more games, you should concentrate mainly on improving your roqueting ability.

The fascinating thing about the "Folk-Laws" is that not a single one of them is true; and many players will be surprised to learn that the four pieces of "advice" at the bottom are incorrect also!

FOLK-LAWS (page 2): Explanation

(1) The first one is technically true, but not the way that people mean it. They mean that if the striker's ball makes a roquet and then comes back onto your foot, or onto the bevelled edge or side of your mallet, it is not a fault because the ball has made a roquet, and so has become a "ball in hand". This is nonsense!

Firstly, the ball does not become "in hand" until it comes to rest, and secondly, the situations described in the previous sentence are indeed faults, notwithstanding that a roquet has been made.

(2) If the fault occurred in a croquet stroke, and the striker's ball went through its hoop while the croqueted ball crossed the boundary, then the opponent has the right to waive the fault and the point would count, even though the stroke in which it was scored was a fault. [Note: under the revised laws this no longer applies.]

(3) The replay is never an option. Either the shot must be replayed (whether you want it or not), or else there is no replay permitted.

(4) This is hardly ever true. A fault is, in fact, merely one kind of error. For example, if a player in a singles game has two balls in contact at the start of a turn, picks up one, then replaces it and plays the other, he has played a wrong ball under the old Law 28(a). If he also leaves a still ball in this stroke, then in addition he has committed a fault. The old Law 26(f)(1) makes clear that the only law to be applied is Law 28: the player replaces the balls and continues by taking croquet with the correct ball. [Note: under the revised laws this no longer applies.]

(5) 'Crushes' are not mentioned in the Laws. However, most people know what they mean by the term, and a 'crush' will be a fault (so a referee should be called to watch any awkward shot near a hoop) whether you are making the hoop or not.

(6) Under the Laws the ball is replaced, but there is no requirement to play it. You have not nominated it as the striker's ball under the new Law 9(b)(1) and the new Law 27 (h) allows play of either ball. On the other hand, if you were entitled to lift the ball, then once you do so you are committed to playing it.

(7) It is only a fault if the shot was deliberately played and was a type of shot considered likely to damage the court.

(8) There is no such rule. The only way that hitting a hoop with your mallet can be a fault is if by doing so during the striking period you cause another ball to move or shake.

(9) It will only be a fault if during the striking period your arm rests against any part of your leg (old Law 32(a)(4), new Law 28(a)(3)). Touching your leg is irrelevant.

(10) On the contrary, unless the stroke was forestalled by the adversary, the roquet stands and you continue by taking croquet (old Law 29, new Law 27(i)).

(11) The position of a misplaced ball can never be condoned. There is no mention of condoning in the old Law 29 or the new Law 27. The wrong position of a ball can never become its correct legal position. If a player plays when a ball is misplaced, one of two things can happen:

(a) The misplaced ball is affected by the stroke. In this case its new position now becomes its legal position; but the incorrect position was never its legal position.

(b) The misplaced ball is not affected by the stroke. In this case it must be replaced correctly. By playing while it was misplaced the player did not in any way "condone" its incorrect position.

(12) The error is not "misplacing a clip" or "failing to place a clip correctly", but "playing when misled". Thus the error may be committed many turns after the clip was misplaced, and always by a player who did not misplace the clip.

(13) A referee called onto the court has the same powers and duties as a 'Referee in Charge' (Reg. 6) for the time he is on the court acting as referee. Thus he is required to act as an 'ever-vigilant adversary ' (old Reg. 5(b), to 'be ever-vigilant' new Reg 5(b)), and accordingly he not only can, but must declare any error (old Law 45(b), new Law 48(b)). [Caution: regulations on referees may be changed in 2004]

(14) You must have your back to the court when measuring balls onto the yardline (old Law 47, new Law 12(e)), but there is no requirement to do so when measuring them in because you do not have a stance.

(15) The peg can be straightened at any time (old Reg. 5(h), new Law 3(a)(3)).

(16) In order to make the hoop the ball must have come to rest (see old Law 14. The new Law 14 differs). Old Law 22(b) explains when a ball is deemed to have come to rest, and gives only four situations in which the hoop would be allowed after the ball rolled back. The equivalent new law is 6(b). Whether or not the clip has been removed has nothing to do with it. Neither does the distance the ball went through the hoop before rolling back. Nor is it sufficient for the striker alone to have looked at it and decided that it was through the hoop.

(17) There is no such rule. Nor did the old Laws say a spectator cannot give advice to a player. They only said that the player was not permitted to receive any such advice or take advantage of it. The new Law 50(a) allows spectator input on errors and interference and lays down the appropriate responses to it.

(18) There is nothing in the Laws to prevent you from running as fast as you can at any time for any purpose, whether or not you have been running previously.

(19) Again, there is nothing in the Laws to prevent you from saving time by retrieving the opponent's balls for him. You are quite entitled to do this, whether the opponent wants you to or not.

(20) It will not be a fault if it was only a practice swing, because you were not "swinging with intent to hit the ball" (old Law 31 (b), new Law 5(a) altered that wording, and added 5(g)). Therefore the 'striking period' had not commenced, and a fault can only be committed during the striking period.

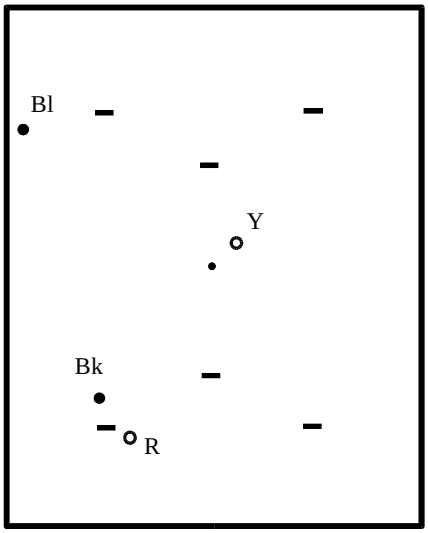
(21) A ball does not complete the running of its hoop until it comes to rest (old Law 14(b)(2), new Law 14(c)). If it goes through two hoops in order in the one shot, it will begin running the second hoop before it has completed the running of the first.

(22) Under old Law 30, the adversary had an option and could interchange the balls instead of asking for a replay. This disappears under the new law (27 (d) and (e)) and either a replay is granted or turn ends.

(23) Playing a ball from the other set has nothing to do with the game. The ball you hit, and any other balls roqueted or moved, should be replaced. Then you continue by playing a ball from your own set.

(24) You cannot claim a lift under Law 36 (advanced play) after pegging out any ball; but a lift under Law 13 (wiring lift) can still be claimed.

(25) There are possible situations (although very unusual) where your swing is hampered, not by a hoop or peg, but by another ball. It may well be quite impossible to imagine any way in which a roquet could be made, yet the player is not entitled to a wiring lift.



Technique: By trying to lift your mallet up as it contacts the ball, all you are likely to do is make the ball skid and so give yourself less chance of making the hoop. The way to give a croquet ball 'topspin' is to tilt the handle of the mallet slightly forward.

Tactics: One frequently sees players reducing their chances of winning by following this misguided advice. Certainly, you should not normally leave your balls deliberately in the middle of the lawn by choice. But in a situation such as the one shown in the diagram at right, where the player of red has played a poor hoop approach shot and cannot make the first hoop, he should sit red in the lawn near yellow so that the opponent at least has to hit a roquet in order to get the innings. Hitting red out of play to the border somewhere concedes black the innings without him even having to hit a roquet, and (depending on the positions of the opponent's clips) will probably also make it risky for yellow to shoot at any ball on the following turn if, say, black shoots at blue and misses.

Handicapping: This silly idea has been used as justification for deliberately retarding the development of many a promising young player, when he has achieved results which clearly show that his handicap should be rapidly brought down. An improving player should actually be brought down ahead of his actual results, since the results will inevitably lag behind his improving ability. The handicap he plays on now is based onresults achieved some time in the past, and since then he will almost certainly have continued to improve.

Most Famous: This foolish saying ("If you can't roquet, you can't play croquet") causes problems for coaches, by making the player think that the main thing he has to do in order to win more games is improve his roqueting ability. At any level of play, with the possible exception of international competition, the ability to control split-shots and hoop approaches is far more important than the ability to hit roquets. If you want to win more games you should concentrate on improving your croquet shots and your tactics, rather than spending hours trying to bring about a small increase in the number of long roquets you are likely to hit. Many top-level games are won without the winner having to hit a roquet longer than 2-3 yards; but the ability to play controlled split-shots is essential.

GAMESMANSHIP

Many and varied are the dodges tried by players in an attempt to gain some sort of psychological or tactical advantage. Some of them are perfectly legitimate, e.g. in a doubles game leaving the ball of the stronger opponent, or the one who is not yet around, right out of play. Others may be such that they do not contravene the Laws, but would be regarded by certain people as highly unethical. Still others amount to downright cheating. You and I would naturally never engage in dubious practices. We mention a few here merely so that we can be well prepared to counter them when we encounter opponents whose ethical standards are not as high as ours.

(1). At the start of the game one player wins the toss and chooses to hit in first. The other chooses red and yellow. The first player plays blue to the east border as usual. The second player takes two balls to the 1st corner and plays red to a 'tice' position. When the first player goes to play his second ball, it "happens" that the yellow ball is waiting conveniently near the in-lawn end of A-baulk, while the black ball is over near the 1st corner. Many a time an unwary player has fallen for the trap of playing the yellow ball without realising that it is not his partner ball, and had to end his turn by removing it and placing the black ball on a baulk.

(2). The player of red and yellow has pegged out his yellow ball, but missed the peg with red. The opponent roqueted, sent red to a far corner of the lawn, and set up in the 1st corner. The player of red takes his ball to the baulk, "inadvertently" forgetting that he is not entitled to a lift because he has pegged a ball out. Unless the opponent realises it in time to forestall, it will be too late. Some have been known to deliberately wait until the opponent's attention has been momentarily distracted before having the unfortunate mental lapse.

(3). The yellow ball had been pegged out by the opponent, and red still has several hoops to make. The opponent has left the red ball so that it will risk giving away an immediate 3-ball break if it shoots at the opponent's balls or sits in front of its hoop. The player of red can think of no noticeably better place for the red ball than where it already is, but if he plays it or declares his turn he will become responsible for the position of the red ball and the opponent will be able to wire both balls from it on the next turn, not allowing him a shot. The player of red walks onto the lawn and plays the blue ball! When the opponent protests, he readily admits to having played a wrong ball. The blue ball is replaced and it is the opponent's turn. The player of red is now responsible for the position of the blue ball, but not for the position of his own red ball! The opponent now has to allow him a shot on the next turn.

(4). Before running a somewhat sidey hoop, the player notices that on the approach shot the balls finished so that his ball is wired from the opponent ball behind the hoop. In running the hoop, he ensures that the mallet follows through gently into the hoop so that if the ball happens to stick in the hoop the mallet will hit it a second time and it will have to be replaced in the wired position. This seems to happen remarkably often in play at higher levels. There is no way of knowing whether or not the second hit was deliberate, as good hoop-running technique can involve a long, low, gentle follow-through in the exact line in which the ball travels.

(5). Near the start of the game a player starts a turn with touching balls in the 4th corner and is faced with a long diagonal take-off to the opponent's balls in the 2nd corner. He picks up yellow, places it against red, then replaces yellow and plays the red ball instead. If the opponent notices, the only penalty is that he must go back and take off correctly with yellow, having had a practice shot. If the opponent fails to notice what has happened, and the take-off is a good one, he will continue the turn accordingly. If the take-off falls short or goes out, or yellow is a still ball, he can declare his own error of playing the wrong ball. According to Law 26 (f) the fault (if there was a still ball) is overridden by Law 28 (a). In any case, the balls are replaced and the player starts his turn again by taking off correctly with yellow from red.

If you know of other good ones I can use - in my articles, of course - please write and let me know.

[Later note: When the Laws were revised in the year 2000, changes were made so as to prevent all of the above underhand "tricks" except the first. However, it will probably not take long for players to think up new ways of taking advantage of an unwary opponent - particularly one who is not familiar with the laws. The above can still usefully illustrate the type of thing one needs to be alert for.]

SECTION 4

COACHING

Some of the following articles have been published in the SACA Coaching Committee's Newsletter during the past three years, and include ideas contributed by other members of the committee, to whom I am grateful for their assistance.

Since the Newsletter has a very limited circulation the articles are included here, together with others, in the hope that both coaches and players in the wider Australian croquet scene will benefit.

Once again it must be stressed that coaching is far from an exact science. The committee has been giving a lot of consideration during the past three or so years to solving not only the problem of how things should be done, but also how they should be taught.

The results of all our work can be seen in the booklets of notes for the coaches training courses at various levels. These are available, or in the case of levels 2 and 3 will become available in the future, through the National Coaching Director. Those interested should in the first instance seek the advice of their State Coaching Director, as other material may be preferred for various reasons in some states, or provided in addition.

It is also likely that in some states there may be a policy of making the material available only to accredited coaches, and there can be sound reasons for such a policy.

THE ROLE OF THE COACH

The role of the croquet coach has been traditionally seen as one of showing the player how to play the various shots, and when things are not working out as desired, telling him what he is doing wrong. In recent years we have come to realise that as coaches we need to be involved in such things as establishing practice drills, psychological preparation, teaching tactics, planning the competitive programme of a player, and goal-setting for competitive events, as well as developing the correct attitude toward risk-taking, ways of coping with unusual or unfavourable conditions, most effective use of hit-up time, etc.

As just one example, let us return to consider a player who is missing roquets because he was hurrying his forward swing. (See the later article "More on error correction" on page 74 for further discussion of this particular problem.) After diagnosing and correcting the error, the task of the coach is far from finished. He still needs to set practice drills for the player, and establish a means of assessing whether or not the problem has been satisfactorily remedied. Then he needs to help the player set goals for competitive play, e.g. concentrate on unhurried swings during the hit-up before a game, then hit both balls into play and (later) run hoop 1 without hurrying the forward swing. There may need to be other times during the game as well, e.g. on the first stroke of every turn, where the player will find it necessary to consciously think through the idea of a higher backswing, relaxed arm and wrist muscles, and unhurried forward swing.

Very few errors can be corrected with any degree of permanency without this type of goal-setting for match play. No matter how much time the players spends at practice, and how many times he repeats a perfect, unhurried swing, he will still be likely to revert to his old habit of hurrying the swing in match play under pressure, unless he makes a deliberate and conscious attempt, at one or more specific times during the match, to ensure that he puts into effect the things he has learnt while practising. The player needs to play the shot with a changed goal: instead of thinking, "I must make this roquet (or hoop or rush)", he thinks, "I must use an unhurried forward swing", and even if the shot is missed he can consider that he has to some degree succeeded if he did in fact manage to achieve this more basic goal. He may lose a game or two at first, but he would probably have lost them anyway, and it is more important to ensure the winning of future games by correcting the error in technique, rather than to win the current game.

After the competition the coach should seek feedback from the player, e.g. "Did you remember to use a high backswing and not hurry the forward swing as you hit the balls into play? And did this help to establish the timing for later shots?"

If the problem remains, then more work on it is needed, and if not, then attention can be given to a different problem. It may also be necessary for the coach to assist the player in planning a particular programme of practice sessions and competitive play. The timing of such things is not always entirely under the control of either coach or player, but it will usually be possible to designate certain periods of the year, when there are no competitions of supreme importance, in which attention can be given to correcting any slight errors in technique and the practising of unusual shots such as roll-cannons, very long pass rolls (e.g. from the fourth corner, to load hoop 4 while going to a ball at hoop 3), jump shots, hampered shots, etc.

As a major competition approaches attention can be diverted to the fine-tuning of basic shots such as gentle roquets over 5-6 yards, wider than usual rushes, take-offs from corner to corner, hoop running, and other shots where any error is likely to be one of judgement and timing rather than one of technique. Psychological preparation is another important factor, and can include preparedness to cope with or counter the style of play of particular opponents, or ways of assisting your partner in doubles, as well as ways of handling specific lawn and weather conditions.

It all leads up to one incontrovertible fact: every player competing at top level, as well as every player who wishes to improve rapidly, should have a personal coach who is both accredited and trusted. In others sports such as tennis, golf, athletics, etc., no-one would expect to be competitive at a high level without the regular services of a competent coach. Why is it that leading croquet players in the past seem to have adopted the attitude that it is beneath their dignity to seek specialised coaching advice? Fortunately, this attitude is gradually changing, and before long everyone who plays at or near state level will be forced to have regular coaching sessions in order to remain competitive. Such a change can only be for the good of the game, and lead to a general increase in the standard of play.

WHAT IS RIGHT-HANDED?

Croquet coaches and players seem to be in no doubt as to what constitutes a right- or left-handed stance and grip. In a right-handed grip the left (non-dominant) hand is placed at the top end of the handle, and the right (dominant) hand is placed underneath. In a right-handed stance the left foot is forward of the right foot.

I assume that I am not the first coach to have noticed that the percentage of croquet players using a left-handed grip and stance seems to be far higher than the percentage of left-handed people one would expect to find in the general community. This has led me to wonder whether or not the traditional idea of what is "left-handed" is in fact correct. There is no doubt that when most players were playing side-style the above description of a right-handed grip was correct, as this method involved having the hands well apart and providing most of the force with the bottom hand. However, most right-handed side-style players actually use what (going by the above) would be termed a "left-handed" stance - that is, they have their right foot forward.

Nowadays most players are taught to play centre-style, keep their hands together, and swing the mallet with the top hand rather than the bottom one. Perhaps there is a need to rethink the traditional ideas concerning the grip and stance that as coaches we automatically recommend to players, depending on whether they are right or left-handed.

This question has arisen in my mind, partly because, like many others, I am very right-handed at everything else, but play croquet "left-handed" because to me it seems more natural. In fact, to me it seems that I am playing right-handed, since the strength of the shot comes from my right hand, and the left hand is used only to guide the direction of the swing.

What, then, would be the effect if when the next person who asks me to teach him the game and says that he is right-handed, I were to suggest that he adopt a "left-handed" grip and stance as I myself do? I have always regarded the fact that I am left-handed at croquet and nothing else as one of my many idiosyncrasies, which like the others should not be passed on to those I coach. But now I am no longer so certain that I am doing the right thing. I do not have the nerve to go against all the accumulated wisdom of the centuries and recommend a "left-handed" grip to a right-handed player, as it could well prove to be disastrous and ruin any chance he may have had to ever become proficient at the game. Then I would blame myself forever after, and deservedly so. No coach should recommend anything other than what he knows is most likely to be of greatest benefit to the player. At present I have no evidence to support or even suggest that a right-handed person is likely to benefit from being taught to play left-handed; but all the same I cannot help wondering whether there may be more for us to learn as coaches in this area.

A further complication arises from the fact that almost all right-handed people are also right-eye dominant.

This means that if they are taught to play with a left-handed grip and stance, they will suffer (as I do) the minor disadvantage of needing to swing the mallet vertically below the eye which is on the same side as their front foot. This causes the thigh on that front leg to interfere somewhat with a straight backswing, unless the stance is a very wide one, or the front foot is consciously placed at what seems an unnatural distance from the line of swing. This is something I must keep on consciously reminding myself of, and is a source of error on those occasions when I forget and place my right foot too close to the line of swing which should be directly under my dominant right eye.

It would be possible, but probably not desirable, to explain all this to a newcomer and suggest that he experiment, hoping that he will work out for himself the way of doing things that will best suit him. However, this is in general not a satisfactory teaching method. The newcomer is likely to learn far more quickly if he is not confused by being shown a number of alternative methods and having to choose between them on the basis of ignorance and no experience. Most players will get on best if the coach makes one clear recommendation as to the grip and stance that is most likely, in the judgement of the experienced coach, to suit that particular player. No doubt there will be rare occasions when we get it wrong. In such cases it should become evident fairly quickly that the player is not coping satisfactorily with the things we are asking him to do in the ways we are asking him to do them, and at that stage the player may be advised to experiment with different grips and stances in the hope that he will find something that suits him better.

In my experience, however, a player who cannot cope at all with the standard grip and stance is not likely to get on well with any other; and once a player is managing reasonably well it will be very difficult to change him, which again raises the question as to what we should be teaching him in the first place.

JUMP SHOTS

When teaching JUMP SHOTS, be aware that the different types of grip (standard, Irish, Solomon) probably will have a bearing on where the student places his hands. A player with the Solomon grip needs to hold the mallet at the top of the handle. However, a player with the standard grip is likely to get on better if he shortens the grip somewhat; and a player with the Irish grip will probably need to use a shorter grip still in order to achieve similar results without placing undue strain on the wrists. A coach should be wary of assuming that the way of playing a shot which he finds best for himself will also be best for any particular student.

WISHFUL THINKING

When players are asked to perform a series of set drill exercises, (e.g. play 5 stop-shots from the 1st corner to load hoop 2 and gain position no more than 1m in front of hoop 1) and record the results, their recorded percentages will usually need to be considerably reduced in order to provide a true indication of current ability.

This fact was reinforced recently when one of the exercises mistakenly set as "homework" for a group of players being coached was to play a 'right-angle split' from 1m behind hoop 1, sending the croqueted ball to within 2m of hoop 4 and the striker's ball to within 2m of hoop 2. Everyone recorded success rates of 60-80% on this shot, although the shot is extremely difficult, if not virtually impossible. It seems that they were very generous in their estimation of the 2m distances involved!

It is probably a good thing to think positively, and have confidence in your ability to play difficult shots with a reasonable success rate; but if you base too many of your tactical choices on such wishful thinking instead of on an objective consideration of percentages, things are likely to come unstuck somewhere.

The most reliable way for the coach to find out whether or not the student has mastered a shot is to have the student perform the tests with the coach present. On many occasions players have insisted that they can take off from one corner to within 3m of a ball in another corner almost every time; but when given a strict test their success rate is less than 30%, which shows that they definitely need more instruction and further practice.

HANDEDNESS AND DOMINANCE

In advising players about stance, grip and swing it is important that a coach begin by asking such questions as:

(1) Is the player right-handed, left-handed or ambidextrous?

(2) Which, if any, is his dominant eye?

(3) Is there any physical condition which may need to be accommodated?

The correct positions for the player's feet and hands will depend on the answers to these questions, yet we could all probably quote experiences where a coach has tried to give advice to a player about his stance or grip without realising that the player is, say, right-eyed and left-handed; or right-handed but has no dominant eye. The coach needs to know how to check such things, as the player may not know whether he is right- or left-handed, nor which, if any, is his dominant eye.

A full explanation of the effects of handedness and eye dominance on stance and grip would require far more space than is available here. We advise coaches who wish to be better informed on these matters to seek detailed advice from a member of the state coaching committee. For now, we will simply state the following general principles without further elaboration:

(a) Most (but not all) players find it most comfortable to use a grip with the non-dominant hand at the top of the handle. For single ball shots this hand should move directly forward during the swing, with the dominant (underneath) hand just "going along for the ride" to help guide the direction of the swing without supplying any additional force.

(b) If possible the front foot in the stance should be on the same side as the top (non-dominant) hand. That is, a right-handed player will stand with his left foot forward. Some players prefer to adopt a stance with their feet level, in which case they will probably need advice as to how they can prevent themselves from over-balancing and "walking" forward during the swing.

(c) The mallet should swing directly underneath the dominant eye, with the shaft vertical, not tilted to one side, as a tilt can impart spin to the ball, making it tend to curve off line. This means that even with a level stance the mallet will not be exactly midway between the two feet, unless, perhaps, the player is one of the rare breed who do not have one eye more dominant than the other.

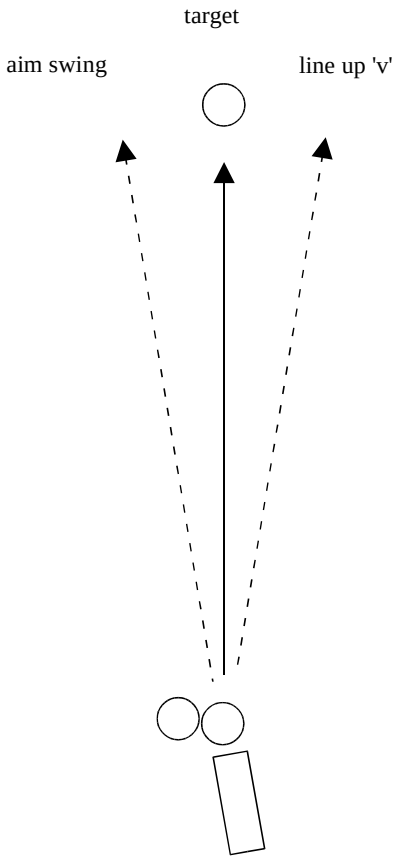
(d) A player whose dominant eye is on the opposite side from his dominant hand is likely to experience difficulty in developing a straight backswing, especially if he uses the "Irish" grip, and may need further advice in this area.

TEACHING THE TAKE-OFF

One of the problems facing a coach is that most players think they already know how to take-off, and are not really interested in receiving further instruction on the subject. It is interesting to ask them how close they would normally expect to get when taking-off to a ball at the far end of the lawn, without going out. Most will be confident of "usually" finishing within 2-3 yards of the target ball, but when put to the test (using slightly differing distances and directions across the lawn) they are likely to succeed only about 3 times out of 10! This exercise should at least convince them that there is room for improvement.

It is unfortunate that many players have been given poor advice in past years and this is part of the reason for the inconsistency in their take-offs. This highlights the danger of accepting coaching from untrained coaches, as one still hears advice such as the following being passed on by well-meaning but ill-informed club-mates:

1. "Turn your mallet face a little inward toward the croqueted ball to make sure that it moves!" - this will indeed ensure that the croqueted ball moves, but it involves hitting with the mallet face not at right-angles to the line of swing, which creates 3 problems: (a) the distance travelled by both balls is harder to control; (b) the player will find it difficult to take off from the 'other' side; and (c) it requires the muscles to co-ordinate in a way which will cause disaster if transferred into the swing used for other shots.
2. "Line up the V to where you want to go, then move your striker's ball back a little ... about half an inch." - this advice is less harmful, but is only likely to prove accurate for one particular distance, and omits mention of the correct line and type of swing. It is also likely to cause the striker's ball to go out in certain situations, e.g. a take-off from behind hoop 4 to the opponent's balls on the border alongside hoop 3.
3. "Try playing your take-offs like I do, with a stop-shot action." - This makes distance more difficult to judge accurately, as it introduces into the swing additional and unnecessary variables (rate of deceleration and timing or 'sharpness' of stop action) which have to be controlled. The take-off action does, however, have one virtue in that 'pull' is reduced and in some cases may no longer need to be taken into consideration.



We do not have room here for a full consideration of the many finer points of this shot, but the accompanying diagram and the following principles will give some idea of the correct teaching method:

1. Line up the V to one side of the desired finishing point so as to allow for 'pull' (or "mallet-drag").

2. Select a point of aim about the same distance the other side of the desired finishing point.

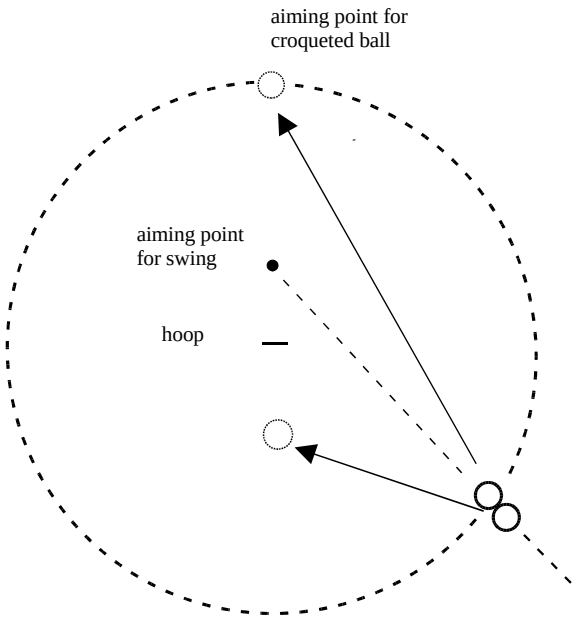
3. The distance of these points either side of the desired finishing point will depend on the length of the take-off. For the full length of the lawn a beginner should allow about one and a half yards, and the allowance is correspondingly reduced for shorter shots.

4. Ignore the croqueted ball, and swing through with the mallet face square, as if attempting to roquet an imaginary ball at the aiming point.

5. Use a higher backswing, rather than a push with the hands, to provide the additional force needed in a very long take-off. Do not hit down on the ball. The swing should be flat, with a normal follow-through.

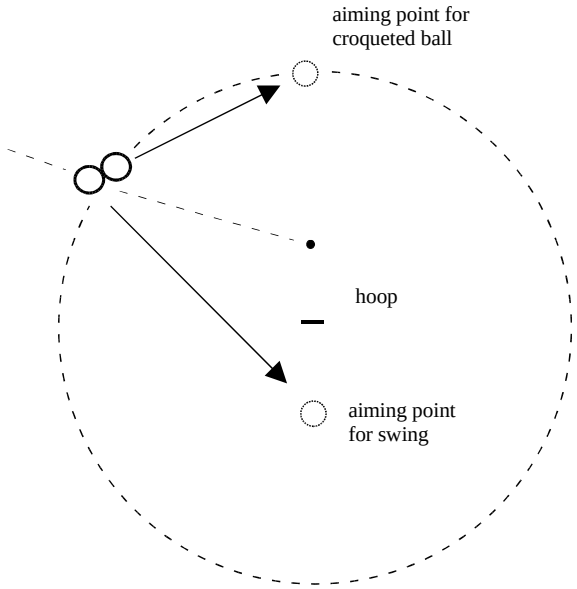
CIRCLE METHOD FOR HOOP APPROACHES (part 1)

This method of lining up and playing hoop approaches was explained in my booklet "Croquet Coaching: Error Correction" and has been incorporated into the official course notes for the training of coaches.
In comparing the Circle Method with the standard method of playing and teaching hoop approaches, the following should be noted:
(1) The standard method involves deciding upon the desired finishing positions of the two balls (usually about two feet in front of the hoop and two yards behind it) and recognising the type of split-shot which will be needed to get them to these positions. This could be a stop-shot, half roll, equal roll, pass roll, thick take-off, (etc.), and the player then needs to know the correct grip, stance and type of swing he must use to play whichever of these shots is required. He must also be able to adjust the grip, stance and swing according to the wideness of the angle of split. Most of this is well beyond the understanding of many players, at least until they have been playing the game for some years. By this time they will often have developed the undesirable habit of playing most hoop approaches as take-offs, since it is the only method they can cope with.
(2) The Circle Method has the great advantage that it can be taught to a beginner right from the start, without the need for him to understand, or be able to play, any type of split-shot or roll.
(3) It also has the advantage that it allows the player to develop a greater degree of consistency (and with it confidence) than any alternative method.
(4) A disadvantage is that the Circle Method will not always result in the player obtaining a forward rush in order to facilitate the continuance of his break. However, at an early stage of his development the difficulty in achieving accurate control of the timing of the more desirable stop-shot (when more or less directly in front of the hoop) may still mean that the Circle Method is a good option. At a later stage, when he can play stop-shots with accurate control of the striker's ball, he can vary his hoop approach method as he considers desirable. It is worth noting that several leading players are now using the Circle Method, sometimes with slight modifications, for almost all hoop approaches; and most of these find it so consistent that they will only vary it when the alternative shot involves no risk at all.
(5) The term "Circle Method" was coined in order to explain the method to coaches. It is not necessary for the player to think in terms of circles, but it is useful when teaching it for the coach to place markers around the hoop in a circle so that the learner can practice lining up the shot and playing it from various positions around the circle. The reason for this is that every position on the circle is the same distance from the hoop, so the player will use the same aiming points for both the croqueted ball and the line of swing; and these can be marked by the coach with small objects such as corner pegs as a guide for the player.
The method is described as follows: (see diagram)



1. Observe the distance of the ball you have roqueted from the hoop (i.e. the approach distance).
2. Find a point on the lawn this same distance directly behind the hoop, and place your striker's ball against the roqueted ball in line with this point. That is, you are aiming the croqueted ball to go to the point you have selected directly behind the hoop.
3. Find another point which is also directly behind the hoop, and about one-third of the way from the hoop to the first point you selected. This second point will be the aiming point for your swing. In playing the shot, you will 'stalk' this point, keep your mallet face square to it, and swing your mallet through directly in line with it, avoiding all temptation to "shepherd" the swing around toward the hoop. You will try to ignore the croqueted ball and swing as if you are hitting your striker's ball to make it roquet an imaginary ball at this second aiming point.

CIRCLE METHOD FOR HOOP APPROACHES (part 2)



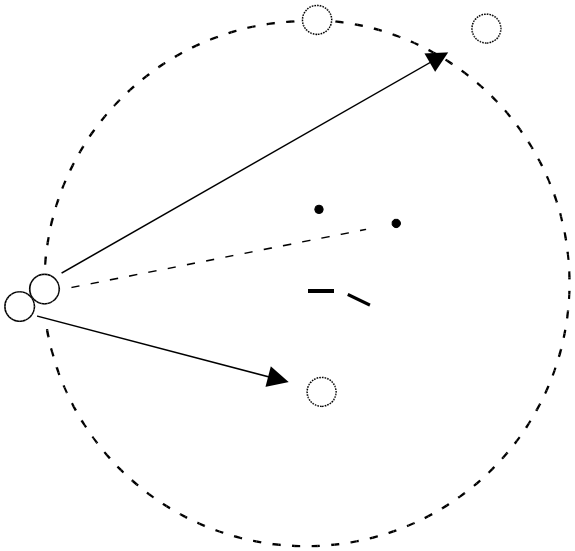
4. The shot must be played with the mallet sloping forward, but only slightly, at an angle of about 15 degrees from the vertical. This degree of forward slope can be learnt with considerable accuracy over time, as it is exactly the same for every hoop approach using the Circle Method, whether you are approaching the hoop from in front, alongside, or behind as shown in the diagram at left.

5. The swing is also the same, except for strength, for all positions around the circle. It is often referred to as a 'stab-roll', but this is not an entirely accurate description. In this case the mallet should be neither stopped (decelerated) nor pushed forward (accelerated) as it contacts the ball. The player merely endeavours to maintain the movement (i.e. speed) of the falling mallet as it 'passes through' the ball. This takes some time to learn, but is actually easier for newcomers than for those who have developed the habit of "rolling" from such positions, or of "stabbing" at hoop approaches with a flat mallet.

6. The strength of the shot is the only thing that is not automatic and has to be judged for each separate hoop approach. However, the player will be helped if he realises that it is determined by his distance from the second aiming point, not his distance from the hoop. (In fact, about the same force is required as if he were hitting a single ball twice the distance to the second aiming point toward which he is swinging; and he should soon learn that less force is required as you move around the circle to a position behind the hoop, because you are then closer to the aiming point, which means that the total of the distances travelled by the two balls will be smaller.) The strength should be controlled by lifting the mallet back higher for a longer hoop approach, rather than by providing any force from the wrists or forearms. That is, you simply let the mallet 'fall' through the ball from a greater height, again maintaining its speed through the ball. This, also, allows the player to eventually achieve surprising consistency.

7. Another surprising aspect of the Circle method is that there seems to be a considerable margin for error. Even when the shot appears to have been somewhat mis-hit, the hoop is often still possible to make.

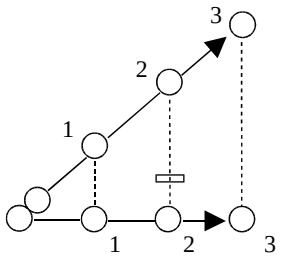
8. For a longer hoop approach the imaginary circle will be larger, and a higher backswing is needed, but otherwise the shot is played in exactly the same way. Note that (allowing for pull) the distance the striker's ball finishes in front of the hoop will be about the same as the distance from the hoop to the second aiming point, or about one-third of the circle radius. This means that in a longer hoop approach you will expect to finish further from the hoop, which maintains the margin for error. However, players who use this method for hoop approaches of six yards or more (e.g. from the border near a hoop) may wish to slightly increase the forward slope of the mallet in order to achieve a narrower angle of split, so that the striker's ball finishes closer to the hoop.



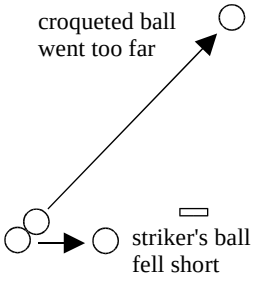
9. At a later stage, when the player finds it desirable to not only make the hoop, but try for a rush in a particular direction after making it, he can do this by simply imagining the hoop in a slightly different position. This will, of course, alter the size of the circle (not shown in the diagram at left) and the positions of the two aiming points, and means that the shot will need to be hit a little harder or softer, depending on whether the rush and imaginary hoop movement are to the far side or the near side of the hoop.

FINE ADJUSTMENTS TO THE CIRCLE METHOD

1. If the balls are placed correctly, and the mallet is swung in the correct way and in the correct line with the correct slope, then as the balls move across the lawn to their destinations they should remain on a line parallel to the side border of the court. The only variable (provided the things which you organise before playing the shot are correct) is the strength of the hit, which is controlled by lifting the mallet higher in the backswing and dropping it through the balls from a greater or lesser height as necessary. This means that if something goes wrong, it should be easy to see what it is, and to correct it in the next attempt, e.g. -
If you hit <u>too gently</u>, the two balls will fall short of their desired destinations as shown by the positions labelled '1' on the 1st diagram at right, and the next time you should take a higher backswing. If you hit <u>too hard</u>, they will both go too far as shown by the positions labelled '3', and next time you should use a shorter backswing. If you get it <u>just right</u> the balls should go to the positions labelled with a '2'.
The dotted lines indicate that if the only error is in the strength of the shot (i.e. amount of backswing), then the balls will finish on an imaginary line parallel to the side border.



2. If the balls do not finish on a line parallel to the border, then it is because one ball has gone too far in relation to the other. This can be corrected by changing the mallet slope as follows:
(a) If the striker's ball falls short and the croqueted ball goes too far, then stand a little further over the balls and increase the mallet slope slightly for the next attempt. (See 2nd diagram)
(b) If the striker's ball goes too far and the croqueted ball falls short, then stand back a bit and use less slope next time.

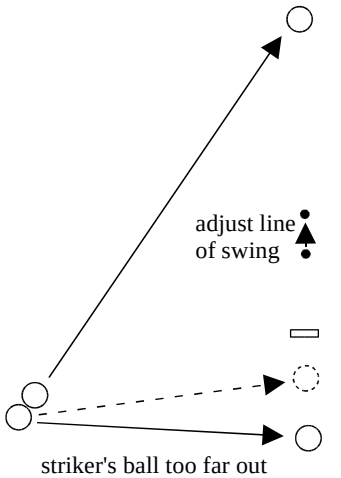


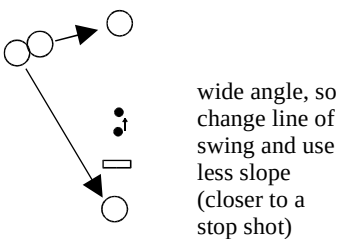
3. As you get more proficient and confident with the circle method you will probably find yourself using it for longer approaches, perhaps up to 6 yards or more from the hoop, e.g. when approaching a corner hoop from the border. Using the method as described for this distance will result in the striker's ball finishing 4 - 5 feet in front of the hoop. If you want to try to get the striker's ball to finish in closer to the hoop than this, you should be able to achieve it by using a little more forward slope and changing the line of swing a little more into the croqueted ball, i.e. a little more than a third of the circle radius behind the hoop. (See 3rd diagram)

4. When you are approaching from positions on the circle behind the hoop you will find that the angle between the directions in which the two balls are to move becomes wider, until when you are almost directly behind the hoop it becomes a right-angle and the shot is more or less equivalent to a take-off.

As the angle becomes wider you will find that the striker's ball starts to slip across the surface of the croqueted ball, instead of the ball surfaces gripping on each other (and the balls immediately moving apart) as they do for narrower angles.

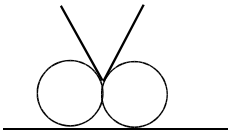
This slipping of one ball against the other in wide-angle shots means that the striker's ball will tend to go too far and the croqueted ball will fall short of the desired destinations. To correct for this, stand a little further back and use less mallet slope while also changing the line of swing a little more into the croqueted ball to lessen the slipping effect and make it go further. Most players who have used the method for some time will learn to make this adjustment almost automatically whenever they are approaching from a position so far around behind the hoop that the angle of split between the desired directions of the two balls exceeds 60 degrees or so. (See 4th diagram)

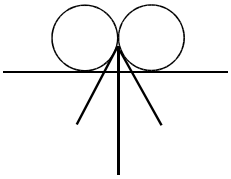




WHERE IS THE V?

Coaches and players often talk to beginners about where to point the V between the balls in order to line up a take-off. Unfortunately, it will often be far from clear to the beginner just what the coach is talking about, and where the 'V' is. The left-hand diagram below shows how most players see the V as a shape above the two balls; but how can it be said to "point" in any direction except possibly straight down?





It seems more sensible to look at an upside-down V underneath the balls as shown in the right-hand diagram, and imagine the central line added to make an arrow shape which does indeed point somewhere. We should never assume as coaches that because a concept is perfectly clear to us, it will be equally clear to those we are teaching!

HELPING YOUR PARTNER

Some good players are very adept at not only making hoops themselves, but assisting much weaker doubles partners to do so as well. Others do not know how to go about helping their partners, and instead of seeing it as an interesting challenge, they see the task as a frustrating one leading to despair.

Here are a few hints that may help you when you find yourself in such a situation:

(1) Always encourage the weaker player to take reasonable risks, instead of advising him to play safe. He needs to think that you have some degree of confidence in his ability, whether you have or not!

(2) Find out what shots he is capable of playing confidently, and set so that he will be able to use those shots. There is little point in putting the opponent's balls at hoops 1 and 2 when your partner is on hoop 1 and setting him a rush in the 4th corner, if he is not capable of rushing a ball across the lawn with reasonable accuracy.

(3) Do not leave the opponents' balls as far apart as possible, expecting your partner to break down. This would also make it harder for him to use them. Set them closer and take the risk of them roqueting, in order to ensure that when they do miss a roquet your partner will be able to get somewhere.

(4) Remember that setting the best possible leave for your partner is more important than making hoops yourself, which you can easily make later on. Even in a handicap game you should not make 4-back until your partner has reached the peg. This is so that if one of the opponents gets to rover or the peg, you still have the opportunity, and sufficient shots in your break, to peel him (if necessary) and peg him out.

MORE ON ERROR CORRECTION

One of the most common errors committed by players is hurrying the forward swing in single ball shots (roquets, rushes and hoop running). This is often most noticeable when the player is a bit nervous or out of form, which results in the shot being mistimed. The backswing is shortened and the forward swing is hurried, with the mallet being pushed forward by wrist and forearm action instead of being allowed to swing smoothly through under its own weight.

In most cases the player will be unaware that he is doing this, and when the coach points out the error to him, he will not know how to go about putting it right. As a coach, you will need to do more than simply tell the player what he is doing wrong. One excellent way of attacking the problem is to place a ball on the yardline and ask the player to roquet it from about 6-7 yards away without any ball crossing the boundary. The shot must be played very deliberately, with a fairly high backswing, and repeated many times until both distance and direction are adequately and consistently controlled. Then, when the correct (slower than before) timing is well established, the player can try longer roquets with the same deliberate action, trying to feel that he is keeping the mallet on the ball as long as possible, and 'sweeping' it rather than 'hitting' it. He should also concentrate on keeping the shoulders still during the swing, and should practise running hoops with a similar deliberate and unhurried action.

Most players find that the shot in which they are most likely to hurry the forward swing is the rush. Whenever rushes are played at practice or in matches, the player should consciously try to maintain an even grip tension throughout the swing, relax the muscles in his wrists and forearms, and use a long, flat swing from the shoulders. The distance of the rush should he controlled by the height of the back-swing. For a very long rush, use a maximum back-swing, firm grip, and still let the weight of the mallet do all the work.

PERCENTAGE PLAY

As your Coaching Committee, we are constantly seeking to find better ways of teaching the things a player needs to know, so that we can pass the information on to our coaches. The most difficult area to teach is undoubtedly tactics, and we have been giving it our attention for some time now, especially since we have been working on ideas for the new Level 2 and Level 3 syllabuses.

We have decided upon satisfactory ways of teaching such tactical ideas as the theory of trap-lines and ideal leaves, when to peg balls out, the tactics of pegged-out games, and many others. However, there are some topics which we are still trying to discover an effective way of teaching. One of these is the idea of percentage play. This is of major importance, since the justification for all tactics must lie ultimately in percentages.

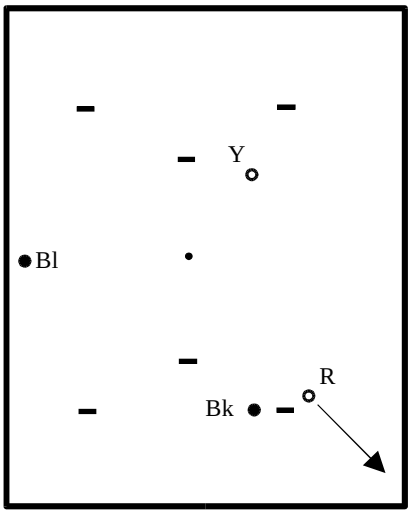
The need for it is illustrated by the position in the left-hand diagram below, which occurred in a recent division 1 game. Red had made hoop 3, then had taken off to black on the border near hoop 4 and played an unsuccessful approach shot for hoop 4. Now red was hit to "safety" near the 4th corner as shown by the arrow, since the player considered it too risky to return near yellow and leave both balls out in the lawn, because the black clip was on hoop 3.

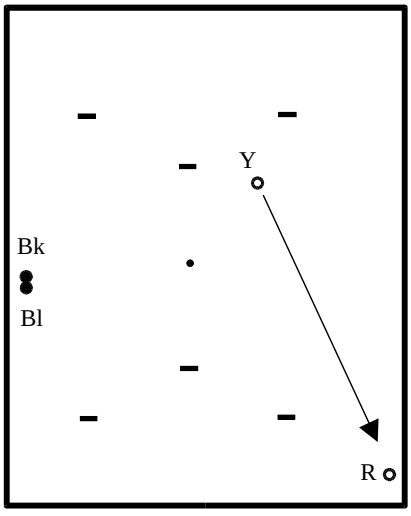
This allowed black to shoot at blue. The shot missed, and when black was measured in by the opponent, black and blue were touching balls as shown in the right-hand diagram. In this situation the player decided to shoot with yellow at red, and missed, with yellow finishing in the 4th corner.

On the next turn, black took off to red and yellow, rushed red into the corner to make a cannon, and without much difficulty was able to set up a break. What the player of red and yellow failed to realise is this: By playing as he did he not only gave the innings away without the opponent having to even hit a roquet, but also created a situation from which the opponent could reasonably expect to get a break established 7 or 8 times out of 10. If he had left both his balls in the lawn, the percentage chance of the opponent roqueting would have been far less than 70-80%; in fact only about 40%. What can a coach do to get players thinking in terms of percentages and choosing the best percentage option, rather than following misleading "principles" such as, "Never set up in the middle of the lawn"?

Level 2 coaches should also have realised that after making hoop 3 with red, and with black on the yardline alongside hoop 4, the player should have used "trap-line theory" instead of leaving yellow out in the lawn; and in the position of the second diagram he should have applied the "three-one" principle and shot with yellow at the opponent's balls. If this shot was missed, the opponent could get a rush to hoop 3 for black, but the chances of establishing an immediate break would hardly have been more than 3-4 out of 10, and would certainly have been far less than the 7-8 out of 10 that he was given in the game.

We need to be able to convince players that there is nothing safe about hitting balls out of play. On the contrary, in most situations it considerably reduces your chance of winning the game.





Most games are won and lost, not through missed roquets or failed hoop shots, but because of poor tactical choices which the player is quite unaware of because he or she does not think in terms of percentages.

Are we aware of this as coaches? And if we are, how do we go about getting players to change the way they think about the various options available to them during a game?

THE MOST IMPORTANT ADVICE

If you were asked as a coach to give the one most important piece of advice that a player should remember and follow, what would it be?

Some would say, "Keep your head down (or your shoulders still)", or "watch the back of the ball", or "always stalk the ball", or "take a long, slow backswing", etc. These are all excellent pieces of advice, but there is one even more important and fundamental. It is, "Let the mallet do the work!"
This means that in all single-ball strokes and most croquet (two-ball) strokes the shot should be played using the weight of the mallet only, with no additional force supplied from muscles in the forearms, wrists, hands or fingers. Almost every leading player - and certainly every player with fluent shots that make the game look easy - follows this basic principle.

In order to achieve this, most players will need to have their hands together at the top of the shaft for all single-ball shots, so that both hands can move forward with the mallet. A few manage to do it with one hand down the shaft separated from the other, but the temptation to retard the forward movement of the top hand and push with the bottom hand is so great that the majority of players with hands separated are unable to resist it.

For long shots (e.g. a rush right across the lawn) a long and high backswing is necessary so that the gravitational force of the falling mallet head will be sufficient to provide the power, without any additional force from the muscles. The grip should be firm enough to ensure that as it contacts and moves through the ball the velocity (speed) of the mallet head due to gravity is maintained. There is no need to accelerate the mallet head through the ball, except in equal rolls, pass rolls and some unusual cannons, but neither should the resistance of the ball be permitted to slow down the forward movement of the mallet, unless the shot is a stop-shot or stab-roll.

Even when players learn to use only the weight of the mallet in their roquets, many are still unable to make themselves do it in rushes and hoop shots, especially when under pressure in a tense game situation. The great value of following the principle lies in the fact that it allows all muscles (including the brain if it can be so described) to be co-ordinated for the task of guiding the swing in the desired direction, to ensure that the ball is hit in the exact centre of the mallet face.

When you are asked to assist a player whose roquets (and inevitably his other single-ball shots) are giving cause for concern, your first thought should be to encourage him to remember and follow this "first commandment" - Thou shalt let the mallet do the work. If you can get him to do this, you will have solved most of his problems automatically. If he is quite unable, as many are, to achieve the ultimate in this regard, then you will need to look for other ways of bringing about small improvements in his swing; but a long, hard, slow process can be expected.

As one experienced coach explained it, swinging a mallet is like riding a motor-bike: there is no need to push.

"DON'T COPY ME - DO WHAT I SAY"

It is always a concern when we see, or hear of, a coach teaching learners to do things the way the coach does them, without knowing whether or not the method is likely to be correct for that particular learner. We trust that our accredited coaches will not fall into this trap, as we stress in our courses that we must vigorously resist the temptation to pass on our own idiosyncrasies unless we are certain that we are doing the right thing. Common examples of things we should avoid teaching, even if we do them ourselves, would include stop-shot take-offs, side-style rolls, flat hoop approaches, and many others.

JUST A THOUGHT to fill up a small space: "You don't stop playing because you get old; you get old because you stop playing!"

SWINGING OVER THE BALL

Almost all of the MacRobertson Shield players would swing the mallet several times above the ball while lining it up. Some then rested the mallet head momentarily on the ground before starting the final swing, but most simply took a larger final backswing and hit the ball without touching the mallet on the ground at any time.

There is a suspicion that to some extent they may be following the latest fashion and copying each other - this does happen in top-level croquet to a greater extent than one might imagine. However, in recent years the practice has become remarkably prevalent and persistent, and one must conclude that most of them really believe it helps them ensure that the final swing will be more exactly in the desired line.

There are sound reasons for believing that the practice swings help train the muscles to co-ordinate in the required manner with the correct timing, and therefore result in a straighter hit, but there is also a price to be paid for this advantage. On the final swing the mallet must be lowered just the right amount to contact the ball in the centre of the mallet face. The lowering should be achieved by straightening the elbows slightly, rather than dipping the shoulders down. However this introduces an additional variable (the amount of lowering) which must be correctly judged in order to avoid either hitting the ground or 'topping' the ball.

Our current inclination is to recommend that learners should avoid copying the experts in the adoption of this practice, though we would not discourage a more experienced player who wanted to try it out.

It should be noted that resting the mallet on the ground when addressing the ball also has a disadvantage, whether or not it is preceded by practice swings: if the mallet head and stance are aligned while the mallet is resting on the ground it is very difficult to ensure that the handle is exactly vertical at the time, and if it is not exactly vertical then by the time the mallet has swung backward and forward, and is now hanging vertically below the hands, it is likely that the ball will no longer be hit in the centre of the mallet face.

HANDLING DIFFICULT CONDITIONS

The difficult conditions could include strong winds, pools of water, a lightning-fast lawn, or one with a very uneven surface.

Such conditions are likely to affect a player who relies on roquets, rushes and take-offs more so than one who can play accurate split-shots. It is important to see that before you make your current hoop the following one is accurately loaded. If the first attempt at loading finishes more than a metre or so from the hoop, then try to send a second ball there as well.

There is a tendency to think, "the difficult conditions make it more likely that I will break down, so I will keep the balls widely separated in case something goes wrong." This is very poor strategy. The correct approach is to keep the balls close together so that you are less likely to break down because you will not need to play any long shots, and will have plenty of options.

The difficult conditions can be viewed positively as giving you a chance to out-think your opponent and so defeat him even if his shots (roquets, take-offs and rushes) are normally more accurate than yours. Even if you do break down with balls together the opponent may not make much out of it, especially if he follows the misguided separate-for-safety strategy.

For the serious competitor, it is important to arrange practice sessions under varying conditions. This may include practising in pouring rain, 40-degree heat, howling gales, or bitingly cold conditions, as well as deliberately visiting lawns that are known to be very fast, heavy, bumpy, or double-paced. People will no doubt question your sanity if you go out to practise in such situations, but when matches have to be played in similar conditions you will have the great advantage of already having worked out how to cope with them mentally, technically and strategically. Thought should be given to such things as clothing (hat, gloves, water on glasses, etc.) and the provision of suitable fluid intake. When required to play in freezing weather conditions, a player whose fingers are blue and numb, and who has never practised wearing gloves, will almost certainly be unable to play good croquet. Similar problems can arise if you come from a dry climate and suddenly find that your rain gear (including shoes) is less waterproof than you thought, or restricts your movement to the extent that you cannot swing the mallet freely.

Once again, it is the role of the coach to see that the player is properly prepared to cope with whatever climatic conditions prevail, and ensure that his mental approach remains positive at all times.

ON WORKING TOGETHER

It is an understandable but unfortunate fact that many coaches develop a type of jealousy regarding the players (particularly beginners) they are coaching. "I am coaching George, and I don't want anyone else interfering or confusing him with differing advice", is a common attitude.

As coaches we should not feel threatened by the idea that someone else besides us may be able to help the beginner.

Players (beginners or experienced) should be advised to seek help from other sources - particularly from other accredited coaches - whenever possible. Someone else may say exactly the same thing we have been saying, but say it in a way which the player is suddenly able to grasp; or may present new ideas that turn out to be extremely helpful. The player will need to learn to discriminate between good and bad advice, but he has to do this anyway in almost every game of doubles that he plays, when he will no doubt receive plenty of advice from his partner about which shots to play and how to play them!

We should always be ready to learn from someone else, so it is wise to enquire later how the beginner got on with the other coach. Sometimes even unaccredited people come up with good coaching ideas, and they could then be complimented and encouraged to consider taking an accreditation course.

Some players have in the past considered the idea of suggesting to their club that the club should invite a particular coach to visit the club and take group coaching sessions, but have been afraid that such a suggestion could be perceived as a vote of no confidence in those (accredited or unaccredited) coaches at the club who are presently trying to assist players.

Good coaches are aware of how much there is to learn in the area of coaching, and would never claim to know it all, or to be able to present it in a way that will be ideally suited to the needs of everyone. They will therefore welcome any assistance from an "outside" coach, and will see it as an opportunity to learn something themselves, even if they themselves have had more experience and have a higher coaching accreditation than the "outside" coach. In fact, every club coach should be actively seeking such opportunities to invite other coaches whose methods they know are sound to take sessions with the players they are endeavouring to help. It is especially helpful if you can take note of things you have tried to explain that the players do not seem to have "cottoned on to" particularly well, and ask the visiting coach to concentrate on some of these areas.

MAKING SIDEY HOOPS

When teaching a player to make sidey hoops it is common to teach him to make sure that his ball misses the near hoop-leg. We believe that concentration on the near hoop-leg is counter-productive, and suggest that instead he aim the centre of the ball at the inside edge of the far leg and swing straight in this line.

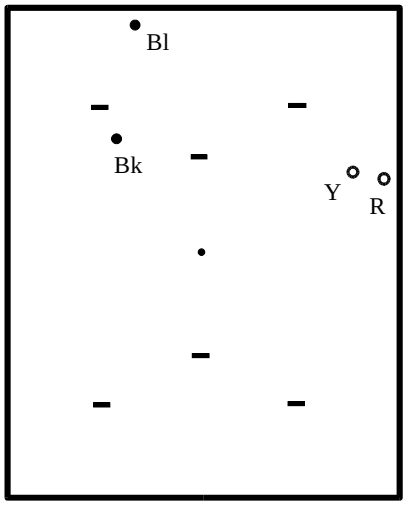
As players we have been training ourselves for years to look at a target and swing the mallet toward it. It will now be very difficult for us to look at something and swing correctly in some other direction. If you fix your eyes on the near hoop leg in order to ensure that you miss it, you are actually increasing the chance that you will hit it. For all sidey hoop shots, and also when attempting to roquet a ball which is partly hidden behind a hoop, you should avoid looking at the hoop leg. Instead, work out exactly where you want the centre (not the edge) of your striker's ball to go, and concentrate on that point, rather than on the hoop.

Perhaps this is a good place to emphasise again the fact that for the coach, the main difficulty in teaching a player to run hoops well from any position is usually the problem of getting him to avoid shortening the backswing, and use a relaxed and unhurried forward swing.

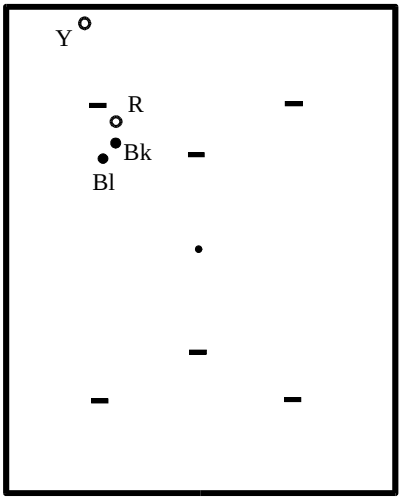
SHOT SEQUENCES (Part 1)

For players capable of making breaks, an important part of their training and coaching programme should be the working out and practising of particular "shot sequences". These will usually follow particular leaves that the player regularly makes, or positions he is likely to encounter.

Suppose that you are faced with the situation shown in the first diagram, where all clips are on hoop 1 and blue has just shot at black and missed, after you had left one of his balls at each of the first two hoops and set yourself (correctly) a rush to hoop 2 rather than to hoop 1. What is the best way to continue - i.e. the way which will give you the best chance of establishing a break before your opponent does? Most players cannot be relied upon (or rely on themselves) to be able to work out the best line of play in such situations under pressure on the spur of the moment; and even if they could, they would gain a considerable psychological advantage from having worked it all out previously and knowing that what they are doing does in fact give them the maximum chance of winning the game. The confidence that comes from knowing you are doing exactly the right thing is a very valuable asset.

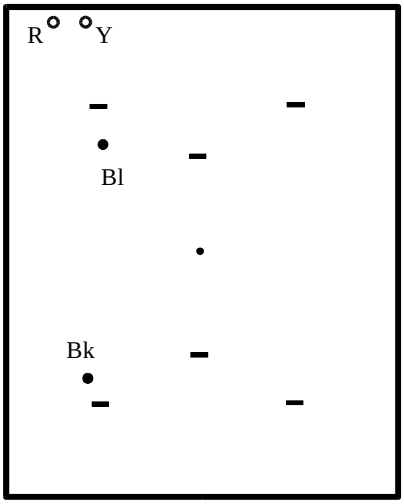


Many players would play red, roquet yellow gently, take off to blue, and roll blue out to hoop 2, at the same time trying for a good rush on black to hoop 1. In similar situations the correct procedure will often depend on the particular shots the player can play successfully, and this is why the shot sequences should be worked out with the assistance of an experienced coach, and will not always be the same for all players.



In this case, however, almost every player would do better to rush the yellow partner ball to the north boundary, as close as possible to blue, and preferably a yard or two toward the 2nd corner from where blue is. Then a short take-off should allow you to follow by rushing blue to black, and a simple croquet shot will then give you a "Dolly" rush on black to hoop 1, while making a vague attempt if possible to leave blue wired from yellow (see second diagram).

If hoop 1 is made, but without a forward rush, then one satisfactory way of continuing the break is to take off to yellow and use it to load hoop 3 before making hoop 2 from blue. This is why it was better to rush yellow slightly to the far side of blue in the first diagram, rather than the near side (would you have realised this in a game?)

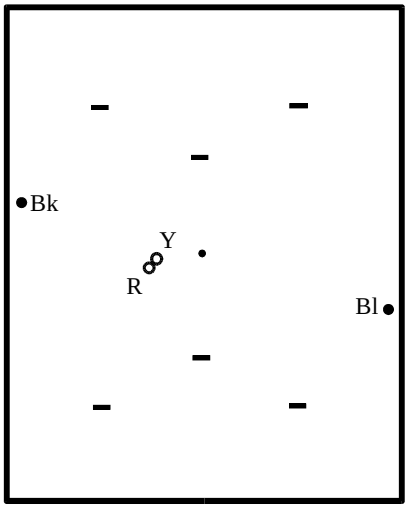


If the hoop cannot be attempted, then red can return to a position near yellow on the north border (third diagram), leaving the opponent in a very awkward position. Even if blue is not wired from your balls, most players would consider it far too risky to shoot with blue and leave black at hoop 1. But any shot with black, if missed, would also give you an excellent chance of setting up a break; and if black is hit away into (say) the 4th corner, you can roquet yellow and roll it out to hoop 2 (preferably just behind the hoop rather than in front, so that if necessary you can return and cover the border behind it), and rush blue to hoop 1.

Thus, this method of proceeding from the first diagram gives you easier shots than if you had taken off and left yellow near the east border, or at hoop 3; and also keeps greater pressure on the opponent if things go wrong. It is just one example of the type of shot sequence that should be part of the preparation and knowledge of every player who wishes to succeed at the higher levels of competition.

SHOT SEQUENCES (Part 2)

The idea of working out shot sequences is not really a new one, as most players have at least some idea of what to do in the standard opening if the opponent varies his play at various stages. (See the article on Opening Ideas for some further information.) But in situations such as the one in the first diagram below, where red is for hoop 2 and has roqueted or rushed yellow to a point between hoops 1 and 2 as shown, many would be unsure of the best way to continue. Yellow should not be left out in the lawn, and an attempt to get a rush behind black on the west border would be risky and unlikely to succeed.



The best plan for most players is to make use of the "trap-line" concept explained in my booklet "Croquet: Lessons in Tactics", and send yellow 1-2 yards to the left (outside) of hoop 2 while going to black, then send black to hoop 3 while trying for position in front of hoop 2, as illustrated in the second diagram. If red does not gain position to run the hoop, then it can cover the border against a shot by black as shown in the third diagram.

Now it will be the opponent's turn, and depending on what he does, the player of red could have the following shot sequences prepared.

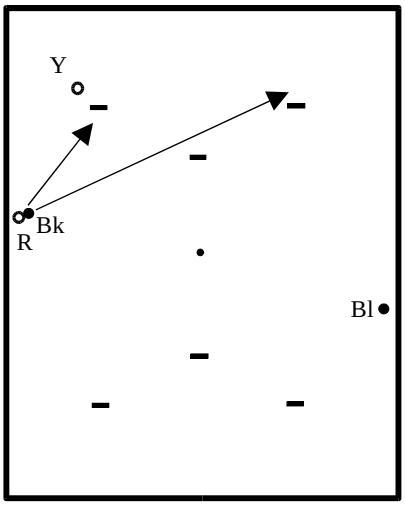
(1) If black shoots at yellow and misses, red will roquet black, send it back to hoop 3, and make hoop 2 with (if possible) a rush to blue.

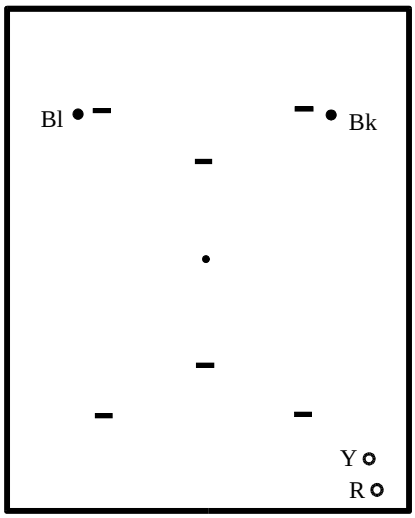
(2) If black shoots at blue and misses, red will make hoop 2 from yellow, trying for a rush to hoop 4 (not hoop 3), and then rush one of the opponent's balls to hoop 3.

(3) If black is hit wide of blue (say, into the 4th corner), then red has two good options -

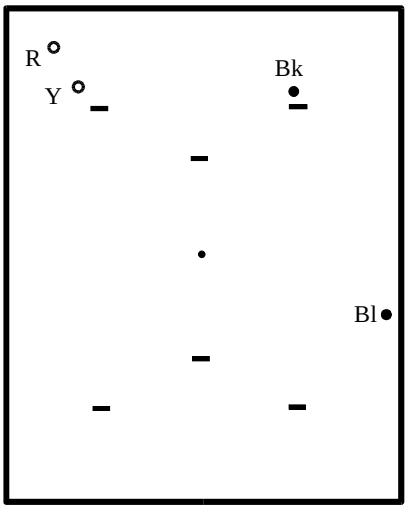
(a) Instead of making hoop 2, rush yellow right down to the 4th corner, then send black to hoop 3 and blue to hoop 2, setting up as shown in the top diagram at right.

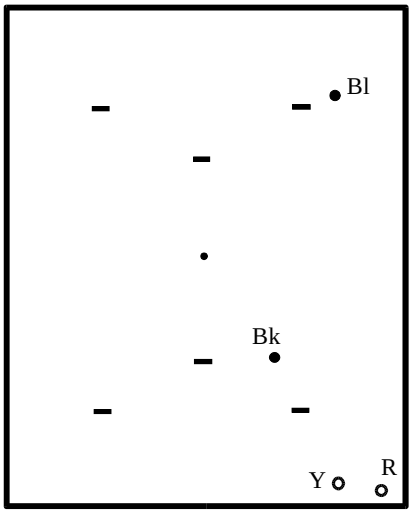
(b) Make hoop 2 from yellow with a rush to black in the 4th corner, then roll black out past hoop 4 and rush or roll blue to hoop 3, returning if necessary to yellow as shown in the fifth diagram.





(4) If black goes anywhere else, make hoop 2 with a rush to black, send it to hoop 3 and set a rush for red to hoop 4. These are not the only possibilities, but the player will do well to have a clear idea in mind of at least one good answer to whatever black decides to do. Working out shot sequences to suit the shots you are confident with, and practising them, must help improve your game.





COACHING PRINCIPLES

A good coach needs to know many things. For example, in relation to just the technique of playing one particular shot, he needs to know:

*The correct things to do.
*Things that need to be avoided.
*The level of the player's development at which they should best be taught.
*The order in which they should be taught.
*The best way to teach each of them.
*The types of error that can occur in the stroke being taught.
*The possible causes of each type of error.
*How the error can be corrected.

In previous articles (e.g. "The role of the Coach") we have seen that he also needs to know how to devise practice drills, organise a training programme, assist the player in setting goals, and assess the effectiveness of the programme. All of this may be involved in the correction of just one error in technique in one shot, and covers far more information than can be given in even a long series of articles.

Here we shall simply consider two basic principles which apply to the best way of teaching the various aspects of technique:

1. **Eliminate variables.** This means that the coach needs to be aware of the various different methods that good players may use to play the particular shot in question, and should choose a technique which eliminates unnecessary variables that would only serve to complicate things and involve additional things that the player would have to learn to control.

2. Isolate elements. Wherever possible, the coach needs to find an approach such that the player can concentrate on learning just one or two aspects of the stroke at a time, and get them right before moving on to incorporate other aspects.

Suppose, for example, that the player has reached a stage where he wants to learn to play accurate split-shots, and the coach also agrees that the time is right for this.

Firstly, the coach will decide on the technique that he will encourage the player to use. This may depend to some extent on the player's grip, stance, physical capabilities, etc.; some of which the coach may decide need to be changed, and some of which he may decide not to attempt to alter at this stage. In most cases he would recommend a technique which involves no unnecessary body movement and does not require the mallet to be accelerated through the ball, as these are factors which would vary (i.e. "variables") for different split-shots, and so if they are part of the player's technique, he will have to learn to control each of them. A method of playing the shots without introducing such variables will be easier to teach and will allow the shots to be learnt more quickly and played more accurately.

Secondly, having eliminated body movement and acceleration during the swing as unnecessary variables, the coach should consider the elements of technique which remain and cannot be eliminated because they are essential to the shot; i.e. how to line up the balls, how to find the correct line of aim (or "line of swing"), and how much forward slope to give the mallet. These elements, of course, will need to be varied for each different type of split-shot, and this is what the player must learn to do. The coach should then realise that the most effective way of teaching these things will not be to try to teach them all at once. By starting with right-angle splits, which resemble thick take-offs to a certain degree, the player can learn to line up the balls (allowing for "pull") and find the correct line of aim, without needing to consider mallet slope at this stage, since right-angle splits are always played with an upright stance, long grip and flat mallet. After the player has learnt how to find the correct line of aim (by "dividing the line" between the desired finishing positions of the two balls - see my booklet "Croquet Technique" for a more detailed explanation), he can proceed to other types of split-shot in which the additional element of mallet slope also has to be judged and controlled. One way of doing this is indicated in the article on Adjusting Splits in the section of this booklet that deals with Technique.

Whatever area of the game you are teaching, or in fact when you are teaching anything at all in any area of knowledge, these two principles will be relevant and can prove valuable. A good and effective teacher is always looking for ways of eliminating variables in order to simplify what has to be taught, and isolating elements in order to reduce confusion and facilitate learning.

SECTION 5

JUST FOR FUN

As a light-hearted interlude, I have decided to include the following skit which was presented in dramatic fashion many years ago by members of the then SACA Strategy Task Force to a meeting of officials from various clubs, and afterward was published in the Australian Croquet Gazette. The purpose of the Task Force was to discover ways of developing and improving the game in our state, and to assist clubs in implementing such ideas.

In addition to providing some light-hearted entertainment, the skit contains some valuable food for thought concerning the way in which our clubs operate. Most of the names are completely fictitious, and any resemblance to any person living or dead is purely intentional, but will be denied by the author. The exceptions are Gert Maslen, Marian Magor and Mrs Tucker, who were real and highly respected past stalwarts of the SACA - so much so that they deserve to be immortalised by having their names left unaltered in this piece of deathless prose. Rod Brown, who was President of the SACA at the time and also chaired the Task Force, is at the present time (January 1995) serving as ACA Treasurer. I hereby declare him also to be immortalised, but to a lesser extent, since I am not sure how well he could cope with being both mortal and immortal at the same time. I express here my gratitude to some other members of the Task Force who contributed ideas that I could make use of.

The title of the drama parodies the name of the South Terrace Croquet Club, which is the oldest club in SA and is situated in Adelaide's beautiful South Parklands, about 100m from the SACA's Hutt Road Croquet Centre. The title was chosen because some members of that club happened to be on the Task Force at the time and participated in the presentation.

Of course, the things portrayed bear no relation to happenings at that club or any other club. Things like that only occurred in the dark and distant past, and could never happen at a meeting of any present day club ... or could they ??

MONTHLY MEETING OF THE THE MOUTH TERRACE CROQUET CLUB

CHARACTERS: Fred - President
Joe - Secretary
Peggy - Div. 3 captain
Ernie - Lawns supervisor
Muriel - Daughter of foundation member
Una - Association Publicity and Development Officer
NOTE: "Hutt Road" is the headquarters of the SA Croquet Association.

SCENE: The clubhouse of the Mouth Terrace Croquet Club.
The time is 11.15 on a Saturday morning.
Fred is seated, looking at his watch.
Enter others, except Peggy.
General conversation ensues.
Fred finally gains their attention.

Fred: May I remind everyone that our meetings are supposed to begin at eleven o'clock. We have a lot of business to attend to, and

Ernie: Hutt Road sent out another lot of rubbish, I suppose. All they ever do is ask for money. They must think that we spend our time sitting around here with nothing to do but raise money so that our state team can have cheap inter-state trips and nice lawns to play on. Why can't they do something to help struggling clubs like ours? All they do is sit in at Hutt Road and talk. I'd like to see a few members of the state team come out here and get on the end of a shovel or a wheelbarrow for a few hours. I had to spread three tonnes of loam on my own last week, and

Fred: Yes, well I'm sure we all agree that you do a great job on the lawns, Ernie, but we have an agenda to get through, so... Where's Peggy? I thought I saw her car pull up earlier.

Joe: She's outside talking to a new member. At least, I think she's a new member. I never saw her before, and she looks too old to be Peggy's daughter.

Muriel: I remember once when we had a new member. 1972 it was. Quite a nice young man, too. Only came for four weeks, though. Can't understand him leaving like that - I enjoyed having him for a partner each week. He had a lot to learn, of course. Kept wanting to do split-shots and put my ball out in the middle of the lawn. He even peeled me through some of my hoops, but I told him I was quite capable of making hoops for myself, thank-you very much. One time he got five hoops ahead of me! If I hadn't stopped him he probably would have gone right around to the peg. Still, he was quite good at setting me up at my hoops. I got onto the return twice, and if I hadn't stuck in the sixth

Fred: Well, someone had better go and tell Peggy that we've started the meeting. *(Ernie goes*) People like her think nothing of keeping everyone waiting as if we've got all the time in the world. To me it's just plain bad manners. Surely it's not too much to expect ... AH... Peggy - we've been waiting for you.

Peggy: I'm sorry, but I've been outside talking to a nice young lady who's interested in learning the game. Says her husband and two teenage children would probably be interested too, and if

Fred: Yes, well that's all very well, but if we don't get through our meetings we won't have a club for her to join.

Peggy: But couldn't you carry on without me while I at least show her how to hold a mallet, and put some hoops out so that she can

Fred We need you here. You are our division 3 captain, and it's division 3's turn to organise the afternoon tea for our gala day next month. How can we do it without you?

Muriel: I remember when we had only division 3's and 4's, and we had to do the afternoon tea every second month. We used to

Fred: Are there any apologies?

Joe: How can there be? We're all here!

Fred: I know that, but it's on the agenda so we have to do it. We've always done it that way, and while I'm president we're going to keep on doing it that way. Joe - record in the minutes, please, that there are no apologies.

Joe: I've already done it. The last time we had an apology was at the last August meeting when Muriel sent an apology because she had to take her cat to the vet, but then she managed to get to the meeting anyway, so she apologised for apologising, and I

Peggy: I think I'd better go and explain to the lady outside. Perhaps we should invite her to come back this afternoon?

Joe: This afternoon? But I thought you said she doesn't know how to play.

Peggy: She doesn't, but if she came this afternoon I could show her

Joe: You know the rules. Beginners have to come out to at least six coaching sessions on Thursday mornings and pay their membership subscription before they can come out on Saturday afternoons.

Fred: We've never been allowed to bring beginners out on Saturdays.

Muriel: Five times, not six. I remember when old Mrs Archibald had three people at once, coaching them on Thursday mornings. 1957 it was, and that's when Ernie here joined the club, wasn't it, Ernie?

Ernie: That's right. I had to come out five times on Thursdays before I could come on Saturdays.

Peggy: But this woman and her husband both work, so

Joe: No, it was six times on Thursdays, not five! I'm sure I'm right about that. It'll be here in the minutes somewhere.

Ernie: Well, I only came five times. Mrs Archibald said I was the best student she ever had. I played at Hutt Road in less than four months, and lost a bisque, too!

Joe: Here it is. Moved by Eve Adam, seconded Mrs Noah - "New members who have not been members of any other club shall be required to attend six coaching sessions with Mrs Archibald on Thursday mornings and pay the annual subscription of thirteen shillings and sixpence before joining in play on Saturday afternoons."

Muriel: When I used to help Mrs Archibald with the coaching we only made them come five times. Mrs Archibald said if they couldn't pick it up in five sessions, they'd never learn.

Ernie: That's right. Five times I came on Saturdays, not six!

Joe: Well, you're out of order then. You've been out of order for 28 years! You've still got one Thursday to go!

Ernie: Since Mrs Archibald has been dead for 14 years, I don't see how she's going to coach me now. Mind you, she'd probably still be as helpful as some coaches I've seen.

Peggy: Couldn't we allow them to come out this afternoon, just this once? The lawns won't be full, and I wouldn't mind teaching them. They seem such a nice family, and we've been saying that we need new members. They can't come on Thursdays, and anyway, since Mrs Archibald died there hasn't been anyone coming out on Thursdays to do any coaching.

Fred: We're wasting our time having meetings and making rules if we're not going to keep to them.

Peggy: But why do we need such a rule?

Fred: Because ... er ... because it's always been done that way - well, for at least the last 28 years anyway. We can't just go changing things around whenever we feel like it. No-one would know what was going on if we did that, would they?

Peggy: Er - no, I suppose not. But it seems such a pity that we can't find some way for them to

Joe: It just doesn't work to have beginners coming out on Saturdays. We've tried it before!

Muriel: Yes, 1952 it was ... or maybe 1953. I remember that it was just before my poor old mother's eightieth birthday. She was a foundation member of the club, you know, and I remember her telling me about the problems they had in the twenties with beginners. Of course, hardly anyonem knew how to play when the club was started, so they were nearly all beginners, except for Mrs Archibald. She was a foundation member too, you know.

Joe: Besides, it's just not fair on our members. They come out and pay their lawn fees to play a game, not to help coach beginners.

Ernie: I agree that beginners should come out on Thursdays like we've always done. Most of them only come once or twice and we never see them on Saturdays anyway. It's just as well, too - if we keep on getting more people coming out on Saturday afternoons, before long our lawns will be full and we won't get a game. With two lawns we can only accommodate sixteen players, and we've got eleven already.

Fred: Yes, that's true ... although it's not often that everyone turns up on a Saturday afternoon. At the rate we are growing - 2 members every 28 years - it will be like Ernie says, and we won't be able to get on the lawns by the year ... 2078!

Joe: If they really want to learn the game they'll come out on Thursdays like the rest of us had to.

Fred: Is there any correspondence?

Joe: The usual stuff from Hutt Road. They want to know what our plans are for the next "Life. Be in it." campaign, so they can assist us with publicity and

Muriel: "Life. Be in it."?! That's all that jogging around and exercising stuff isn't it? Well I can tell you that I'm not going to come out in a leotard and prance around like that girl on television, no matter what Hutt Road says. Why are they wasting time and money on that sort of rubbish?

Joe: They say it's designed to help clubs get new

Muriel: There's some exterior motive behind it, you mark my words! We don't need their help. In the old days when Gert Maslen and Marian Magor and Mrs Tucker were running things we had to do everything ourselves. What we need is not advice from Hutt Road. We need new members! Mind you, when I was club captain in 1964, we almost got three new members, but two of them decided to join the Fitzroy club instead, and the other was killed in a car accident two days before she was going to be accepted. An iron girder fell off the back of a truck, came through the car windshield and cut her head clean off! No-one told us she had died, so we nominated her and accepted her. It was four months later that we found out through her sister - and we had already paid her capitation fee, too!

Ernie: They should have called it a DE-capitation fee, by the sound of it.

Joe: Hutt Road has also sent us a notice about a meeting of working players

Peggy: None of us work, and we haven't had any working people in the club for years.

Ernie: No. What a pity. We could certainly do with some more workers in the club.

Peggy: Don't you think I should go out and say something to the new member? She said she was interested in

Fred: Later on. We still have a meeting to get through. Was there anything else from Hutt Road?

Joe: Yes. They want to know if we have anyone interested in attending a seminar on improving club administration and better ways of introducing new players to the game.

Fred: Well, I'm afraid we haven't time to deal with that now.

Joe: What are we going to do about the "Life. Be in it." campaign and working players meeting?

Fred: They will have to wait until our next meeting in June. We still haven't organised the afternoon tea for the Gala Day, and

Peggy: Don't you think we should let the members know about some of those things? June will be too late, and some of them may want to

Fred: No, we don't want our members going in there, anyway. They'll only come back full of weird ideas and start telling us how we should be running the club. It's all right for Rod Brown - he's got plenty of other people to do all the work for him. I'd like to see how he'd get on as President of this club. Never enough money to keep the lawns in respectable condition, and all of us over seventy and on the pension.

Muriel: I remember when we had to raise money to pay for the carpet. Old Maudy Anderson and I cooked for four days, and made

Peggy: I really think I should see to the new member ... (*looks outside)* ... That's strange - she seems to have gone!

Fred: Never mind. She probably wouldn't have been a good club member anyway. Most of them never turn up to meetings and aren't interested in helping build up the club at all.

Muriel: I remember when that young man came in 1972 - or was it 1973? - He came to a meeting. That was just about the time he left. I still can't understand why he left. Such a promising young player he was. Had a lot to learn, though

Fred: Yes. Well now, about the afternoon tea ... (*Fred is interrupted by a loud knocking at the door. Una enters.*) Oh ... er... Hullo, what can we do for you? We are just in the middle of a club meeting.

Una: Is this the Mouth Terrace Croquet Club?

Fred: Yes. Who are you?

Una: I thought you were expecting me. My name is Una. The Croquet Association recently appointed me to the new position of Publicity and Development Officer, and has asked me to visit your club and explain some ideas on how to attract new members. I'm from the Newtown Club, and we've been successful in gaining several new members recently, mainly younger working people. We thought that other clubs like yours may be able to gain something from our experience.

Fred: I see - er - well - what a good idea! At last the people at Hutt Road are starting to do something to help struggling clubs like ours. We were only saying a few minutes ago how much we need new members, weren't we, Joe?

Joe: That's right. That's exactly what we said.

Muriel: Especially younger working people. None of us is getting any younger, you know. I remember when that young lad came in 1964 - or it may have been 1965 - he was working. Had an engineering degree, he told me. Had a lot to learn, though

Fred: Yes, well what have you got to tell us? I hope it won't take long. Our meeting finishes at 12 o'clock.

Peggy: But surely we could go on a little longer if we need to.

Fred: We've always finished our meetings at 12 o'clock, and I don't care what Hutt Road do, while I'm President

Una: I won't take long. Since you've already agreed that your club needs new players, you've already taken the first step. The rest of your members agree too, of course?!

Fred: Er - yes. Well, as a matter of fact we haven't discussed it yet with the others. But we all agree, don't we? *(all nod)* In fact there's a motion in the minute book to that effect, if I remember rightly.

Joe: That's right. Here it is ... moved Peggy, seconded Ernie - "That we have a drive to attract new members, and that we begin as soon as we have completed the current project of raising money for our new curtains." That was passed in ... April 1977!

Peggy: We still don't have the new curtains, either.

Una After you agree that new members are needed, you should make sure that all members of the club understand the need and the reasons for it, and are willing to give it a high priority.

Muriel: Old Mrs Archibald was going to make the curtains when we raised enough money to pay for the material, but she died before we finished raising

Una: You should also think about exactly how many you would like to have and could adequately cater for. Set a definite target and aim to achieve it by a definite date. A club needs more and more money each year just to keep it going, and the best way to raise money is to gain more members - especially working players who are not trying to make do on a pension and will eventually share in the work of running the club. Do you realise, for example, that if you had gone ahead with your membership drive back in 1977 instead of waiting until you had new curtains, and if you had gained just four new members, by now their membership fees alone would have amounted to the equivalent of about $8000 additional revenue for the club, and you could have bought the new curtains many times over!

Ernie: When I seconded the motion I said we ought to go ahead with it, but Muriel and Mrs Archibald insisted on getting the curtains first.

Muriel: Well, curtains are important. As Mrs Archibald said at the time, you won't attract new members if your clubrooms look like the Black Hole of Calcutta!

Una: I agree. That's a very good point you've made, but as I said, it really gets down to a matter of priorities. We decided at our club to aim at building our membership up to at least 32 active players as quickly as possible. We tried several ways of inviting non-players to try the game - advertisements in the local paper, accompanied by a photo of an attractive young player; letter box drops; leaflets handed out in the local shopping centre; invitations to local organisations to come to a barbecue and 'Fun Night'; posters in hairdressing salons; Adult Education classes in the evenings at our club; open days in connection with "Life. Be in it."...

Muriel: We tried a letter box drop once, in 1951 - or was it 1952? - I walked down three streets, both sides, putting a leaflet in every letter box. We had to pay six shillings to get the leaflets printed, and it was all wasted. Only two people came out. Mrs Archibald took them for two sessions, but then she was to go away on holidays, so I said I'd come out with them while she was away, but they never came again!

Una: Unfortunately there is no single method that can be guaranteed to work in any particular area. You need to be persistent and keep trying first one method, then another. The only guarantee is that if you don't try anything you won't get any response!

It's equally important to see that you do everything possible to keep and encourage people when they do show some interest. The main thing here is that you need to be flexible - work out what their needs are, and be ready to fit in with them. This may mean being prepared to change the way you do things, and as many members as possible should be willing to share the load of keeping in touch with enquirers and arranging the sort of help they need.

Fred: Since Mrs Archibald died we haven't really had anyone to do the coaching.

Una: Beginners don't need a highly qualified coach. They need someone - the right sort of person - to take an interest in them. If and when you decide they do need coaching, that doesn't mean you have to do it yourself. Just make sure that someone capable is organised to do it. You could even arrange, as we did, for someone from another club to assist.

Peggy: That would be a good idea.

Una: And you could do other things as well to encourage them. If they are working you could arrange play for them of an evening, or on Sunday afternoons if they play another sport on Saturdays. Some clubs have even successfully run early morning "Come and Try" sessions three days a week aimed at business people.

Joe: I don't know about Sunday afternoons. Mrs Archibald always objected to the lawns being open on Sundays.

Ernie: Mrs Archibald again! She's been dead for 14 years and she still runs our club! Perhaps she'll register her vote on Sunday play at the same time as she comes back to give me my final Thursday coaching session!

Una: You could also do other things to make it more likely they will want to stay. You could make sure the club has a couple of good mallets to lend to new players so they won't have to try to learn with old-fashioned awkward monstrosities that make it impossible to play shots correctly and compete on equal terms with those who have decent mallets; and you could consider a reduction of, say, 20% on their membership fee for the first year

Muriel: Why should we do that? If they are working players they can afford to pay the full amount better than we pensioners can. Remember we have to pay more for Gala Days now, and if

Joe: Still, if it encourages them to join and makes them think we're really keen to have them as members, it may be worth it.

Peggy: Yes, 80% may be better than nothing at all!

Una: Exactly! And remember that working people have much less opportunity to play than the rest of us do, so they're really getting a lot less for the money anyway. One word of warning - don't be too quick to start talking to new members about working bees, wash-up and cleaning rosters, uniforms, raffles, meetings, and all that sort of thing. It is important for a start that they simply come out and enjoy playing the game. Try to work out whether they are interested in the game mainly from a social point of view, or whether they see it as a serious competitive sport and are keen to improve. Try to arrange the sort of competition they will appreciate most. After they have progressed a little it may mean arranging a low-level "competition" against another club which also has some beginners, even if some of you others have to play as well to make up a team.

But I can see that you really are on the way to starting a successful membership drive, and I'm sure you will think of many more useful ideas.
I'll leave you to discuss it further, and don't hesitate to contact me or someone else in the Association if you think we can be of further help.

Fred: Thank you for coming. *(Looks at watch)* Now we have just one and a half minutes left. What are we going to do about -

ALL: THE AFTERNOON TEA AT THE GALA DAY!!

SECTION 6

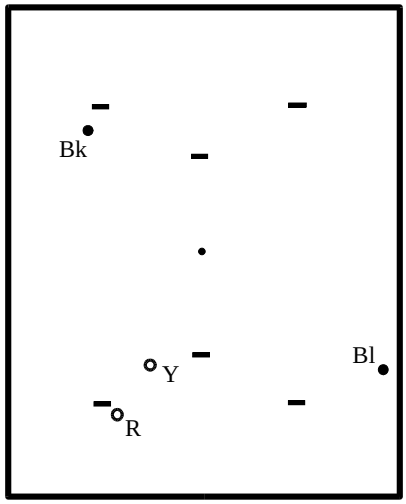
PSYCHOLOGY

This section contains ideas which further develop some of the themes introduced in my booklet "Croquet: The Mental Approach". As explained in the introduction to that booklet, there is no doubt that psychological considerations play a greater part in croquet than in any other sport. At present the knowledge available in this area is fragmentary. Much research is still to be done. Psychological principles need to be established, documented, and explained. Both coaches and players need to be educated in ways of applying such principles.

As yet the experts in sports psychology seem to have given little attention to our game, doubtless because the application of their expertise requires funding at a level which is unavailable in the sport of croquet. The thoughts presented here are not offered with any pretence of authority. The author will readily admit that he knows no more about the subject than many other people - and probably a lot less than some - so the ideas in this section, like those in the above mentioned booklet, are designed merely to start people thinking in an area of the game to which many players and coaches give insufficient attention.

PSYCHOLOGY OF DOUBLE TARGETS

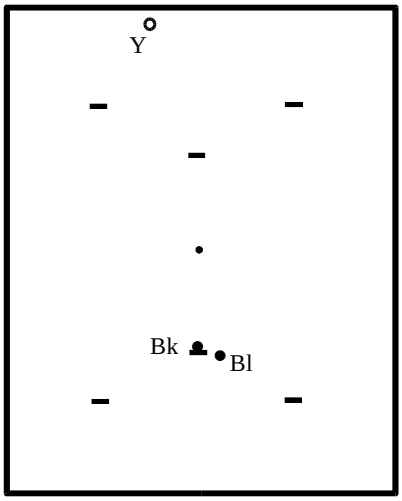
In my booklet "Croquet: The Mental Approach" I raised the question of whether or not there may be situations in which an opponent is less likely to hit a double target than a single one. In the first diagram red has rolled with yellow for hoop 1, but finds himself unable to make the hoop. It has been suggested that instead of placing the red ball in front of the hoop where it would be hidden from black, it may be better to leave it open to black with the red and yellow balls a carefully judged distance apart, depending on the roqueting ability of the opponent. The idea is that the second ball could act as a distractor, and increase the likelihood that the black ball will go through the gap between the two balls rather than roqueting one of them.



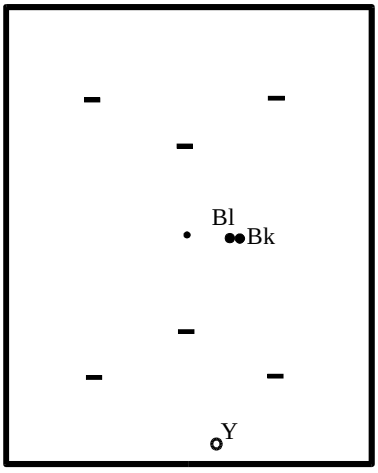
This idea is interesting because if there is any truth in it at all, then it would apply, paradoxically, against a strong opponent rather than a weak one. A poor roqueter is quite likely to aim at one of the balls and hit the other; but a good player is far less likely to do so, therefore the idea may be worth consideration against a strong opponent, but not against a weak one. Also paradoxically, the gap left between the balls should be smaller if the opponent is a better roqueter!

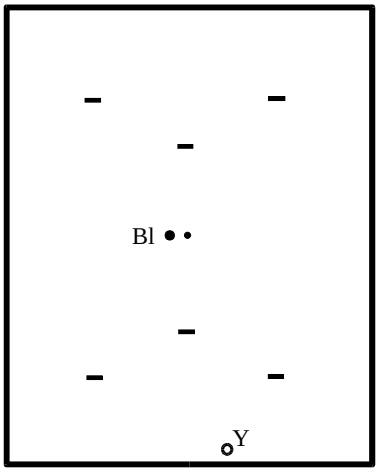
Of course it can be argued that the opponent simply needs to completely ignore one of the balls and shoot only at the other one; but I am not sure that many players would be psychologically capable of doing this if the gap is the right size.

The second diagram shows a position from an important tournament game in which my red ball had been pegged out, my yellow ball is for the peg, and my opponent had failed at the rover hoop with his black ball. His two balls offered me a double target with a gap of just over a foot, so instead of shooting at the peg, I shot at the double and went straight through the middle of the gap. He made rover with black and cut blue toward the peg, producing the situation of the third diagram.



Here, he realised that the 3-4 yard peg-out could not be considered a certainty, so he played the croquet shot as a gentle roll in order to try to leave the blue ball wired from yellow if he failed to peg it out. This is in fact what happened, and he pegged out his black ball. Now, in the position of the fourth diagram, I had only a shot at the peg, which I took and hit it, winning the game 26-25. I am sure that if I had been him in the situation of the fourth diagram, I would have done the same thing, yet I could not help thinking at the time that if the rover hoop had been removed I probably would not have won the game.





I would have shot at the blue ball if I had not been wired from it, and with the peg acting as a distractor it would have been difficult to make myself shoot straight at the ball without allowing a little bit on the side where the peg was. Should he have wired blue from yellow? It is likely that all of us would have tried to do the same, though perhaps not so successfully.

But I wonder whether I would have been as likely to hit the double target with about a two-foot gap?

PSYCHOLOGY OF TRIPLE PEELS

When a player reaches the stage of attempting triple peels, which usually means that he is close to being considered for state selection, he encounters and must learn to overcome psychological problems of a type he has probably not had to deal with previously.

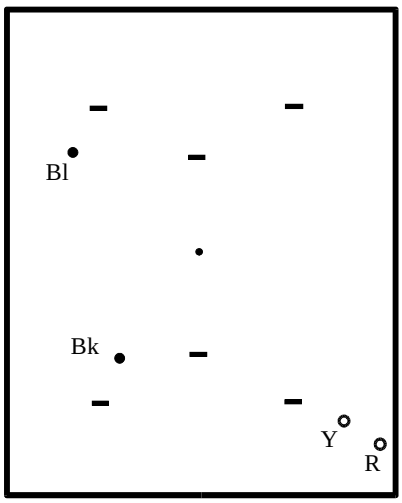
The first is that if he is not careful, he can develop a strong sentimental attachment to the triple peel which he is attempting, to the extent that he wants to try to keep it going at all costs. This seems to involve, at times, a strange lack of objective judgement which causes the player to take risks that are far greater than those he would normally take, and which can be seen, when viewed calmly and logically, to considerably reduce his chance of winning the game.

Whether or not a triple peel should be attempted at all in a game that you really need to win, is a point worthy of consideration. An article published in an English magazine in the 1990s dealt with the question of when a triple peel should, and should not, be attempted; and concluded that it will only be objectively feasible if the player has about a 50% chance of completing it successfully, and in addition there is a better than even chance that the opponent, if he gets in, will be able to complete an all-round break. If you are interested in trying triple peels you can test the first of these conditions for yourself by setting up a leave such as the one shown in the diagram below, and seeing how often you can complete the triple peel. If you cannot do it 5 times out of 10, then by attempting a triple peel in a game you are likely to reduce your chance of winning instead of increasing it. It should be remembered that at best the triple peel will serve to deny the opponent just one turn in which he is entitled to a lift shot, and against most opponents the allowance of this shot will not be of sufficient consequence to justify the taking of noticeable risks which could have been avoided by playing instead a simple 4-ball break.

The second psychological problem is that it is possible to get carried away with the excitement of the fact that you are about to complete a triple peel! This can result in increased tension, causing failure in even the simplest of shots required to complete the break after all of the harder and riskier work has been done. For some players this psychological difficulty is very real, and it takes them many attempts in competition play, all with the triple peel almost completed but not quite, before they finally manage to complete one.

The third problem, and a very difficult one to overcome indeed, is in the player's psychological approach to the remainder of the game when he has failed in an attempt to triple peel. For some players, once the triple has failed there is no longer sufficient interest for them in the game to maintain the intense concentration they had been applying to every shot before things went wrong, and so they start to play well below their best and are likely to lose the game when they may well have been able to win it.

Perhaps the best answer to all of these psychological problems associated with triple peels is to do so many of them that they become common-place and no longer seem to assume any great importance. However, this is not so easy for most of us to achieve, and the best we can do is to at least be aware of the psychological dangers, and be ready to meet them. Things are not helped by the unfortunate tendency of others to overrate the triple as an achievement. For example, many still consider that a player who triple peels his opponent's ball and pegs it out, but then loses the game, has achieved more than the player who won the game!

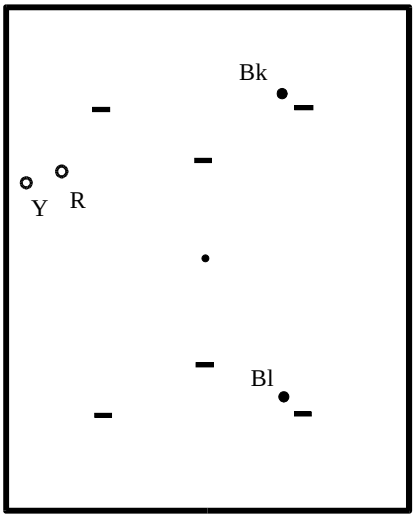


A fourth psychological danger is the tendency for the player to suffer a mental let-down after the third peel. Sometimes the three peels are completed even before the 2-back hoop is made. Because the player knows that all the hard work has been done, he can find it difficult to maintain full concentration and so can break down in what should be the most straight-forward part of his break.

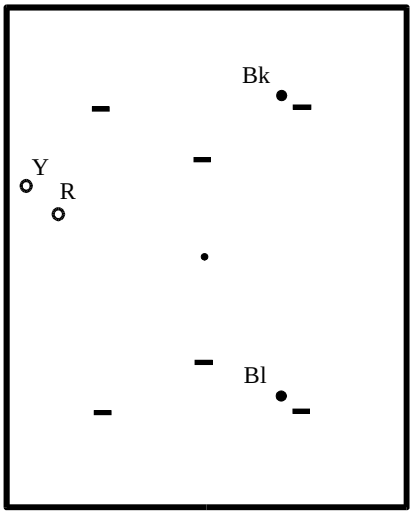
If you wish to give yourself the best chance of doing a triple peel without being greatly concerned about whether or not it will increase your chance of winning the game, then you should try (as the player of red and yellow and having taken yellow to 4-back) setting the leave shown in the diagram. The opponent will almost certainly lift the black ball, and although his lift shot will not be a particularly long one, if he misses it you should have a better chance than any other leave would give you of finishing the game with a triple peel which involves little risk in getting it going.

PSYCHOLOGY OF LEAVES

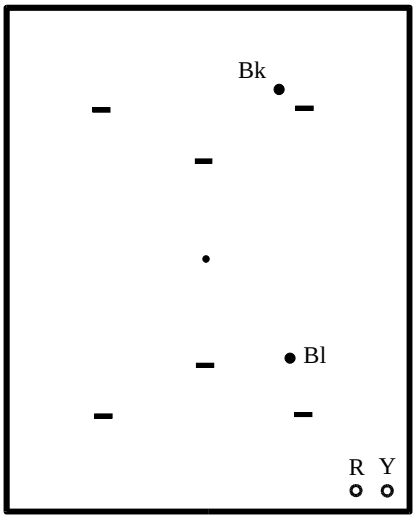
In each of the diagrams on this page we shall suppose that the player of red, which is for 4-back, has set up for his yellow partner ball, which is for hoop 3. Note first of all that, unless the player of yellow is incapable of rushing a ball across the lawn, it would be incorrect to set up with the red and yellow balls in the 3rd corner or near yellow's hoop. The first diagram shows a very strong leave, but apart from the difficulty of setting the rush for yellow without leaving black a double target, some players would see as a disadvantage the fact that black is more or less forced to shoot at red, even though there is only a single ball target, since yellow already has a perfect rush to its hoop. By setting the rush as shown in the second diagram, to the blue ball instead of to hoop 3, you can raise considerable doubt in the minds of many opponents about whether or not they should shoot at all, since a miss would give yellow "more than he has already got". The reasoning is fallacious, since in both situations yellow, if he is a competent player, would clearly have a better than 75% chance of establishing at least a 3-ball break. Black should have around a 25% chance of roqueting either red or blue, so the correct play for black is to shoot at the ball he considers himself most likely to hit. However, even opponents who realise this may not find it easy to cope with the psychology of the situation.

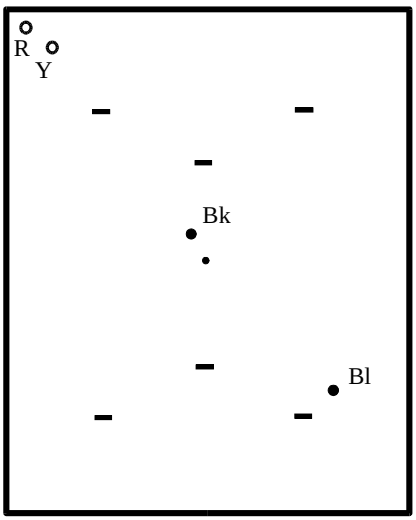


The third diagram shows a similar leave in which the player of red has sought to take advantage of an opponent who likes to adopt a "safety-first" approach and avoid risks wherever possible. His correct shot is with blue at red or yellow, but such a player will find it very hard to bring himself to "risk" leaving black at yellow's hoop, even though it actually would be by far his safest course of action. He is likely instead to hit black away into a corner and leave yellow with a good no-risk chance of establishing a break.



The fourth diagram shows a situation where red had conceded a 'lift' to the opponent before setting for yellow, and has set a "reverse rush" in order to discourage black from shooting at red or yellow. The English player and writer Keith Wylie has correctly pointed out that this idea should be seen as nothing more than a "con", since there can never be anything to gain by setting the rush in reverse against an opponent who is capable of correctly and objectively deciding on the best reply. Black can always do whatever he would have done if the rush were set the right way round, so his percentage chance of getting the next break cannot have been reduced by the backward setting of the rush. In fact, in many situations his chance will have been increased by the offer of more attractive alternatives.





Against some opponents there may at times be something to gain by setting a weaker leave for yourself than you could have done, but only if you know the opponent well enough to rely on him to succumb to the psychological pressure and do the wrong thing.

"NEVER CHANGE A WINNING GAME"

The old sporting adage referred to in the title of this article has some interesting applications to the game of croquet. Coaches sometimes are frustrated by it, when they can see that a player is adopting a facet of technique, or a series of tactical choices, which will lead to increasing problems and the loss of games as the player moves on to play at higher levels. If the current technique and tactical play seem to be working and enabling the player to win games, then it will be difficult to persuade him that there is any need to change. Later, when the player finds that the coach was right and he is no longer having the success he had experienced at lower levels, it may be much harder to make the change because the incorrect methods have become ingrained habits reinforced over a considerable length of time. The fact that you are winning should not be taken as absolute proof that all is well with your game, and a wise player will seek the advice of a competent and trusted coach to peruse the tactical choices and technical expertise displayed in games he won, as well as trying to ascertain the reasons why other games were lost.

The idea of not changing a winning game can, however, be quite important in some other areas of the game of croquet. On many occasions players have been observed to have built up a considerable lead by using a particular strategical or tactical approach, only to change that approach later in the game for no apparent reason, and allow the opponent back into the game. Examples are the attacking player who, by taking risks that happen to come off, reaches a stage where he suddenly realises that he has a real chance of beating an opponent he did not expect to beat, and starts to play more carefully because he "does not want to risk losing his lead"; and the player who has been succeeding in getting the opponent more and more frustrated by keeping the balls where they cannot easily be used, until he (or more often his partner in a doubles game) unaccountably gets a "rush of blood" and takes the risk of attempting a five-foot angled hoop with the opponent's ball present, thus presenting the opponent with a ready-made break.

Many years ago I was watching the final of a country tournament in which an experienced state player was in trouble against a player who had recently been promoted from division 2 and was playing extremely well. There was no sign that the pattern was likely to change until the state player missed a roquet, measured his ball onto the yardline, and was challenged by his less experienced opponent on the grounds that the ball had actually gone out a foot or so from where it was measured in. "Oh dear, he shouldn't have done that," commented an old and wise lady sitting next to me, "He probably would have won the game anyway." At the time I did not understand the point of her remark, but sure enough, the state player, stung by what he saw as a challenge of his honesty, started to concentrate harder and suddenly began to play like a winner. I learnt from this, and other similar incidents, that it simply does not pay to change the psychology of a winning game. Whether the state player had measured the ball in correctly or not, his actions should have been ignored by the less experienced player. Even if the challenge was justified, it was far too dangerous from a psychological viewpoint to risk changing the mental approach of an opponent who was at that stage not playing well.

On another occasion a young and very strong player was playing well against a more experienced opponent in the best-of-three-games final of the SA Open Championship. The younger player had won the first game and was well ahead in the second, when he made a serious mistake of a type which I am sure in later years he will not make. He apparently considered that some of his opponent's hoop approaches looked suspiciously like double-taps, and so asked the opponent to have a referee watch all his future hoop approaches. While the young player was perfectly entitled to take such action, it was another case where it was most unwise to risk changing the psychology of a winning game. The opponent, instead of becoming upset at the request, saw it as an opportunity to think through his hoop approach technique and ensure that he got everything exactly right. The greater concentration resulted in his hoop approaches, and other shots as well, being played with a care and accuracy that had not been in evidence previously, so that he won that second game and went on to rather easily win the third game as well.

Perhaps a case can be made to support the idea that during a game you should never challenge an opponent's shots in this manner, since if he is indeed double-tapping his hoop approaches (or leaving still balls on take-offs, etc.) it is only likely to reduce his control of those shots anyway. It is hard enough to control the balls in one hit, let alone two hits in the same swing! On the other hand, if you are well behind and look like losing, then any such action you take is hardly going to make things worse, and may be worth a try. But if things are going well and you look like winning, forget it!

SECTION 7

PEGGED-OUT GAMES

Very few players seem to deliberately practise playing with two balls against one, one ball against two, or one ball against one. It is another area in which many poor tactical decisions are made, even at the highest levels of play. Some players avoid entering pegged-out games when they could have increased their chances of winning by doing so, simply because they have little idea of what to do in such situations.

There is an enormous amount of information for coaches to pass on and for players to learn and practise. Only a small fraction of it can be covered here, in order to give some idea of what there is to learn.

Many players are unable to adjust their thinking to the fact that percentages and tactical principles change drastically once a ball has been pegged out. They use more or less the same tactics and play the same shots as they would in a game with all four balls, as if one of the balls is out of play temporarily. By doing this they allow the opponent numerous chances that he should never have been given. Unfortunately, they usually later blame the loss of the game on anything but the fact that their tactical choices were foolish in the extreme, and it is far from easy to convince them that they need to spend time improving their knowledge in this area.

In pegged out games wiring assumes far greater importance, leaves can become really critical, and correct placement of balls (which means knowing the right places to put them stroke by stroke, as well as being able to get them there) becomes vital.

Readers who take the trouble to think through the examples given in this section, either keeping track of the balls mentally or setting up the position on a pin-board (or better still out on the lawn) cannot help but improve their understanding of the types of situations that can arise, and what to do in them.

WHEN TO PEG A BALL OUT

A coach will often be asked by players whether or not it is correct to peg out a ball in a particular situation. Such a question can be very difficult to answer with any real conviction, as the answer will usually depend on the skill levels of both the player and the opponent. As a general guide we recommend the following principles for players who are below international level, but are capable of playing sizeable 4-ball and 3-ball breaks.

1. Pegging out your own ball.

(a) You should peg out your own ball when you have missed the peg with your partner ball in attempting to peg it out, unless the partner ball has gone well out toward a boundary and the opponent's balls are separated. Leaving yourself with one ball is more likely to win the game than leaving both of your balls in the middle of the lawn. It is also better than leaving your partner ball in the middle and hitting your ball out of play, as your opponent then is likely to gain the innings and with all four balls still in play will have greater opportunity to set up and complete an all-round break.

Exceptions to this rule may occur when the opponent also has both clips on the peg (or on rover or penultimate) and his balls are close enough together to make it very likely that he will roquet.

(b) Also peg out your own ball when your opponent has only one ball left in the game and your partner ball is five or more hoops ahead of him. The chance of losing a 2-ball game from such a position (except at international level) is so slight that your best chance of winning will almost certainly be to peg out your forward ball. This is true even if you have an alternative possibility of playing a 3-ball break with your partner ball and finishing the game immediately. Unless your partner ball has made 4-back the chance of something going wrong with the 3-ball break is greater than the chance of losing the 2-ball ending.

2. Pegging out an opponent ball

(a) You should peg out one of the opponent's balls any time you can, provided his partner ball has not yet made 4-back. This applies even if your own partner ball is still on the first hoop, assuming that you know how to play with two balls against one. If the opponent's remaining ball will be on penultimate then your own partner ball would need to have made 1-back, as otherwise you would probably do better to keep all four balls in the game and take the risk of the opponent roqueting, having ensured that if he fails to roquet you will have a reasonable chance of setting up a break for your partner using the ball the opponent has left out in the lawn. If your opponent's remaining ball will be for rover or the peg (so that he needs to take only one ball into the lawn in order to give himself an excellent chance of finishing the game), then the peg-out will be inadvisable unless your partner ball has made 4-back.

(b) As a corollary to the above, peg out BOTH the opponent's ball and your own ball when your partner ball will be five or more hoops ahead of the opponent's remaining single ball.

P.S. - Don't forget that after you peg a ball out your opponent will still be entitled to lifts, but you will not.

WHEN TO MAKE 4-BACK

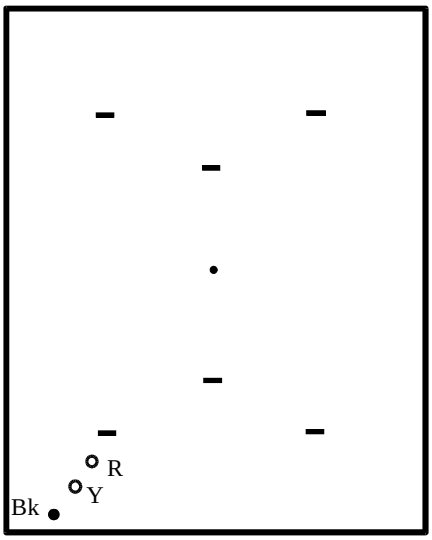
You will often see a player make a nine-hoop break, then later get in with the same ball and go to rover or the peg when his partner ball has hardly started. In most situations it is tactically wrong to make 4-back before your partner ball has at least made 1-back. The reason for this is not so much the possibility of your opponent going right around and pegging your ball out (although at the highest levels that may indeed be a relevant consideration), but rather the far more important point that by giving the opponent a 'lift' you will have made it more difficult to obtain a leave which gives your partner ball the best chance of setting up a break. The setting of a really good aggressive leave is far more important, and far more likely to result in your winning the game, than the making of one or two (or three) additional hoops with your forward ball.

It is curious that some players will make their all-round break with the second ball noticeably more difficult by attempting a triple peel whose main purpose is to deny the opponent one lift shot; yet if it fails (say, at hoop 3 without the peel having been made) and they get in again with the forward ball, they will make 4-back and so give him the shot, simply for the sake of making a hoop or two. They may argue that they are giving themselves the opportunity of finishing the game in one more turn; but why should it be any more difficult for your opponent to go right around and peg your ball out (peeling it through rover if necessary) than for you to do so?

For players below international level, and one suspects at international level also, percentages surely favour setting properly for the partner ball, and ensuring that you will peg out in the turn in which you make 4-back with the ball whose clip is already there, so that you avoid conceding the 4-back 'lift'.

THREE-BALL GAMES (Part 1)

When a ball has been pegged out, so that only three balls remain in the game, the tactics can involve making a series of decisions which are far more difficult than those faced in a normal game. Part of the difficulty can arise from the fact that few players actually practise three-ball games on a regular basis, so they have very little experience on which to base estimates of percentages.



The first diagram shows a position which occurred in one of my recent games, which we knew was likely to be the deciding game in the 1994 South Australian inter-club premiership series. The blue ball has been pegged out (the player of blue, a much stronger player than his partner, had made the first break to 4-back, then I had managed to triple peel his ball and peg it out). Yellow (my partner) is for 2-back; my red clip is on the peg, and black is for hoop 3.

Black has just taken a shot at our balls from the far end of the lawn and missed. We are now faced with three options:

(1) Yellow can roquet black and play a three-ball break. This involves the risk that if he breaks down at any point, black will almost certainly have all three balls out in the lawn, with an opportunity to himself finish the game with a 3-ball break.

(2) Ignore the black ball and try to make one hoop at a time, always leaving our balls wired from black, or in a distant part of the lawn so that he will have to hit a long roquet and then play some difficult shots in order to get a 3-ball break going. This sounds like a safer strategy, but is not so easy to do in practice. There is also the consideration that when 4-back is made, black will be entitled to a 'lift'.

(3) I could play the turn with red, rush yellow out to black, then send black to a distant part of the lawn and peg my red ball out, leaving my partner to play a 2-ball game with 5 hoops lead. Five hoops ahead is normally considered the minimal number in order to ensure a higher percentage chance of winning the game than if the three balls were all kept in the game. In this case, however, I would not be sure of leaving yellow in a position to run its 2-back hoop, and it is likely that black would gain position to run hoop 3 before yellow could get in front of 3-back. Thus yellow may have to wait until black had made hoops 3, 4 and probably 5 as well before he could try for position in front of 3-back, and would then be only 3 or 4 hoops ahead.

It is also possible to try to combine these options, e.g. by using option (2), but hoping at a later stage to switch to option (3) by pegging out the red ball when, for example, the yellow clip is on 4-back. The choice between these various options, especially in the heat of battle, is a perplexing one, and it is not helped by the certain knowledge that whatever choice you make will be severely criticised if you happen to lose the game.

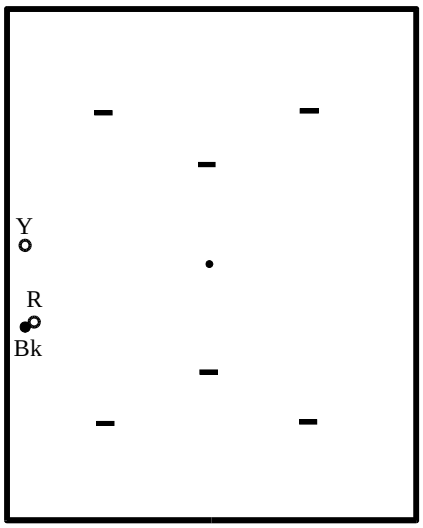
The "correct" choice is probably option (1), but in this instance my partner did not feel confident about the idea of playing a 3-ball break under so much pressure, so we chose option (2). History records, sadly, that a few turns later black managed to hit one of our balls when we thought they were both completely wired from him, and played a rather awkward 3-ball break which he somehow managed to keep alive long enough to win the game.

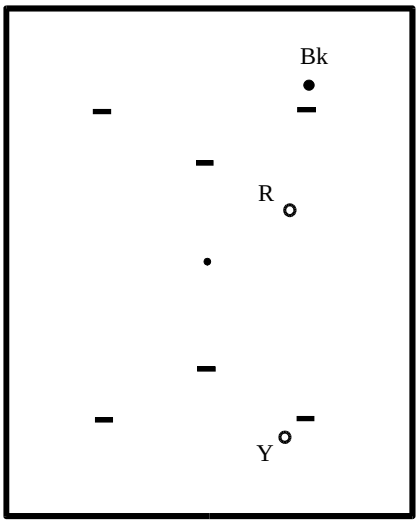
One factor in 3-ball games not to be underestimated is the fact that the player of the single ball is in a situation where he has nothing to lose. All pressure has been removed from him, at least for the time being, and he may as well go for everything. Many players can seem to play 'above themselves' in such situations, while the player with the two balls is under constant pressure.

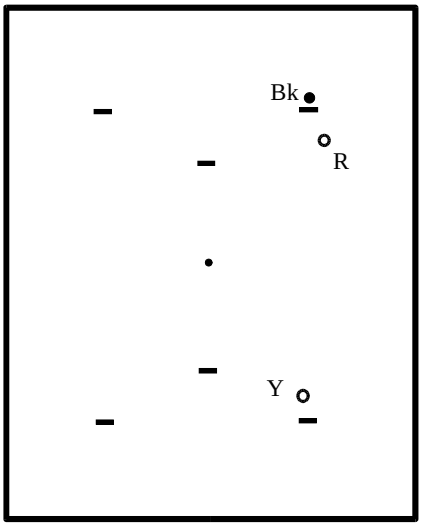
We went home trying to work out what we could and should have done differently in the above situation, and at various other stages of the game. There was no shortage of helpful advice offered by spectators, but the main thing we concluded is that in future we need to give ourselves a lot more practice at playing with two balls against one, or one against two. The textbooks seem to give little definite advice, other than to state that the majority of 3-ball games are won by the single ball. However, the reason for this may well be that few players know how to play the two balls correctly, so the player of the single ball is given far more chances than he should be given; and in many cases players only peg out an opponent's ball when they are already in a somewhat desperate situation.

THREE-BALL GAMES (Part 2)

When playing with one ball against two, the first important principle to follow is: **Always shoot at the opponent's balls** (whichever one, if you roquet, would give the best chance of establishing the 3-ball break) regardless of what you would be giving him if you miss. Against a capable opponent there is little point in sitting in front of your hoop as many players like to do, or trying to "sit over" him in the hope that he will make a mistake. Secondly, it is important to **take every chance of establishing a 3-ball break.**







Playing to make hoops with only one of the opponent's balls in play is for most of us a waste of time, unless we have only one or two hoops to make. This principle is illustrated in the first diagram, where the player of the single black ball is for hoop 3 and has roqueted red after his opponent had set wide on the west border. Many players as black would now take off from red, trying for a rush behind yellow to hoop 3. A better plan is to send red to a position about one third of the way from hoop 3 to hoop 4 without making any attempt to get behind yellow. Then yellow can be split to a position a yard or two behind hoop 4 as black goes to hoop 3. The chance of getting right in front of the hoop and being able to run it is remote, but black can instead sit in front of the hoop, with a strong position as shown in the second diagram. Any shot taken and missed by the opponent will now give black a good chance of setting up the 3-ball break that he needs. The placement of the red and yellow balls is important. Yellow is placed behind hoop 4 rather than in front so that it is further from red, but mainly so that if red is hit away to a far corner, black can run hoop 3 right through to the south border without having to worry about controlling the strength of the shot, and then be in a good position to roquet yellow and continue. In similar situations players tend to load hoop 4 (if that can be done first, e.g. if black had roqueted yellow instead of red in the first diagram), then approach hoop 3 with a long roll in which the opponent ball is placed only 1-2 yards behind the hoop as illustrated in the third diagram. If the roll is unsuccessful and the hoop cannot be made, it is then difficult for black to sit in front of the hoop without allowing the nearby red opponent ball any part of the black ball to shoot at. This is why the hoop should be approached with a shot that places the opponent ball several yards behind the hoop, so that even if black is not properly wired from red, the shot will be too risky for the opponent to contemplate.

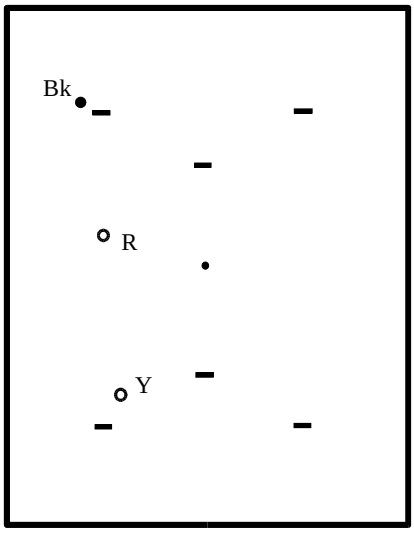
Note also that it is wrong, as some would do, to sit black at a distance of only one foot or less in front of hoop 3. This could give a better chance of completely wiring it from the opponent's ball, but if even the tiniest bit of the black ball is showing, the opponent can safely shoot at it because the hoop will hamper any attempt by black to turn around and roquet the red ball on the north border if it misses.

The black ball needs to be set about a yard in front of hoop 3 as shown in the second diagram, and then if red shoots at it and misses, black will not make the hoop immediately, but will roquet red on the border and send it back to where it came from - again several yards behind the hoop - with a reasonable chance of getting the 3-ball break established, and again keeping the player of red and yellow under pressure by setting once more as shown in the second diagram if the hoop cannot be made. An understanding of exactly where to place the balls when you get the chance is essential if you are to give yourself the best possible chance of winning with one ball against two.

THREE-BALL GAMES (Part 3)

It is not possible in the space available here to cover all of the possibilities that can occur in three-ball games, but some understanding of the type of thinking involved can be gained from a careful consideration of tactical ideas starting from the position shown in the first diagram, where black is for 1-back and has just failed to make the hoop, and has finished in a position from which he will not be able to make it on his next shot.

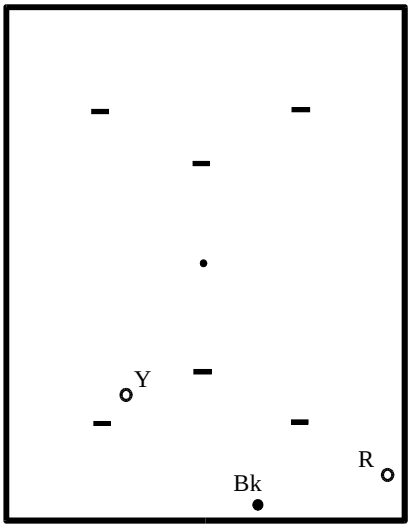
Let us suppose that red is on the peg and yellow is for 3-back. Red will not want to risk shooting at black, as a miss would give the player of black a better opportunity than he ought to be given. Shooting with red at yellow, as some would do, also involves unnecessary risk, as a miss would allow black to either shoot at red and yellow, or sit in front of his 1-back hoop.



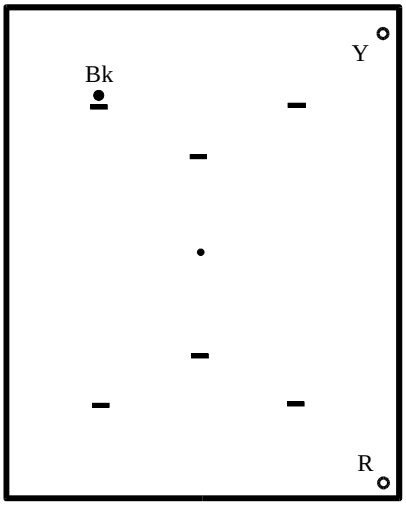
If red is hit away into the 3rd corner, then black will shoot at it, since red is already for the peg. Therefore, red should be played into the 4th corner, to a position where (if possible) it is wired from black, since black will shoot at it wherever it goes unless it is wired.

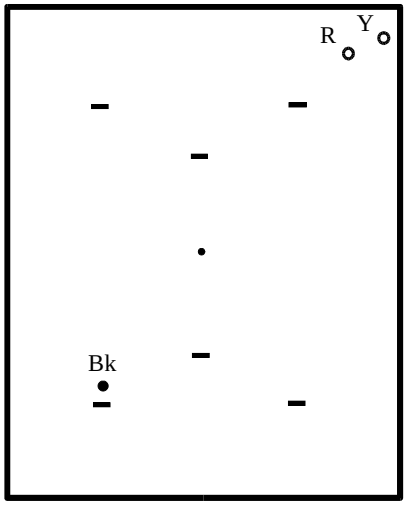
The best place for red, especially if it would be wired from black there, is right on the corner spot. If red goes a yard or two out of the corner then black (if wired from red) can go wide of it on the other border, as shown in the third diagram, keeping pressure on the player of red and yellow, who will again have to move red and leave yellow out in the lawn.

Supposing, then, that red is played into the 4th corner. If black now sits wide of it, then red can shoot at black with relative safety, so black is likely to sit in front of its 1-back hoop, allowing yellow to be played on the following turn. However, to play yellow near red in the 4th corner would again be dangerous, allowing black to run 1-back and shoot at red without giving yellow an immediate break if the shot is missed, unless the position is such that yellow can create a cannon in the fourth corner, which is a possibility that both players should always bear in mind.



There is no need for the player of red and yellow to go together and allow black to shoot at his balls in a situation where a roquet would allow black to rush the other ball to his hoop (or set up as in the previous article), until a position can be created such that a miss by black will give yellow an immediate break. After yellow is played into the 3rd corner (this time there is no need to try to get it right on the corner spot), black might make 1-back and sit in front of 2-back. In this case red should not shoot at yellow, but should be played to a position as shown in the fourth diagram, so that after black makes 2-back he will not be able to sit near 3-back, and a missed shot at the opponent's balls will allow yellow to finish the game with a 3-ball break. If black sits in the 4th corner after making 2-back, then yellow can rush red to a position where it can set a completely wired rush to 3-back for itself, having regained the innings and the initiative without undue risk.

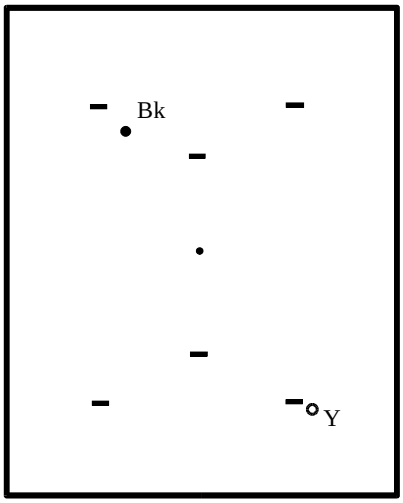




TWO-BALL GAMES

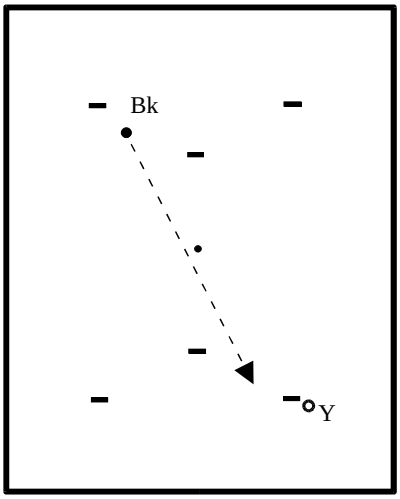
In two-ball games there is less scope for tactics than in three-ball games, and the main consideration, of course, was whether or not to create a two-ball game by pegging out the second ball. The first diagram shows a situation where yellow is for 3-back and black is for hoop 3. Thus yellow is six hoops ahead, which should be more than enough to guarantee a win more safely than if there were still three balls on the lawn. However, things can still go wrong, and players on both sides are prone to make decisions which give the opponent unnecessary chances.

It is black's turn and yellow has tried for position to run 3-back, but has finished too close to the hoop and has no chance of making it in the next turn. The player of black has a choice of three interesting possibilities:



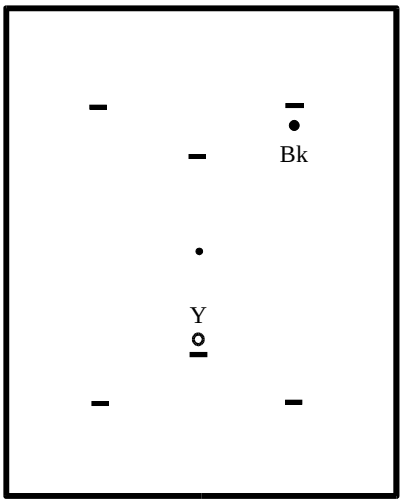
(1) He can shoot at yellow, even if partly wired from it. In order to regain reasonable winning chances black must catch up at least three hoops on yellow, and the only way he is likely to do this is by making a roquet at some stage. If the shot is missed, yellow will be unable to sit in front of 3-back and would not want to risk a shot at black, even if it has one without a hampered backswing. However, there is the risk of black hitting the hoop to be taken into account, as if black finishes within easy roqueting distance of yellow, the game is as good as finished. Even so, this is probably black's best chance.

(2) He can play black to a position where it is wired from yellow and prevents yellow from going to position in front of 3-back (see second diagram). This avoids the risk of hitting the hoop, but requires accurate judgement of distance in order to ensure that black finishes in the correct wired position. The result can be a sort of "stalemate" where the players creep around the hoop a few centimetres at a time, keeping their balls wired from each other, and on occasion declaring their turns when there is no better place for the ball than where it already is. If the game has a time limit, then the onus will be on black to eventually do something. He will probably choose a suitable moment, when yellow cannot run the hoop, in which to hit his ball out to border and invite yellow to risk the 6-8 yard roquet on it.



(3) He can try for position in front of hoop 3. If he succeeds then yellow may have to go right away from its hoop and allow black to catch up two or three hoops before yellow can again go near 3-back, but if black does not get position to run hoop 3, then yellow can simply sit in front of 3-back (almost certainly wired from black) and once again the game is as good as over.

The reason for needing to be five or more hoops ahead before willingly entering a two-ball endgame (assuming that you are not already past 4-back) is that with a little luck it is possible for the opponent to catch up one or two hoops by following you around from hoop to hoop, and you need to be at least three hoops ahead when you get to make rover.



In the third diagram, for example, black is still to make 4-back. Whoever has the turn, black can give himself a reasonable chance (say 25%, which is too much if you are yellow) of winning by making 4-back and sitting in position to run penultimate. Then yellow will not be able to safely sit near the peg, so will have to attempt the peg-out from a longer distance. If yellow is already near the peg when black makes 4-back, then of course black would shoot at it, expecting to hit the 15-yard roquet 3-4 times out of ten, which is a better chance than you would want to give him.

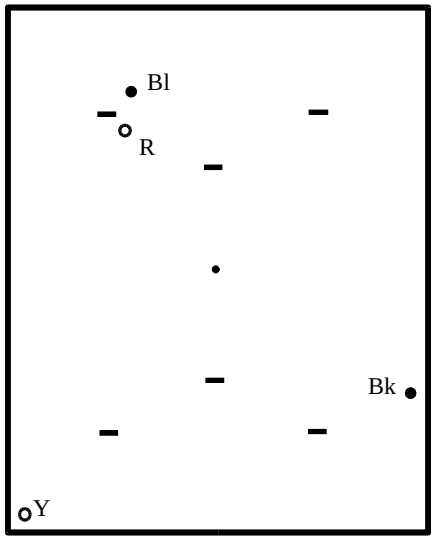
SECTION 8

TACTICAL ERRORS

The four articles in this section were published in the Australian Croquet Gazette during 1994, and illustrate the type of incorrect tactical thinking which is evident even at the highest levels of play. Examples simlar to those given could be found in the games of almost every player at any level. We cannot hope to completely eliminate such errors from our play, but we can at least try to learn from them, and so reduce their number.

A famous chess player once pointed out that there is no need to keep on repeating the same errors, as there are plenty of new ones waiting to be made! I think that the same can fairly be said in reference to the tactical errors we make in games of croquet.

HOW TO LOSE A GAME OF CROQUET



A coach will usually experience great difficulty in convincing players that most of their games are lost through poor tactics rather than through missing roquets or sticking in hoops. The diagram shows a position at the start of a game played during the recent Australian Championships.

Red had made hoop 1 and played a long roll with blue for hoop 2, but failed to gain position to run the hoop. The other three clips were still on hoop 1. The player of red now shot back at his partner ball in the 1st corner.

When the roquet was missed, red and yellow became touching balls in the corner. This allowed blue to shoot at black, and although this roquet was also missed, the player of red and yellow had no clear way of setting up a break on his next turn, unless he was prepared to split his partner ball to hoop 2 while going right across the court to the opponent's balls on the far boundary, then rush one of them back to hoop 1. He elected instead to take off to the opponent's balls, succeeded in making hoop 1, but had nothing set up ahead and had to allow the opponent another chance to roquet before there was any real chance of establishing a break.

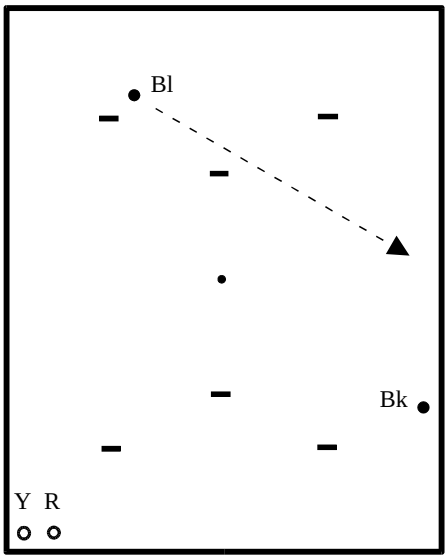
If red had succeeded in roqueting yellow it is most unlikely that he could have found a way to establish a break in that turn anyway. There were at least three options available to red which would all have been preferable to shooting at yellow in the diagrammed position:

(1) Red could have played to stop in the lawn a yard or two short of yellow, giving yellow a rush to hoop 1. This is not easy to do accurately, but if successful would make it dangerous for blue to shoot at black, since yellow can then make hoop 1 with a rush to either hoop 3 or the 4th corner, setting up at least a 3-ball break.

(2) Red could have been hit out a yard or two up the west border from yellow, giving yellow a rush to hoop 2. This also more or less "prevents" blue from shooting at black, since yellow could rush-load hoop 2 then take off to the opponent's balls and rush one of them to hoop 1. However, it is likely that blue would have a rather inviting double target in the 1st corner.

(3) Better still, red could have been hit out on the south boundary, about a yard from yellow so that yellow has a cut-rush to the black ball. Once again the opponent would be taking a severe risk if he shot with blue at black, as yellow can then rush red to the 4th corner and use a stop-shot to send it to hoop 2 before rushing an opponent ball to hoop 1.

Option (3) has the added advantage that if the opponent plays blue to the east boundary wide of black as shown in the second diagram (which would have been a reasonable answer to either of the first two options), then yellow can cut-rush red toward black and without difficulty place the opponent's balls at hoop 1 and hoop 2 before setting himself a rush to either - preferably to hoop 2 rather than hoop 1 unless the rush is wired from the opponent ball at hoop 1.



This again faces the opponent with a situation in which any missed roquet will prove very costly, but there is now a good chance of establishing at least a 3-ball break whatever he does.

There is little doubt that the player of red and yellow is still blissfully unaware that he greatly reduced his chance of winning the game by shooting at yellow in the position of the first diagram. This is what makes it so difficult to convince players, even those well below state team level, that although it is important to get out on the lawn and try to improve their roquets and hoop-running, etc., it is even more important to take deliberate steps to improve your tactics.

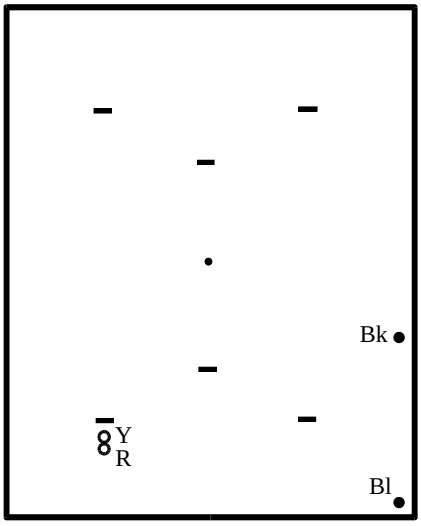
The stronger the player becomes, the more it is that tactics, rather than improved shot-making, becomes the main key to winning more games.

The moral is: MAKE SURE THAT YOU LEARN FROM THE MISTAKES OF OTHERS. YOU DON'T HAVE TIME TO MAKE THEM ALL YOURSELF!

HOW TO AVOID MAKING HOOPS

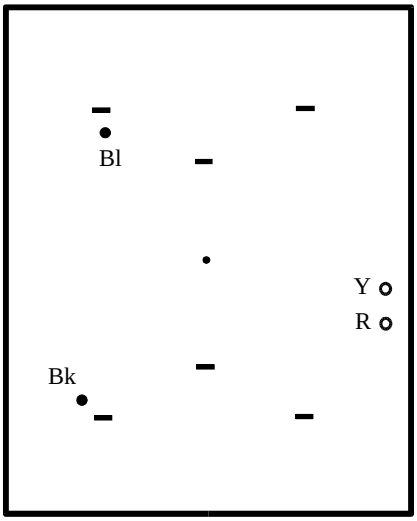
It is often difficult for a coach to convince players that there are times when it is wrong to make a hoop. Even at the highest levels of play it is not uncommon to see players making hoops without thinking. The positions shown here occurred during the National Championships in Adelaide, and involved some of our leading players; but players at less exalted levels can also learn much from the errors that were made.

In the position of the first diagram all clips were still on hoop 1. Red had rushed yellow to about one foot directly in front of hoop 1, and now made a "double" by peeling the yellow partner ball through the hoop before making it with red. As often happens when this is attempted, the result was that after making the hoop red had a hampered roquet on yellow, and then elected to take off to the opponent's balls, leaving yellow in the lawn near hoop 1 with very little chance of continuing the break.

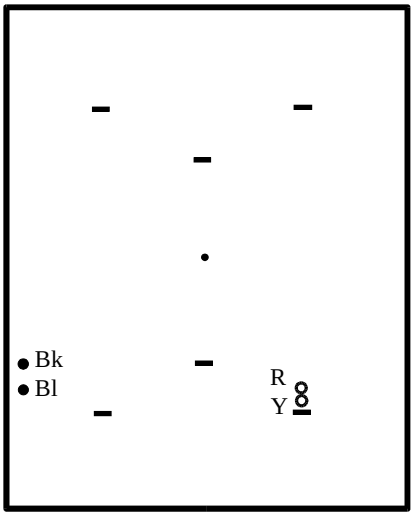


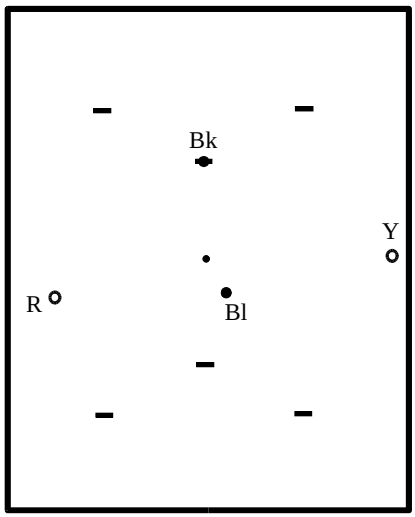
The correct play was to avoid making the hoop for yellow, and simply place the yellow ball to the right of the hoop so that after making the hoop red would have a rush toward the opponent's balls. Then it does not require much skill or accuracy to place the balls roughly as shown in the second diagram, with one of the opponent's balls at each of your hoops. Your red and yellow balls can be placed anywhere along the east boundary, but should be set parallel to the boundary and slightly in from the yardline, so that you are threatening to make at least a 3-ball break with either ball, and a missed roquet attempt by the opponent will immediately give you the fourth ball as well.

In the third diagram we see another example of the same error, where the player made hoop 4 with both balls, then was not prepared to play the big split-shot needed to load hoop 6 with yellow while going to the opponent's balls, so decided to take off to them and could only manage to rush one of them to hoop 5 with little chance of continuing the break. The correct play was to make hoop 4 with red only, placing yellow so that after making the hoop red has a rush to the 1st corner. From there it is relatively easy to send yellow to hoop 6 while going to the opponent's balls with a break set up. A reasonable, not quite so good alternative was to play to rush yellow to hoop 6 after making hoop 4.



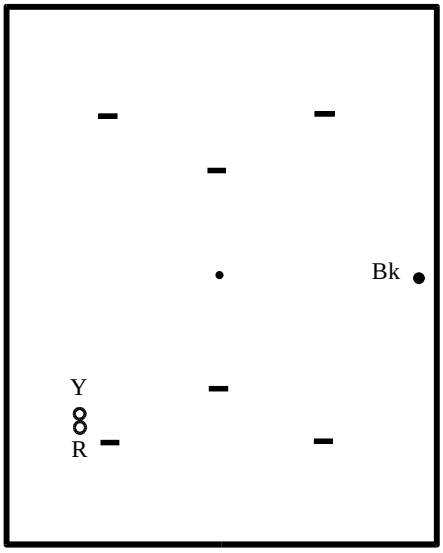
The fourth diagram shows another example where a hoop was made when it should not have been. Black had stuck in hoop 6, then red had shot at it but missed. Now black made the hoop and shot at blue. When the shot was missed, the opponent could shoot at blue with either ball, and even if he missed, blue would have no safe shot to follow.





Here the black ball is in a very safe position, so blue is the ball to move. Blue should shoot at black, and if it misses finish just short of the yardline. Then on the next turn black can run through the hoop to the boundary, getting a rush on blue to 1-back.

HOW TO ENSURE A LOSS



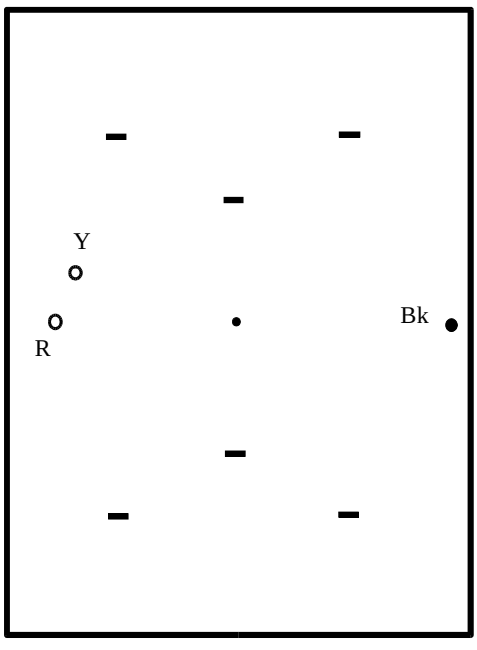
The position shown in the first diagram was taken from an important game between two of our leading players in the National Championships in Adelaide. Blue has been pegged out and black is for the peg. The yellow clip is on 4-back and red has just made hoop 1. The opponent had pegged out blue, leaving black near the peg; but yellow had roqueted black, sent it away to the 4th corner, and set up in the 1st corner for red to make hoop 1. Then the black ball was played to the middle of the east boundary as shown, from where it has a relatively short shot at the peg. This idea of using a turn to place the single ball (which is for the peg) in the middle of a side boundary, instead of shooting at either the peg or the opponent's balls, is sometimes used by experienced players, but should prove futile against a thinking opponent.

The player of red and yellow made hoop 1 with red, but did not obtain a forward rush, and after roqueting yellow had reached the position shown in the diagram. From here, red rolled with yellow for hoop 2 and set up there. Then black shot at the peg and missed, after which red made hoop 2 and rolled to hoop 3, again setting up. Again black shot at the peg and missed. Red made hoop 3, after which black was permitted another shot at the peg, which this time was successful.

In the diagrammed position the player of red and yellow was obviously in a desperate situation, with only a slight chance of winning the game. However, with players capable of making all-round 3-ball breaks, as these were, the result is certainly not a foregone conclusion if correct tactics are used. It is clear that the policy adopted by the player of red and yellow, of making hoops one or two at a time and allowing the opponent to continue shooting at the peg from side to side, is an almost certain way to lose the game. Sooner or later black will hit the peg. The chance of black missing the peg eight or ten times in a row, even with players well below state level, is extremely remote.

Therefore the correct play is to allow black only one shot, which if missed will give red a 3-ball break on which it should go to the peg. Then another shot (from the 1st corner, if possible wired from the peg and with yellow set in the 3rd corner for 4-back) must be allowed, and if this is missed then yellow should finish the game. Black will not be entitled to any lifts since blue has been pegged out.

This means that in the first diagram, after making hoop 1, red should not have rolled with yellow to hoop 2. Instead, the correct tactic is to set up as shown in the second diagram, on the opposite side of the peg from black. Then, if black shoots at the peg and misses, red will have an excellent chance of setting up the 3-ball break required. This will be true whether black shoots hard at the peg, or just dribbles in to stay near it. If black shoots at red or yellow and misses, then red again should be able to set up a 3-ball breakwithout any great difficulty. For this reason it is important that the red and yellow balls are set, not too near the border, but a carefully chosen distance in from it. If black refrains from shooting, then red can make hoop 2 and if it does not get a good rush to hoop 3 it should again set up so that any shot black takes and misses will give a 3-ball break.

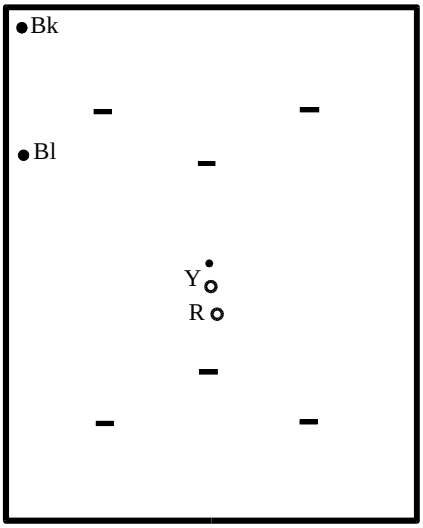


From a coaching viewpoint it is unfortunate that some players, particularly those who consider themselves to belong to some sort of elite class, seem to resent any suggestion that their tactics can be improved. This highlights the fact which is accepted in almost every other sport, but not generally in croquet: Every serious competitive player should have regular sessions with a coach, and the higher the level at which he or she plays, **the more vital it is.** For example, every top tennis player or golfer (or athlete in almost any other sport) has his or her own individual coach. It is also worth noting that in almost all cases the coach cannot play anywhere near as well as the player who is being coached.

HOW TO LOSE THE INNINGS

The position shown in the first diagram is taken from a game played in the English Silver Medal tournament at the National Championships in Adelaide, between players who had won the gold medals in their respective states. We shall see that even at this level players can be seen giving the innings away and losing games through poor tactics.

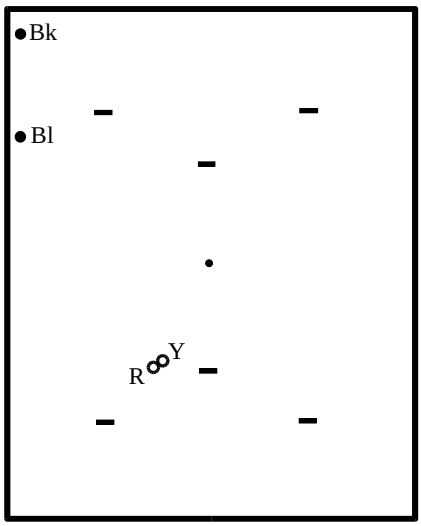
Yellow is for hoop 5 and red for hoop 3. The opponent has his blue clip on 4-back, while the black clip is still on hoop 1. Before reading any further, work out clearly in your mind what you would do if you were playing red and yellow in this situation.



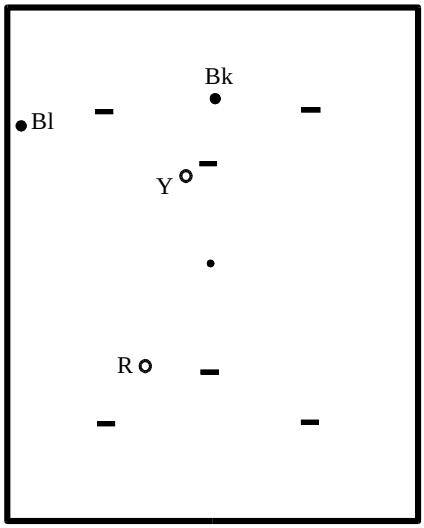
Players at all levels frequently make wrong tactical choices in such situations because they do not think past the making of their next hoop. In lower divisions such thinking may be excusable, but when the players are capable of making consistent breaks, as these certainly were, they cannot afford to make serious tactical errors.

The player decided to play yellow and make hoop 5. He managed to do this after an anxious moment or two, since his cut to the hoop did not finish particularly close and he had to make a somewhat sidey hoop shot.

After making hoop 5, yellow, instead of getting a forward rush, had a rush toward hoop 1. At this stage red should have been rushed out to a position near the border, since it is obvious that yellow has much less than an even chance of continuing the break. The principle involved is straightforward and easily understood, but frequently overlooked (as it was here) in actual play: **Do not leave your partner ball in the lawn unless you have a better than even chance of making the next hoop.**



However, the player decided to simply roquet red instead of rushing it, and so reached the position shown on the second diagram. In this situation he again should have realised the danger of leaving his partner ball out in the lawn, and should therefore have played a thick take-off to send red within four yards or so of the border, so that if things went wrong he could return to it without allowing the opponent a safe shot. Instead, he took off to blue, leaving red out in the lawn. His error became more apparent when he had taken off from blue to black, almost (but not quite) managing to get a rush on it, then cut black part-way into the lawn and pass-rolled unsuccessfully for hoop 6. He found that in the position of the third diagram he could not afford to leave both balls out in the lawn, and was unable to make the hoop, so he hit yellow out to the border in front of hoop 1. Then black shot at blue and missed, and red could not afford to risk shooting at yellow, since the black clip was on hoop 1. Therefore red had to retire into the 4th corner, giving away the innings without the opponent even having had to make a roquet!



It would not be fair to criticise too strongly the player of red and yellow, as most players would have done more or less the same sort of thing, which indeed could prove successful on some occasions.

In the next article we shall consider in detail what the player should have done in order to greatly increase his winning chances, and try to discover some tactical principles which will assist us to avoid making such tactical errors. One principle has already been quoted above and concerns leaving your partner ball out in the lawn. Many players who are aware of this principle err in the opposite direction by leaving their partner ball near the border at all times. But the converse is also true: **You must be prepared to put your partner ball into the lawn when you have a better than even chance of establishing a break.**

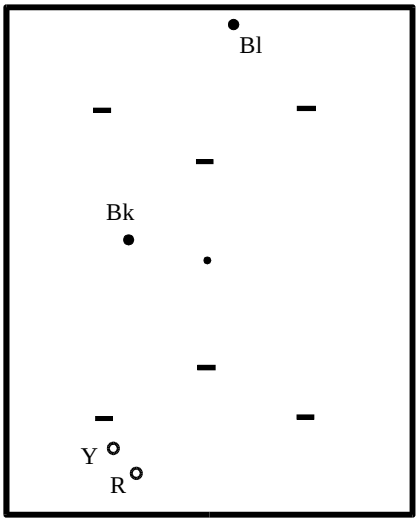
SECTION 9

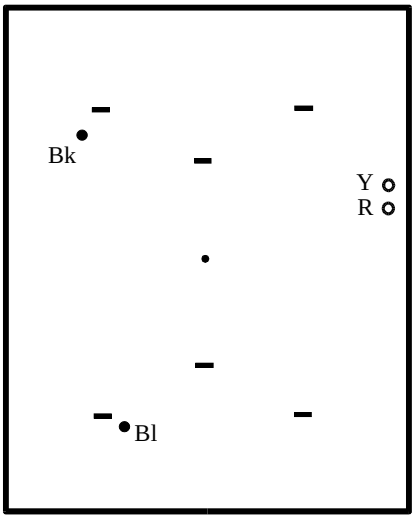
GENERAL TACTICS

By far the most difficult task which lies ahead for our coaches is to bring about a desperately needed improvement in the standard of general tactics used by players at all levels in Australia. Even at inter-state level there are few players who think objectively in terms of percentages, yet apart from the calculation (or at least accurate estimation) of percentages there is no other way of justifying tactical choices, or of knowing whether or not you are making the correct decisions. The fact that you make a particular tactical choice and then go on to win the game does not mean that your choice was the correct one - not even in that particular instance, let alone on future similar occasions - and neither does the adoption of a line of play by leading players provide convincing testimony of its correctness.

The tactical approach espoused and advised in this section is not without its controversial aspects, and may not suit every player's temperament; but I am certain that those who do succeed in understanding and adopting the various ideas and principles of tactical play will win far more games than they otherwise would have done.

DEFEATING 'AUNT EMMA'





The legendary "Aunt Emma", who may also haunt our lawns in male guise, is noted for ultra-defensive play. She will make as many hoops as possible from her partner ball while keeping your balls as far apart as possible. She rarely thinks to put your balls where she will be able to use them later, as she is more concerned to make sure that you are unlikely to roquet. For this reason she rarely makes more than one or two hoops at a time, and in positions such as the one shown in the first diagram where you are playing red and yellow and all clips are still on hoop 1, she will not be prepared to risk shooting with black at either your balls (since a miss would give you an easy break), or at her blue partner ball (which would give you two balls together in forward play). Therefore, not having read our previous article "Why Not Shoot?", she will probably hit the black ball into, say, the 3rd corner.

Many players become frustrated by this type of opposition and end up taking foolish risks in an effort to end a situation in which neither side is making any apparent progress. Others try to 'play her at her own game', which is almost always a mistake because she is very good at the limited range of shots needed to play the way she does.

What is the best way to defeat her? Firstly, you must realise that in order to defeat her you must learn to play breaks. If you do not possess the range of shots (particularly splits) needed to set up and maintain a break, then you must set about acquiring these skills as rapidly as possible, and this will probably require the assistance of a good coach. Until you have done this you must expect to continue losing games to a good "Aunt Emma" - and make no mistake, some "Aunt Emmas" are indeed very good players who win a lot more games than one would expect.

Even players who are capable of playing breaks, however, do not always go about things in the right way when playing against the venerable Aunt. For example, in the first diagram above, after black is hit into the 3rd corner, you should not attempt a two-ball break with red while her balls remain out of play. In making hoop 1 you should try to get a rush toward the east border somewhere between hoops 3 and 4, instead of a rush to hoop 2. Then you can take off to black in the 3rd corner and send it to hoop 2 while going to blue; then send blue to hoop 1 and hit red out near yellow to achieve the set-up shown in the second diagram. Here it is once again unlikely that Emma will risk shooting at a ball, but you will have an excellent chance of getting at least a 3-ball break under way whatever she does.

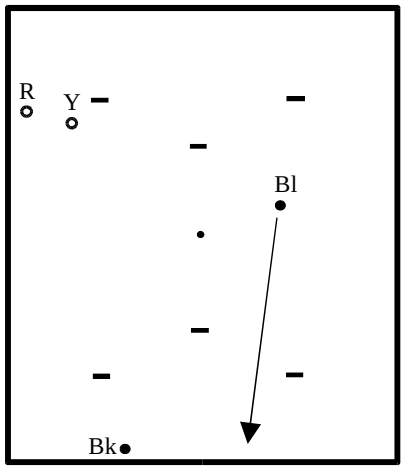
The main principles involved in beating Aunt Emma-type play, therefore, are:

1. Learn to play split-shots and maintain breaks.
2. Be patient and <u>always</u> shoot at a ball, with confidence that once you succeed in roqueting you will easily be able to make more hoops than she has done while playing simply to keep you separated.
3. Do not play to make hoops with your own balls while hers are out of play. Get her balls and put them where you will be able to use them, and if possible where she will not be willing to risk shooting.
4. Accept the fact that nothing you can do will <u>guarantee</u> that you will beat her. If she hits <u>every</u> roquet and you play poorly enough you will still manage to lose to her; but if you go about things as recommended here and refuse to allow her tactics to upset you, the odds will be weighted overwheImingly in your favour.

Perhaps, after everyone has read and applied this series of articles, Aunt Emma will at last be laid to rest!

THE ANSWER TO RETURNING WIDE (part 1)

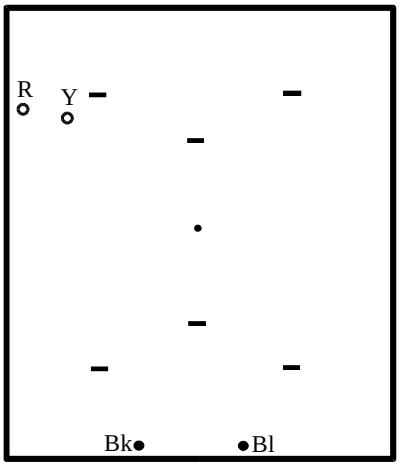
I have made the point in previous articles that there are very few situations, if any, where it pays to 'return wide' of your partner ball against a thinking opponent who is capable of making breaks. Yet this ill-advised tactic is still seen quite frequently in play at all levels. The first diagram shows a position in which the red clip was on hoop 5. The player of blue considered that shooting at the opponent's balls (a single-ball target) was too risky, since a miss would allow red to roquet blue and send it to load hoop 6, then rush yellow to hoop 5. He also chose not to shoot at black, because it could allow red to set up a break by rushing yellow to hoop 6, taking-off to the two balls on the south border, and rushing one of them to hoop 5.



Therefore the player decided to 'return wide' by hitting blue out on the south border about 8 yards away from black. His idea was to avoid presenting the player of red with the opportunity to set up an easy break, which any missed shot would have allowed him to do.

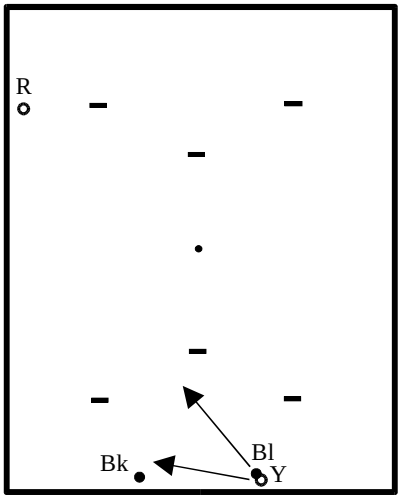
THE WRONG REPLY

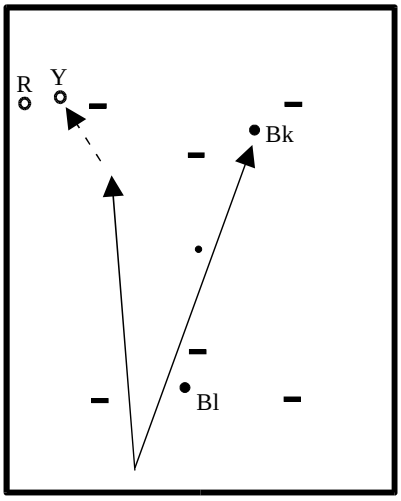
Having left his opponent with the balls placed as shown in the second diagram, the player of blue now expected red to roquet yellow, possibly rushing it to hoop 6, then take off to black, roquet it, and play another take-off, trying to get a rush behind blue to hoop 5. This way red may be able to get a break established, but it would take some accurate shots and would involve leaving yellow out in the lawn where red would be unable to safely return to it if anything went wrong. If the player of red is foolish enough to attempt this line of play, then blue's tactic of 'returning wide' would be justified; but look at what happens if blue's opponent plays correctly:



THE CORRECT REPLY

In the position of the second diagram, the turn should be played not with the red ball, but with yellow. After roqueting red, yellow should take off to blue (easier than black because the line of the take-off to blue would meet the south boundary at a more acute angle), then roll blue to the front of hoop 5 while going to black, as illustrated in the third diagram. There is no need to try to get a rush behind black, so the yellow ball can be kept safely away from the border, going to a position from which black can be easily roqueted. Then black should be sent to a position between hoops 3 and 6 as shown in the fourth diagram, and yellow can then be hit back near red, giving red a rush into the lawn. These shots do not require any great accuracy and entail little risk.

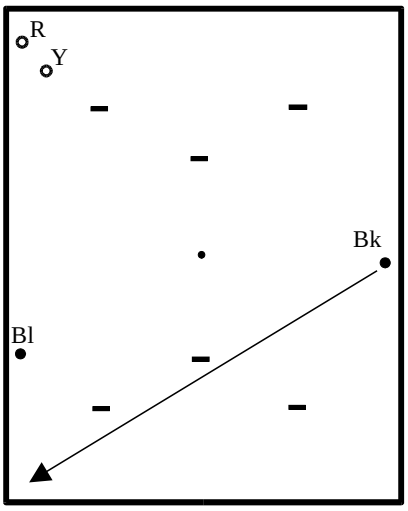




This would leave the player of black and blue wishing that he had taken a shot in the first place (which is exactly what should always be the consequence of 'returning wide'), as any shot he now takes and misses will give red an easier break than he would have had then; and if he again fails to shoot red will in any case have a good chance of establishing a break without needing to take any undue risk.

THE ANSWER TO RETURNING WIDE (part 2)

The first diagram shows a situation where the red clip is on hoop 2 and yellow is on hoop 1. The player of red and yellow has set a rush for red in the 2nd corner, with the opponent's balls widely separated. The player of black and blue felt that if he shot at either of his own balls with the other, a miss would make it too easy for either red or yellow to set up a break, so he played black into the 1st corner as shown by the arrow, thinking that this would make it difficult for either red or yellow to get a break established on the next turn. The fallacy in this sort of thinking lies in the fact that the player of red and yellow does not need to try to establish a break on the next turn, and the player of black and blue has passed up the chance of a possible roquet.

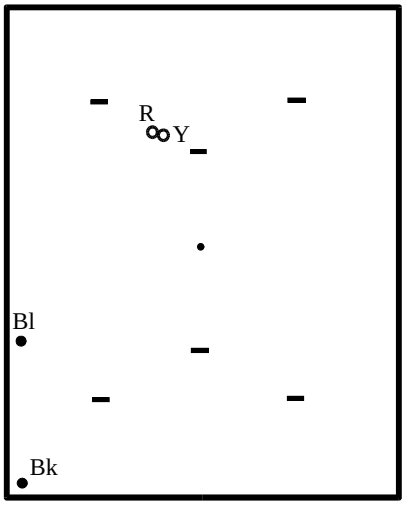


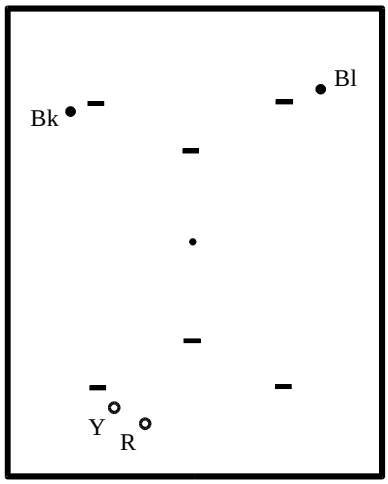
THE WRONG REPLY

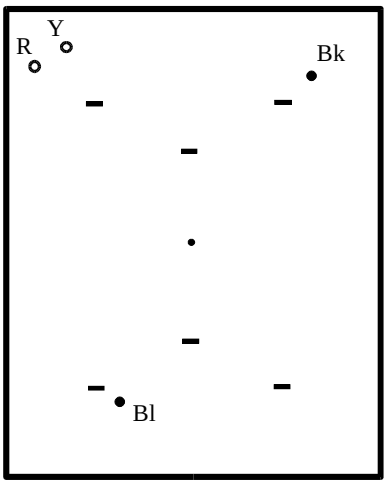
In the game the player of red decided to make hoop 2, attempting to get a rush to hoop 3. However, he ran too far through hoop 2, and could only manage to roquet yellow into the lawn instead of rushing it anywhere useful. This brought about the situation of the second diagram, where red is faced with the need to get his partner ball out of the middle of the lawn while going to the opponent's balls, with little chance of being able to set a good leave, let alone continue the break. Thus the negative strategy adopted by the opponent in hitting his black ball out of play has been fully justified.

THE CORRECT REPLY

In approaching hoop 2, yellow should have been placed on the left (outside) of the hoop, in order to obtain a rush either to the opponent's balls, or to a position on the "trap line" behind hoop 2. This would allow him to set up an 'ideal leave" as shown in either the 3rd or 4th diagrams. If you bear in mind that red is now for hoop 3 and yellow for hoop 1, you will see that if the opponent now misses any shot, he will be giving an even easier chance of establishing a break than before. In the position of the 4th diagram he does not even have a reasonable option of hitting out to a corner again, as either red or yellow should have little difficulty establishing a break anyway. This shows that against a thinking opponent, returning wide of your partner is pointless, and black should have shot at a ball (presumably blue) in the first diagram. The answer to such negative play is to make only one hoop (or none at all, as after black was hit into the 1st corner, red could have rushed yellow right down to the south border and immediately set a leave somewhat similar to the ones shown, but with the red clip still on hoop 2), and then go and get the opponent's balls and place them to advantage. This is actually easier to do when they have been placed several yards apart than if they were together.



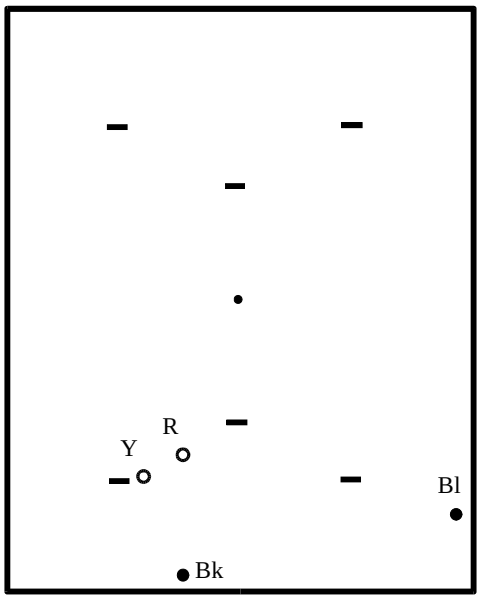


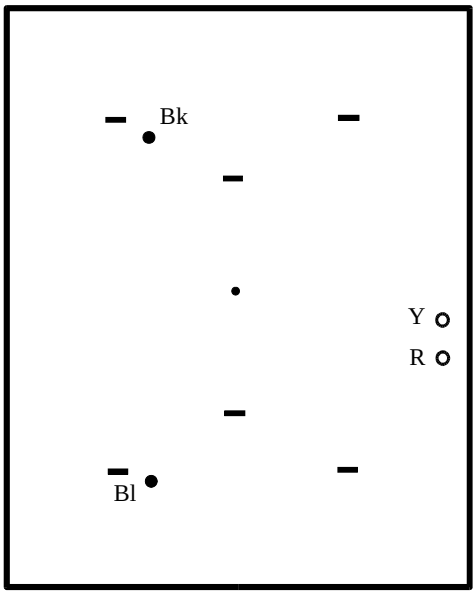


Against a thinking opponent, returning wide of your partner almost always reduces your chance of winning the game.

Unless you were wired from one or more of the three balls, there should have been at least one ball you could have shot at which would have given a better winning chance.

PERCENTAGE PLAY





In croquet, the justification for all correct tactical moves must lie in percentages. Consider, for example, what you would do as the player of red and yellow in the first diagram where all clips are still on hoop 1 and black has just shot at red from near hoop 2 and missed. There are five possibilities:

1. Two-ball break Make hoop 1 with red, then rush or roll to hoop 2, etc. This would probably be the choice of the majority of players. However, it is a very poor choice when both players are capable of making reasonable breaks, as the game will not be won by making odd hoops. With this method your chance of getting a break established before your opponent does must be little better than even - say, 55-60%.

2. Stop-shot for position: Roquet yellow and take-off to black. Send black to hoop 2 with a stop-shot in which you also gain position to run hoop 1. This method gives you an immediate break if the stop-shot is successful, but allows black another chance to roquet if not. It is only justifiable when you can claim for yourself a success rate (in playing the stop-shot and making the hoop) of around 50% or better.

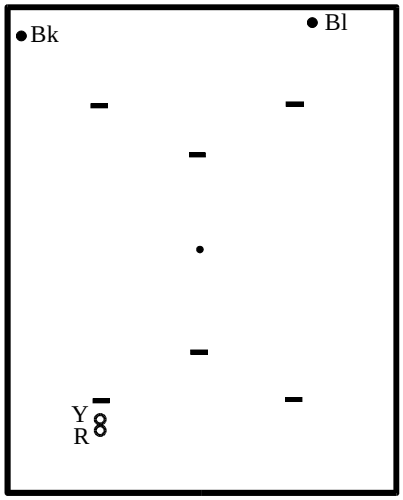
3. Set up an "Ideal Leave": Make hoop 1 with red and rush or split yellow to a position anywhere near the east boundary as you go to blue in the 4th corner. Roll blue to hoop 1 while going to black (keep red well in court - no need to risk going out). Send black to hoop 2 while returning to yellow to set up the position shown in the second diagram. This allows the opponent one chance to roquet, but guarantees a break if he misses or fails to shoot. On such a long roquet very few players would expect to hit more than one in four (25%), so this method gives you at least a 75% chance of a break on your next turn, making it far preferable to either of the two methods so far considered. (A detailed consideration of such "Ideal Leaves" and their use is given in my booklet on 'Next Break Strategy'.)

4. Immediate break: Make hoop 1 with a rush back to black. Rush black to blue and put it a little way into court while obtaining a rush on blue to hoop 2. Make hoop 2 with a rush to either hoop 3 or one of the other two balls, etc. You may succeed in establishing an immediate break this way, but if anything goes wrong you will be allowing the opponent at least one chance to roquet, and if he misses it is still unlikely that you will have an immediate break set up, so you may well have to give him further chances to roquet. To justify this method you would once again need to give yourself a 50% or better chance of establishing the break immediately, as otherwise method 3 would give you a better chance of winning the game.

5. Immediate roquet: Red also has the option of roqueting black, with an immediate break if successful, but a break for the opponent if not. In the light of what we have already seen, this method will be the correct one to use provided red has an 80% chance or better of roqueting black. Note that he does not need to be certain of making the roquet. If he is convinced that he could hit it at least 8 times out of 10, then the roquet should be attempted as it gives the best possible chance of winning the game.

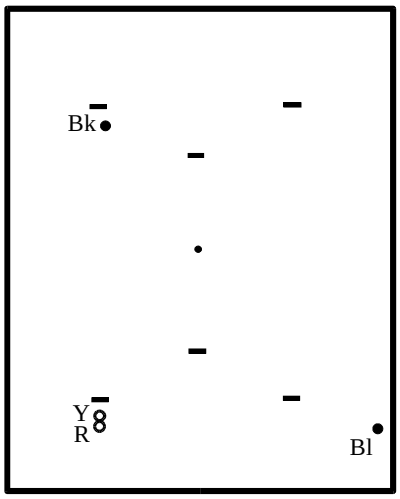
You can obtain a reasonably accurate assessment of your potential success rates (i.e. percentages) for the various methods by trying them out in practice sessions. However it must be remembered that your success rate in matches when under pressure may differ somewhat from the percentages you can achieve in relaxed practice sessions, and this should be taken into account. In general, it seems that although it is seldom seen, method 3 should be chosen by most players in such situations.

A RUSH TO WHERE? *by John Riches*



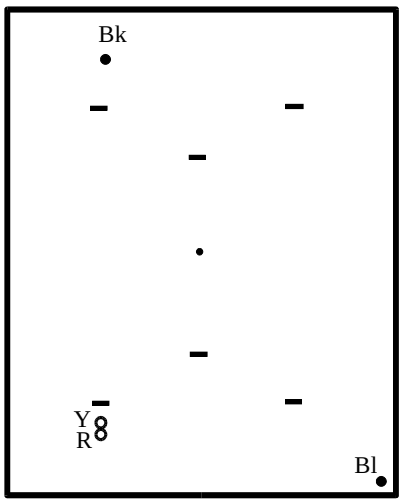
One of the common tactical errors seen on our croquet lawns is the failure to rush a ball to the best possible place, so as to maximise the chance of setting up or continuing a break. Many players give little thought to the question of finding the correct place to rush to, and even those who do give it some consideration usually wait until they are about to play the rush, when it is often too late.

Test yourself by examining the three diagrams and determining where you would hope to rush the yellow ball to after you make the first hoop with red. This assumes, of course, that you would make such a decision before approaching the hoop, if not earlier. In these cases you are approaching from about 1 yard directly in front of the hoop, and it should not be too difficult to organise the approach shot so that after making the hoop you will have a rush to wherever you wish.



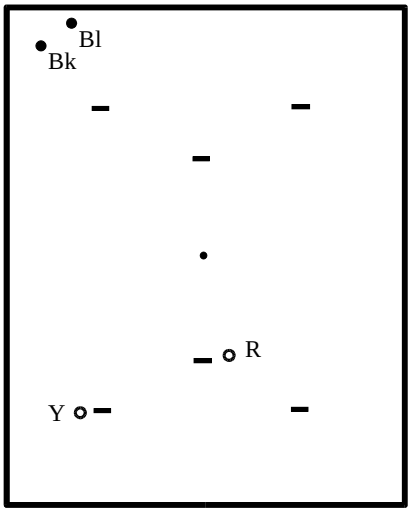
In the first diagram yellow should be rushed to the 3rd corner so that a stop-shot can be used to send it near hoop 3 before rushing blue to black (or to hoop 2) to set up at least a 3-ball break.

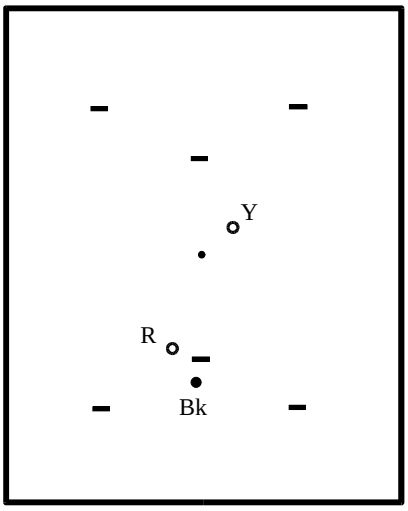
In the second diagram yellow should be rushed to the 4th corner. Then a stop-shot can be used to send it to hoop 3 before roqueting blue and taking off to black at hoop 2. This allows you to get blue in off the border a yard or two by playing a thickish take-off, and will make it easier to continue the break later. An alternative would be to put yellow at hoop 4 and rush blue to either hoop 3 or (better still) the boundary alongside hoop 2 from where it can be used to load hoop 3 in the croquet stroke.

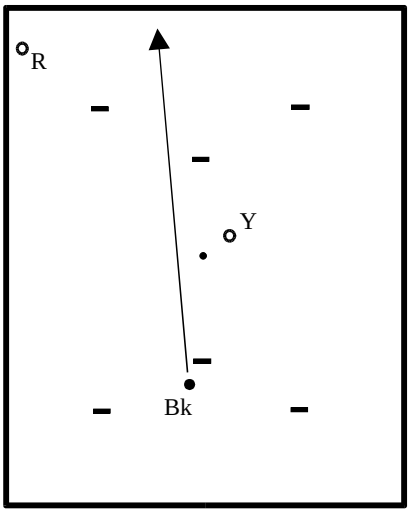


In the third diagram there is little point in going to the blue ball after making hoop 1, unless you are approaching the hoop from so close that it will not be possible to obtain a forward rush. It is better to try for a rush to the 2nd corner, from where yellow can be sent to hoop 3 with a stop-shot while getting behind black to rush it out to hoop 2. This is much better than rushing yellow to hoop 3, or hoop 2, or the north border behind black. You need to think about not only making hoop 2, but continuing the break afterward. Note also that after accurately loading hoop 3 with yellow you should make hoop 2 from black and then rush black to the border in front of hoop 3. It would be a serious mistake to rush it into the middle of the lawn as many players do, since from there it cannot be used to properly load hoop 4 before making hoop 3. In fact the position of the blue ball in the 4th corner requires that the black ball should be sent right to hoop 4, and it is better to send it a yard or two past hoop 4 than to leave it short. Then, after making hoop 3 with yellow, even if you do not get a forward rush, you will be able to take off to blue in the 4th corner and proceed to set up a 4-ball break. If black is left short of hoop 4 (i.e. more than a yard or two in front) it will not be so easy to get blue into the break. Try it and see!

INTO THE CORNER







There will be times when even the most aggressive player is forced to play a purely defensive shot which will usually involve hitting a ball out of play into a corner.

Such occasions will hopefully occur only rarely, and usually when you are forced to play a ball which is already on the peg or 4-back, so you would not want to make any hoops with it even if you managed to make a roquet. It will usually mean also that the ball you have to move is wired from at least one of the other three balls, since if all three are open it is almost certain that taking one of the three available shots would give a better chance of winning the game than "finessing". (In croquet the term "finessing" or "retiring" means hitting a ball out of play without attempting a roquet. The former term is widely used in England. In one sense it is unfortunate in that it suggests there is something subtle about the use of such a tactic, when in most cases the exact opposite is true.)

In the first diagram yellow and blue clips are both on the peg, and black is for 1-back. Yellow is wired from red but must move, and cannot afford to shoot at the opponent's balls, so will 'retire' or 'finesse' into a corner - probably the third, anticipating a 'lift'.

Many coaches pass on the advice which is to be found in various textbooks on the game: "In such cases, never hit your ball right into the corner. Instead, go a foot or two away from the corner spot on the side border!' There are two main reasons for this -

(1) It denies the opponent the chance of making a cannon by rushing another ball into the corner.

(2) If you later shoot at it with your other ball and miss, you will then have a potential rush rather than touching corner balls.

However, there are situations when a ball which is hit out of play should be placed right on the corner spot. See if you can think of such a situation before reading further.

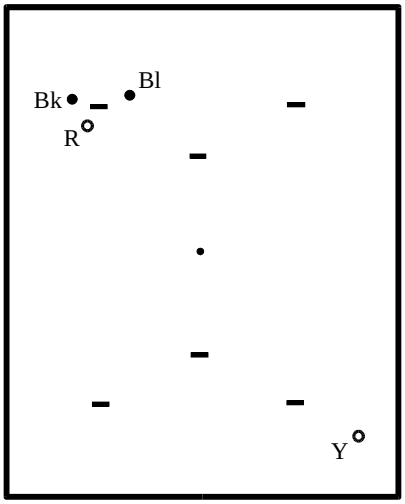
In the second diagram yellow is on the peg, and red and black are both on rover. The blue ball has been pegged out and black is not entitled to a lift. Red has just approached rover, hoping to make it and peg out. However the approach shot was poor and red cannot make the hoop. Black is wired from yellow and must be given a shot. What should red do?

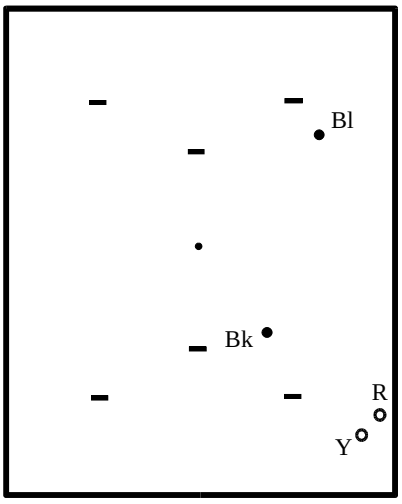
Having read the first part of this article, you may already have worked out that this is a situation in which red should not only 'retire' into a corner, but it is important that red is placed right on the corner spot.

To illustrate this point, suppose that red makes the tactical error of going not right into the second corner, but a foot or two down the side border as shown in the third diagram. This allows black to play to the north border as indicated by the arrow, choosing a distance which prevents yellow from returning to red, but makes it very risky for red to shoot at black. By playing in this way black gives himself an almost even chance of winning the game, which is far better than he should have had. Notice also that if red now shoots at yellow, then so can black, achieving a similar position (if both miss) at the other end of the lawn. It would also be very risky for red to sit near yellow in the middle of the lawn.

If red is placed right on the corner spot instead of on the yardline just out of the corner, there is no opportunity for black to use such a pressure tactic, as red would be able to shoot through black safely into another corner.

"A HOOP IN THE HAND IS WORTH..." *by John Riches*





Perhaps the most common tactical error seen on our croquet lawns, and the one to which the loss of most games can be attributed, is the failure to set up a break when it was possible to do so. The failure usually results from an unwillingness to take a short-term risk in the hope of achieving a long-term gain.

In the position shown on the first diagram red is for hoop 3 and has taken-off from yellow to the opponent's balls after the opponent had failed at hoop 2. Many players of red would now roquet black gently and make certain of obtaining a simple rush on blue to hoop 3. However, for a player who is past the 'beginner' stage it is far better to rush black right out into the 2nd corner and use a stop-shot to send it as far as possible toward hoop 4 while trying for the rush on blue to hoop 3. The reason why players fail to do what they should is that they realise they would no longer be certain of getting as good a rush on blue, and so would be less likely to make hoop 3. Therefore they forgo a chance to set up a four-ball break in order to make certain of one hoop. When stated in this way the foolishness of such a choice seems rather obvious, as when both players are capable of making breaks, games are not likely to be won by making odd hoops. Foolish it may be, yet almost every game in lower divisions and also many at higher levels could be used to provide instances where players fail to obtain breaks because they do not even attempt to set them up for reasons similar to those just explained.

It is not easy to convince players that there is nothing "safe" about refusing to take the risk of possibly not making the one certain hoop.

The more experienced and advanced player sees it differently, and knows that there is no point in making hoop 3 unless he can either continue the break, or at least set up a position such that unless the opponent hits a long roquet he will have a break on the next turn.

If the player of red plays correctly, and sends black toward hoop 4, but fails to get the rush on blue to hoop 3, then he will have to roll both balls (red and blue) to the hoop, and if he does not gain position to run the hoop he can return to his yellow partner ball near the 4th corner, obtaining the position shown in the second diagram. It is important to realise that there is no real danger (at least below international level) in having the black ball only 9-10 yards away from your own balls, as the opponent would be taking a great risk if he now elected to shoot with black instead of moving blue - and this is a type of risk which in most cases should not be taken!

In fact the position of the second diagram is a very strong one for the player of red and yellow, because any shot with blue also entails giving you both of the opponent's balls where you should be able to make use of them. In situations like this players also find it hard to accept the fact that having the black ball close as shown in the diagram is stronger and safer than having it further away - say, 2-3 yards left of the peg, where the opponent would be able to shoot at it with blue quite safely.

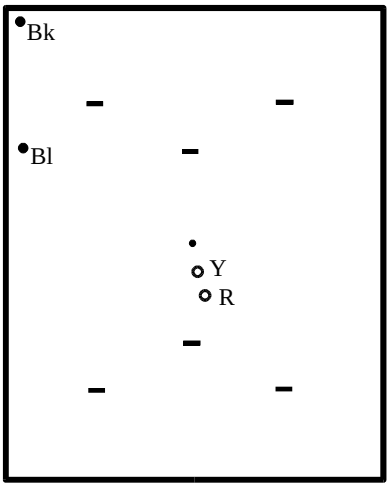
It is this sort of thinking that sorts out the top players from the also-rans. There are many who can play all the shots accurately and consistently, but who can be counted on to lose game after game because they refuse to take what they see as a "risk" involved in setting up a break when they had the opportunity. Instead of taking the small risk of missing out on making one hoop, they take the much greater risk that such an opportunity may not be presented to them again. After losing the game it is common to hear them complaining that they missed roquets and could not get going properly, when a closer analysis of the game would reveal that they did not need to make any more roquets than they had made - they lost because they did not make use of the opportunities they had to set up breaks.

This is a theme which I have mentioned in one way or another on previous occasions. I do not apologise for returning to it, and will continue to do so until there is evidence that players are beginning to take notice of it.

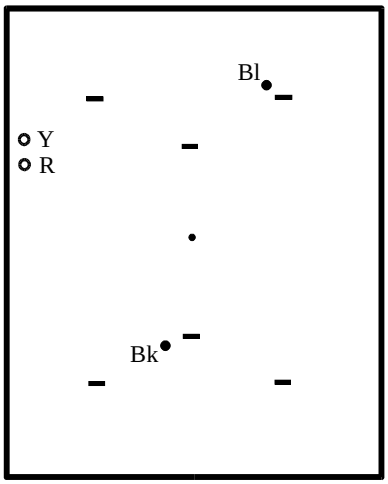
WHEN NOT TO MAKE A HOOP

In the first diagram we see again the position which we considered in the previous article (page 62). Yellow is for hoop 5, red is for hoop 3, black for hoop 1 and blue for 4-back. We saw that the player of red and yellow played the yellow ball, made hoop 5, and found himself with very little chance of continuing the break. From there he ended up giving away the innings without the opponent having to make a roquet. His first mistake was that he should have used the red ball, rather than yellow, in this turn. The making of one hoop for yellow is irrelevant, and in fact, as we shall see, actually places the striker at a disadvantage.

There are times when you are better off not making a hoop, and this is one of them.

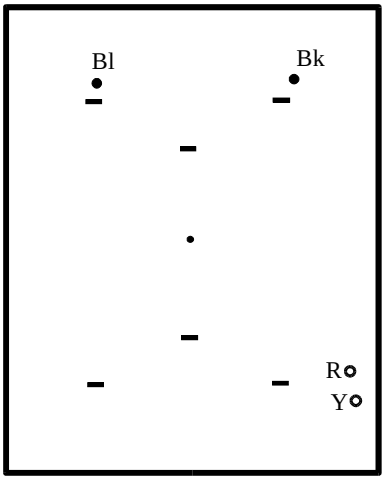


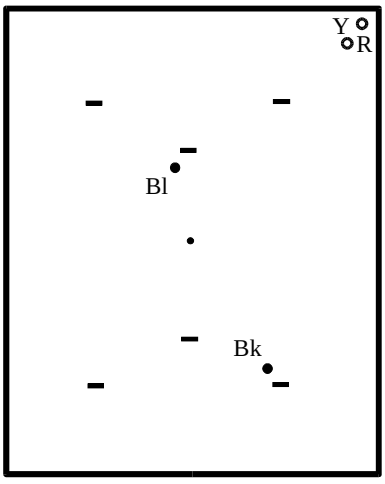
Red should rush yellow toward the opponent's balls and simply set up as shown in the second diagram, with one of the opponent's balls at each of red and yellow's hoops. This allows the opponent one chance to make a long roquet, which he stood to get anyway, and guarantees an easy break if he misses. Since even the best players cannot claim to roquet 50% of their shots over such distances, this gives red and yellow a much better than even chance of getting the next break. It is important to note that by making hoop 5 with yellow, the player actually harmed his own cause. The reason for this is that with clips on hoops 3 and 6, instead of 3 and 5, it is much harder to find a good leave which will guarantee a break on the next turn if the opponent fails to roquet. With clips on hoops 3 and 6 it is too risky to leave an opponent ball at each of your hoops, because these two hoops are too close together.



Clips on the same or nearby hoops are almost always a disadvantage. The best leave you could hope for would be something like those shown in the third and fourth diagrams. A few moments' thought should be sufficient to convince anyone that the position shown in the second diagram is much stronger for red and yellow than either of these two. In addition, if you go back to the first diagram and imagine yourself playing yellow, it is far from easy to work out a satisfactory way of making hoop 5 and placing the four balls as shown in the third or fourth diagrams (note that an accurately set rush is needed in each), so you would probably have to settle for a leave which is far weaker again.

Therefore, if you were red and yellow in the position of the first diagram, and the opponent generously offered you the chance to move your yellow clip on from hoop 5 to hoop 6, the offer should be politely declined, as you are far better off with it on hoop 5!



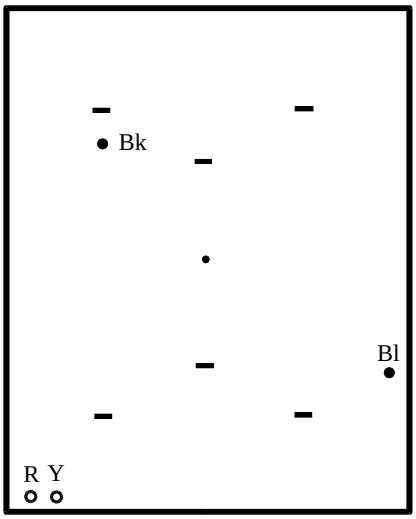


Yet players in such situations insist on making the easy hoop with nothing to follow and imagine that they have achieved something.

Instead of playing to make a single hoop with nothing set up ahead, it is almost always better to set up the lawn accurately in the first place. The exception to this is when your clips are already on the same or nearby hoops, so by making one hoop you can separate them and set a stronger leave.

WHEN TO RETURN WIDE OF PARTNER

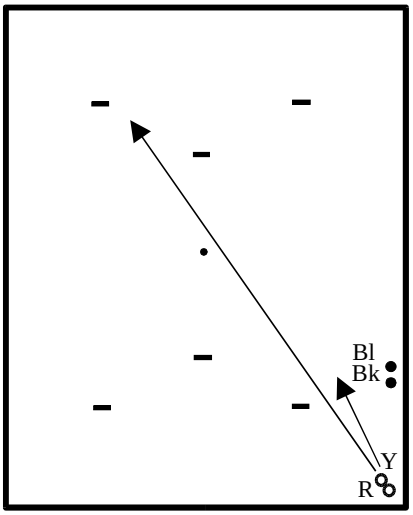
In the first diagram all clips are still on hoop 1. The game was played at inter-state level, and the player of black decided that shooting at blue would be risky, as if the shot was missed red need not try to make hoop 1, but could rush yellow to the fourth corner and then use the angled stop-shot illustrated in the second diagram to load hoop 2 before rushing either black or blue to hoop 1 with a break set up. Therefore he elected to return wide of blue as shown on the third diagram.



This tactic is frequently seen at all levels of play. It is arguably a legitimate tactic when used by players who are not capable of making consistent breaks, although against such an opponent the shot with black at blue is relatively safe, since he is likely to have difficulty playing the two rushes and angled stop-shot needed to set up the break as in the second diagram.

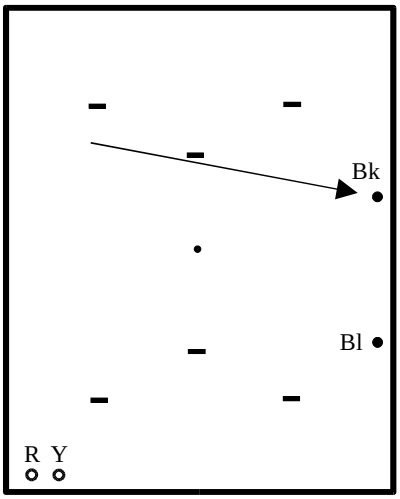
However, at higher levels of play the tactic of returning wide of partner, instead of shooting at a ball, should be seen in most cases as nothing more than an attempt to "con" the opponent by relying on him to commit an elementary mistake in tactics or shot-making, or both. A competent opponent simply will not make such mistakes, and black would have been better off attempting a roquet in the original position.

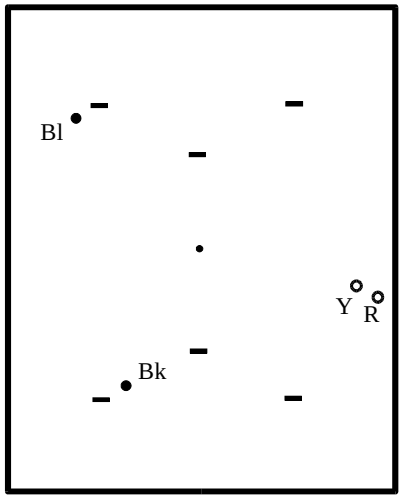
In the game the "con" trick worked, as after black returned wide of blue the player of red and yellow played red and attempted to make hoop 1 by cutting yellow in slightly, then rolling for the hoop. This involves taking risks with little prospect of getting a break established. It justified the tactic of returning wide in this particular instance and was what the player of black and blue was hoping for. Red actually succeeded in making hoop 1, but did not get a forward rush and had to take off to the opponent's balls with little chance of establishing a break; and neither was there any satisfactory way of obtaining a strong leave in order to give himself a good chance of a break on his next turn.



In the position of the third diagram red should have cut-rushed yellow toward blue and proceeded to set up the position shown in the fourth diagram. This allows the opponent one chance to make a long roquet, and gives an excellent chance of setting up a break if he misses. Any shot he takes will be "riskier" than the shot he refused to take in the original position.

Note that by returning wide of blue, black not only passed up a chance to roquet (he should actually have shot at yellow in the position of the first diagram), but also made it very easy for the player of red and yellow, if he had stopped to think, to set up for himself an "ideal leave". The position of the second diagram is actually less risky for black and blue against a thinking opponent than that of the third diagram. **When the opponent can be relied upon to think, and play percentages, the answer to the question in the heading of this article is "Almost never"!**

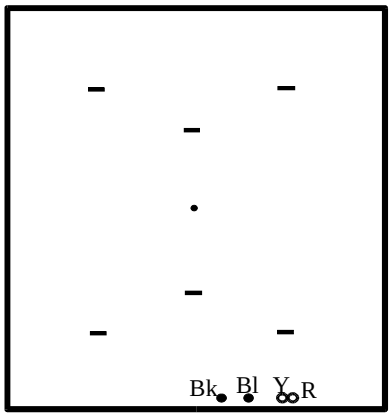




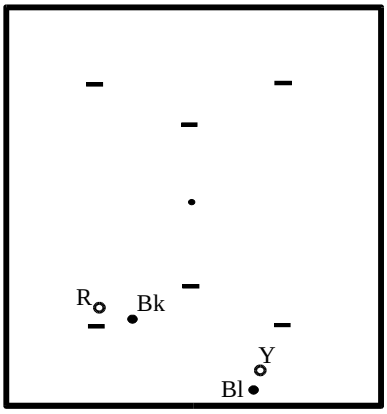
LEAVING BALLS TOGETHER

Many players at all levels of play seem to have a phobia about leaving balls together. An important breakthrough in the development of a croquet player comes when he or she manages to overcome this fear and starts regarding balls left together as a welcome advantage rather than a source of danger.

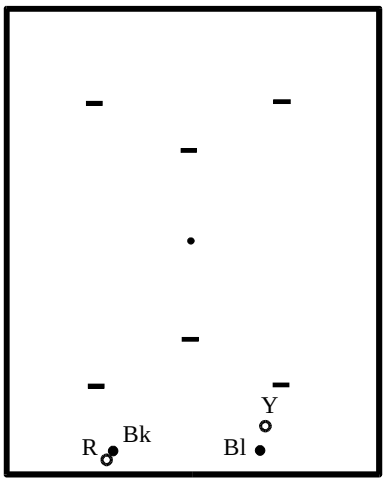
The first diagram shows a position which occurred in a doubles game in which I was involved. All clips were still on hoop 1. Our opponents had set their black and blue balls about 2 yards apart on the south boundary as shown, and my partner had played red, rushing yellow also to the south boundary. He asked me whether I thought he should (a) stop-shot yellow into the lawn a few yards past hoop 4, then make hoop 1 from the opponent's balls, which would risk leaving at least one of our balls in the lawn if anything went wrong; or (b) send blue to hoop 1 and then split black to hoop 2, trying at the same time to get position to run hoop 1, with the option of returning to yellow on the border if unsuccessful; or (c) stop-shot yellow to hoop 1, roquet blue, rush black along the border in front of hoop 1, and stop-shot black to hoop 2 while trying for position to run hoop 1.

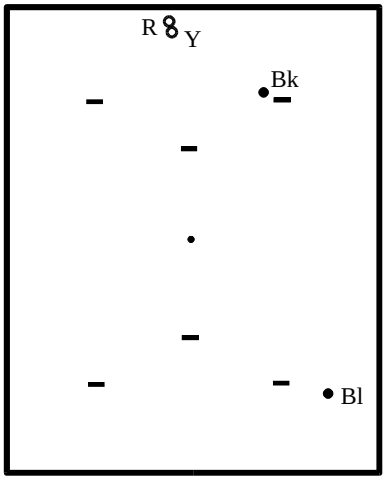


After making hoop 1 with alternative (a) he would have the situation shown in the second diagram. From here he could go to blue and send that ball to hoop 3 while trying for a rush on yellow to hoop 2 His chance of succeeding in this may be reasonable (say, about 60-70%), especially if he could rush black accurately to blue after making the hoop. Alternatives (b) and (c) offered a better chance of continuing the break if hoop 1 could be made, but the likelihood of making the hoop was considerably reduced to probably no more than an even (50%) chance.



I suggested as a fourth alternative that he send yellow only a yard or two into the lawn, leaving it near blue, and rush black to make hoop 1. He could expect to do this about 9 times out of 10, and also get some sort of backward rush to the border in front of hoop 1, which is almost always the easiest rush to get after making a hoop. This would bring him to the position shown in the third diagram, and from there it is not difficult to send black to hoop 3 while going to the two balls that have been left together. In most cases you would rush yellow out to blue (ignoring the common advice to go to the border ball first), and then get a rush on blue to hoop 2. Because the two balls have been left close together the getting of an accurate rush is relatively easy. It could be an interesting exercise to set up the original position at your club andask players of various levels how they would continue as red, and why.





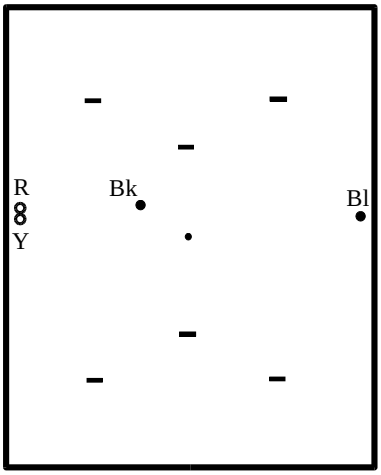
The correct continu-ation will depend to some extent on the shots which the player can play confidently, as well as his degree of "togetheraphobia". Another example is shown in the fourth diagram, where red is for hoop 3 and should send yellow right to hoop 4 (near blue), rather than only part-way as is frequently seen.

HOW TO CHANGE THE LENGTH OF A SHOT

The position shown in the first diagram occurred in a recent tournament game between two good division 2 players. The player of red had roqueted his partner ball on the west boundary, with the red clip on 3-back and yellow on the peg. He decided to take off to black, trying for a rush to his 3-back hoop.

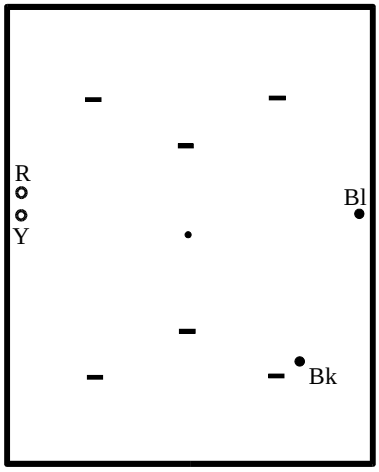
The rush was not a particularly good one, and he had to approach the hoop with a pass-roll from near hoop 5. When he failed to gain position to run the 3-back hoop, he returned red to the west boundary near yellow, reaching the position shown in the second diagram.

The opponent then shot with black at blue and made the 14-yard roquet. Later I discussed the game with the player of red and yellow, and asked firstly why he did not try to rush black to blue, instead of to the hoop. It turned out that although he was quite an experienced player, this course of action had simply not occurred to him. He could now see that it would have been easier, given the direction he was coming from, to get a good rush to the blue ball rather than the hoop; the black ball could be rushed right out of court anywhere near blue without having to judge the strength of the shot, the black ball could be put advantageously into the lawn a yard or two when getting a rush on blue to 3-back, and the rush to the hoop would be a shorter one, which could therefore be judged more accurately.



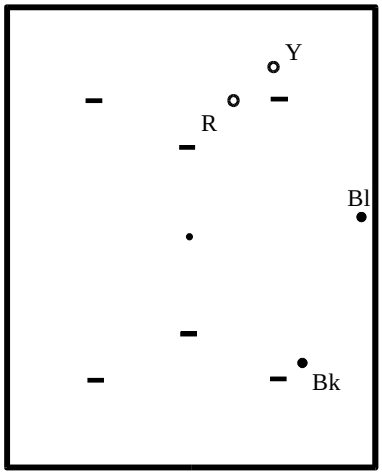
This idea of converting a long rush into a shorter one is frequently overlooked.

Secondly, I asked why he had taken off from yellow, instead of sending it to load the 4-back hoop. He explained that he was not certain of getting the rush and making 3-back (as indeed happened), so did not want to put his yellow partner ball too close to blue, in case he had to return to it. So we set up the position shown in the third diagram, which was the situation he wished to avoid, in which yellow is at 4-back and red has returned near it, presuming that as in the game he had been unable to make 3-back. I asked him what he considered the opponent should do in this position, and he realised that the shot with black at blue was now very risky for the opponent, since a miss would allow red to roquet yellow, take off to the two opponent balls, rush one of them to 3-back, and very likely finish the game. (Note that in diagram 2 this same shot entailed little risk.)



Therefore he said that black should shoot at red or yellow, and the opponent's 14-yard roquet had been converted to a 21-yard roquet! Whether he was able to make his 3-back hoop or not, he was better off with yellow at 4-back, yet he had considered this course of action too risky!

Better still, when sending yellow to 4-back he could have tried for the rush on black to blue instead of to the hoop, as we have already seen; and yellow could be placed a yard or two behind 4-back so that if necessary red could return to a position about halfway between yellow and the north boundary, thus "covering the border" and making any shot at all by the opponent extremely risky.

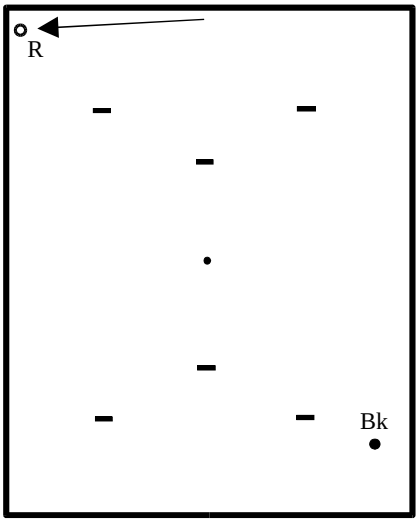


An analysis of almost any game, up to and including those played at state level, will reveal that games are won and lost as a result of tactical errors such as these, and not because (as the player of red imagined) the opponent managed to hit a good roquet with black at a critical time. Below international level the ability to hit long roquets has little effect on the outcome of a game; but tactical choices have a very great effect. Unfortunately, it is almost impossible for a coach to convince most players that if they want to win more games they should be spending time improving their tactics rather than their roqueting ability.

OPENING IDEAS

Most players have some ideas concerning how to continue if the opponent varies at some stage from the standard opening. Here are some points which may prove helpful:

(1) If the opponent's first ball of the game (black) falls just short of the yardline near hoop 4, as shown in the first diagram, it is not a good idea to hit your first ball to the normal 'tice' position, as blue, instead of shooting at black, can be played so as to obtain a rush to your 'tice'. The best plan is probably to hit your ball (red) in from B-baulk, to a position about one foot up the side border from the 2nd corner spot as shown. Then, if the opponent shoots at red with blue, he risks giving you an easy double target with yellow; and if he plays to the border near black, you can (in fact, must) shoot at his balls from either B-baulk or (if they present a good target) from A-baulk.

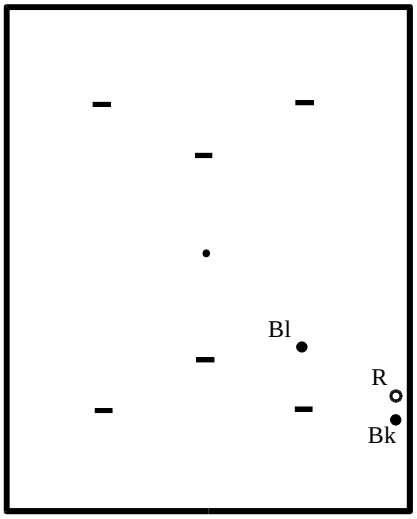


(2) If (on the second turn of the game) you had shot with red at black and missed, the most aggressive continuation for the opponent would have been to place blue as shown in the second diagram, where he is threatening, unless you roquet with yellow, to play black on the 5th turn, use a stop-shot to send red to hoop 2, and rush blue to hoop 1. Care needs to be taken in placing blue to ensure that yellow will not have an inviting "triple" target from the in-lawn end of B-baulk. Any shot taken by yellow from A-baulk will risk making it very easy for black by giving him the fourth ball to use as well.

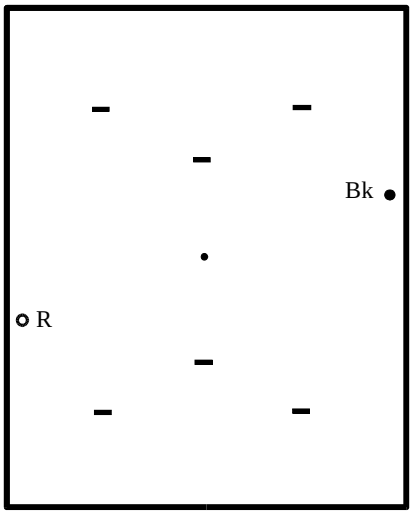
(3) If you had roqueted black with red on your first turn, there are three reasonable possibilities -

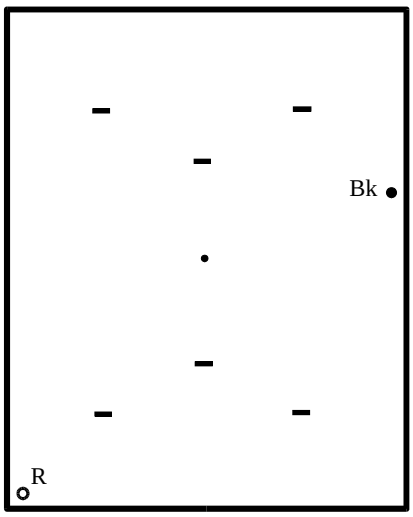
(a) Roll both balls (red and black) to the peg and leave them cross-wired there. Both balls should be left within 2 yards of the peg so that the opponent has no safe shot through toward a corner. However, he can risk putting his third (blue) ball also in the middle of the lawn, allowing you the chance to roquet and set up a 4-ball break; but giving him a 3-ball break if you miss.

(b) Send black up the east border to a long 'tice' position from B-baulk, and hit red out on the west border in a similarly long 'tice' position from A-baulk, as shown in the third diagram. Then, if the opponent shoots diagonally at either ball, he risks leaving you a double target to shoot at with yellow on the fourth turn.



(c) Place black as in (b) above, but hit red out in the lst corner as shown in the 4th diagram. This is a very aggressive option, and unless the lawn is very fast and the opponent is very good at playing long pass rolls, is likely to cause him considerable embarrassment. There are many other similar ideas which are frequently overlooked by players who have not thought through and prepared themselves to meet any opening variations the opponent may decide to try on them.

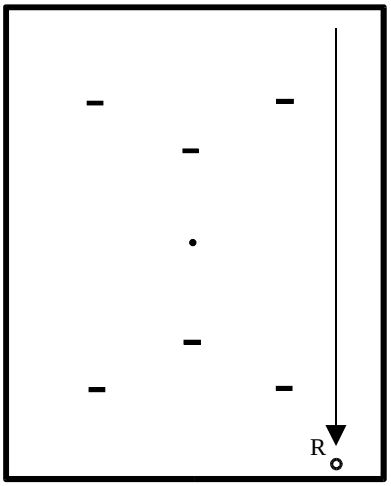




A DIFFERENT OPENING

Are you getting bored with starting games in the same old way every time? Why not try an aggressive new start which has proved effective at interstate level (although at that level it may be considered somewhat risky) ?

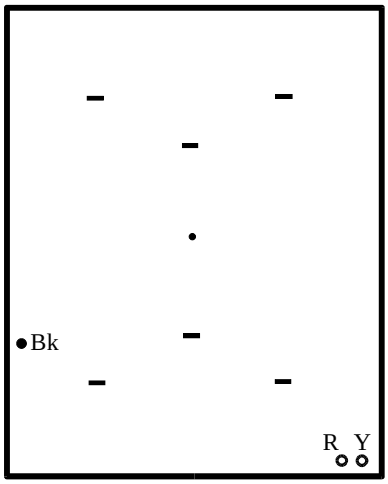
In the first diagram the player of red and yellow won the toss, elected to start, and hit his first (red) ball from B-baulk as shown by the arrow to a point on the south boundary about 2 feet from the 4th corner spot.



Then his opponent played black to a "tice" position as normal, and yellow was played into the 4th corner, making no attempt to roquet red. This results in the position shown on the second diagram.

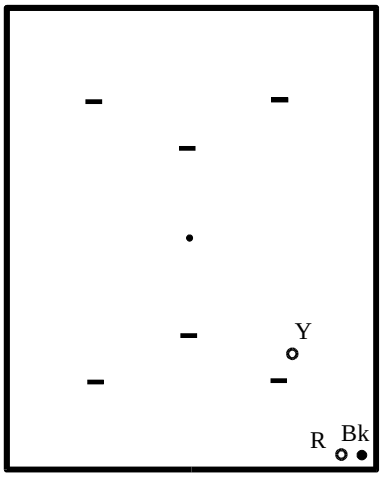
If blue then misses the tice and finishes in the second corner, yellow has a cut-rush either to the tice or to hoop 1, giving a better than usual chance of establishing an immediate break. If blue had roqueted the tice he would be no better off than in a standard opening. If blue shoots at the balls in the 4th corner he risks giving red a cannon (which needs practice), again with an excellent chance of a break.

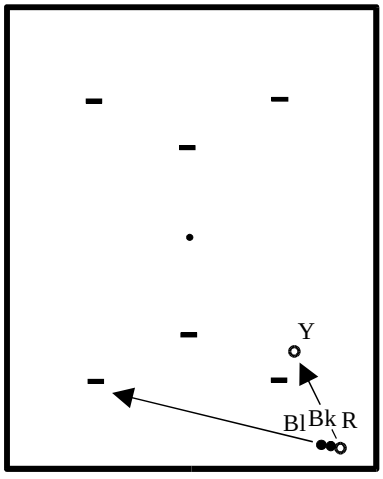
If black (on the 2nd turn) shoots at red and misses he risks giving yellow a double target, or else allowing yellow to be placed as shown in the second diagram. Here red is threatening to at least roquet black and send it to hoop 2 while getting a rush on yellow to hoop 1.



A missed shot by blue at yellow will give him the 4th ball as well, while a missed shot at red would allow a simple promotion cannon as illustrated in the fourth diagram (in which the blue ball is sent to hoop 1 without being roqueted, while red finishes near the yellow ball, which can then be roqueted and split to hoop 2 as red goes to the unused blue ball at hoop 1), followed by an immediate break.

In the third diagram yellow should be placed so that it does not allow blue too inviting a "triple target" from B-baulk; and at international level one would need to bear in mind that if the opponent does succeed in making a roquet with blue on the fourth turn, he is likely to have an easy nine-hoop break. However, even at that level the risk he is taking in shooting at any ball is considerable, since any missed shot will give you the same break even more easily. There is also the consideration that to set the break up immediately the opponent will often need to play either a promotion cannon, or a delayed cannon, or a cannon from the fourth corner to load hoop 2 while rushing a ball to hoop 1. These cannons are not straight-forward, and it is unlikely that the opponent will have spent much time practising them; whereas you, if you plan to use this opening, can ensure that you know how to play them accurately and confidently.

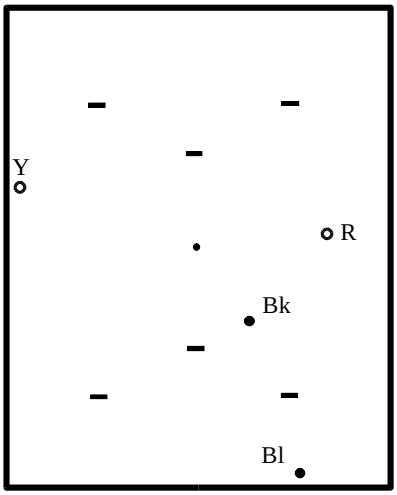




On the whole, this opening seems to offer you a better chance of getting a break established before your opponent does than most other openings; and there is also the psychological advantage of getting him confused and wondering what he should be doing in reply.

HITTING THROUGH TO BORDER

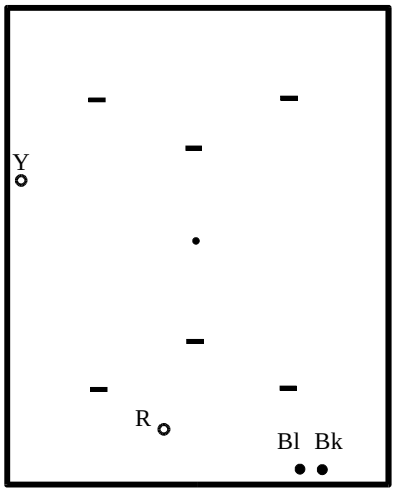
In the position shown on the first diagram red has a good, but not certain, chance of roqueting black. It is common for an experienced player of yellow to advise his inexperienced partner, "Have a go at black, but make sure you go right through to the border if you miss". In most situations this is very good advice, but in the situation shown here red should pause and consider what the opponent is likely to do on his next turn, and it is obvious here that black is likely to shoot at blue. If black does not succeed in roqueting blue, the opponent's two balls will be on the south border, and the ideal place for red would then be 2-3 yards in from the border so that the opponent's balls present a double target as shown in the second diagram. Therefore, it may be better to play red so that if it misses black it will not quite reach the border.



Note that if red were on the border in the second diagram then the single-ball target presented by the opponent's balls would be far less inviting for red. Of course, the roqueting ability of the opponent must be taken into account, and also the possibility that he will be able to use red more easily if he does roquet blue with black. But you should at least give a thought to tactics such as this, rather than simply shooting through to the border without thinking, then later complaining that you lost the game because you "couldn't get a roquet", when you actually lost because you did not think!

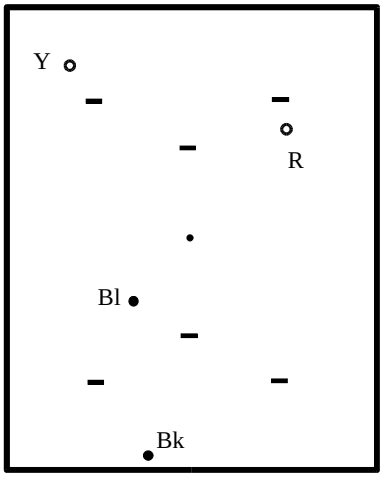
This idea is an example of the many situations in which players tend to shoot at a ball and go right through to the border without thinking.

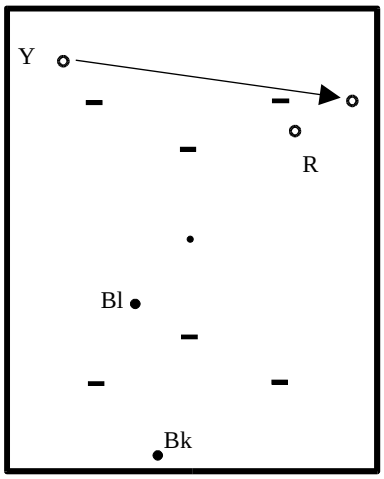
A slightly different version of the same idea is illustrated in the third diagram. With all clips still on hoop 1, most players would shoot with yellow at red. This is good if the roquet is made, but there were two alternatives worth consideration:



(1) Red could shoot at blue, and finish on the west border a few yards from the first corner. This would allow red a likely double target if blue then shoots at black and misses, but would allow black a (risky) shot at red, and would probably commit you to shooting at black with red if blue is hit out to the south border wide of black.

(2)) Yellow could, instead of shooting at red, be played so as to cover the border against a shot by blue at red (see fourth diagram). This would place the opponent under considerable pressure, since with both your clips on hoop 1 a missed shot with blue at black would give you a good chance of setting up a break, and a missed shot at your balls would allow yellow to roquet blue, send it to hoop 2, and rush red to either the black ball (which is the best way to go about things) or to hoop 1. Once again, the choice of shot depends on the roqueting ability of both you and your opponent; but the alternatives should at least be given consideration.



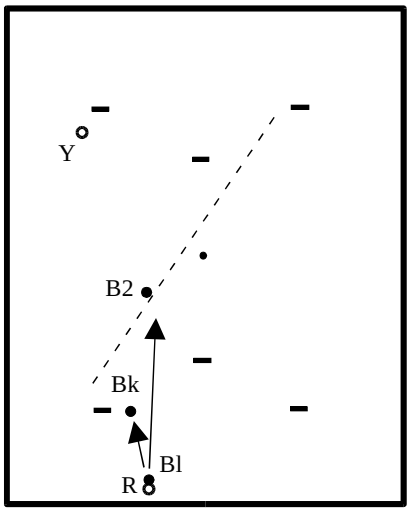


One suspects that the number of games lost simply through lack of thought is far higher than most players would admit - especially in regard to their own games!

PLACING THE PIVOT BALL

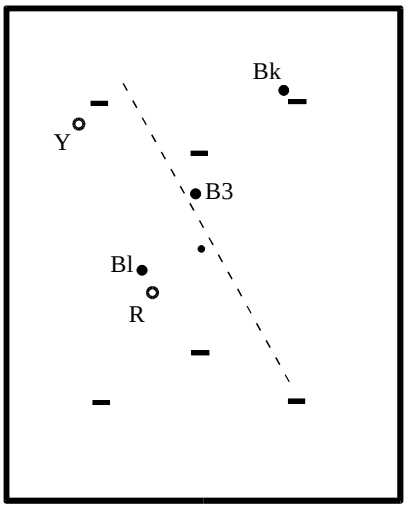
One of the keys to playing consistent 4-ball breaks is accurate placement of the pivot ball. This requires not only the ability to play confidently a considerable range of croquet strokes, but also a clear understanding of exactly where the pivot ball should be placed. In the first diagram red is about to send blue into the lawn for use as a pivot ball in the break before making hoop 1 from black. The correct place for blue is not just anywhere near the peg, but as close as possible to a specific point which is found as follows:

Imagine a straight line drawn from just behind the hoop you are about to make to the hoop you will load after making it (i.e. hoop 1 to hoop 3 as shown by the dotted line). Find a point one-third of the distance along this line and from there go one yard toward the ball at hoop 2. This will bring you to point B2, which is the ideal place to send the pivot ball. Following this "one yard from one-third" principle in placing the pivot ball will allow you to load hoops more accurately with straight, simple croquet strokes (mostly "natural" 1:3 drives) which also give you a rush on the pivot ball toward the ball waiting at your next hoop.



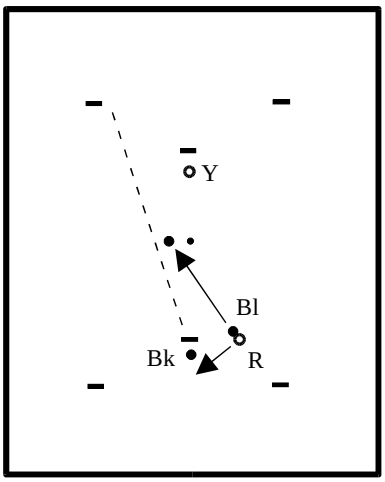
However, before roqueting or rushing the pivot ball, you need to find its next pivot point (B3 on diagram 2) by imagining a point behind hoop 2, going one-third of the way to hoop 4, then one yard toward the black ball at hoop 3.

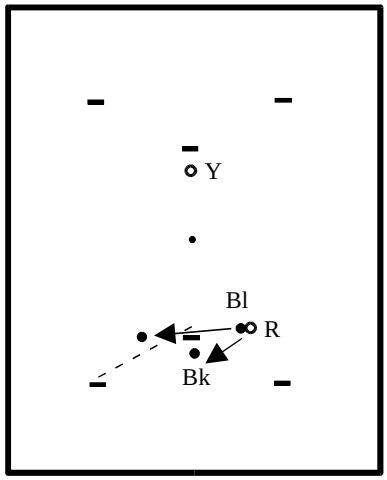
The blue ball in diagram 2 must be rushed or roqueted to a place from which it can easily be sent to point B3 while red goes to yellow at hoop 2. This usually involves rushing the pivot ball (blue) out past the ball at the hoop (yellow) and then using either a 1:3 drive or a stop-shot to send it to point B3. A break continued in this manner is easy to maintain and should seldom get out of control. There is no need to attempt to get a rush in any particular direction after making each hoop, so you can concentrate on simply ensuring that the hoop is made. A useful rush, if you get one, can be considered a bonus.



After making hoop 4 and having loaded hoop 6 with yellow as shown in the third diagram, there are two alternatives. If you intend to load 1-back with black after making hoop 5, then continue the previous pattern of "one yard from one third" and place the blue pivot ball near the peg as shown, using an angled stop-shot.

Some players, however, prefer to load 2-back at this stage of the break, and so they should send the pivot ball to the point shown on the fourth diagram, which is one-third of the way from hoop 5 to 2-back. Note that placing the pivot ball right at 2-back, as many players do, is incorrect because it makes the break slightly harder to continue unless you can rely on getting a rush on black after making hoop 5.

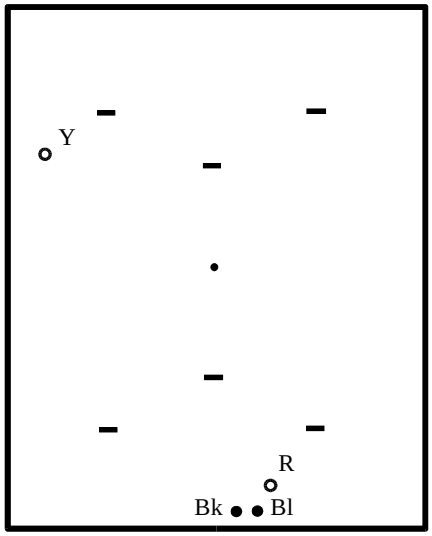


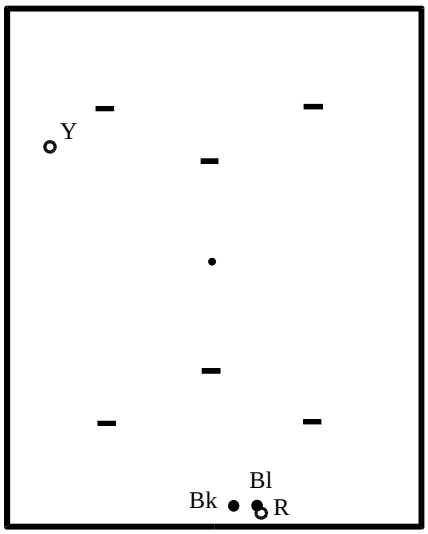


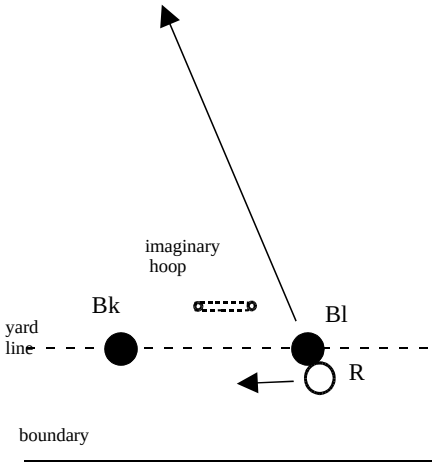
The exact position of each pivot point will vary a little according to the shots the player prefers to play, but it is important to keep placing the pivot ball not just anywhere, but in the best possible position to make future shots easy.

PRACTISING DURING THE GAME

When I suggested this idea to a player I was coaching, he said, "Oh, they'd never allow that at our club. They won't even let you practise on the lawns before play starts!" I explained that what I had in mind was something quite different. When you are faced with a very simple shot, or one of little consequence, it is easy to treat it carelessly, and so miss out on an opportunity to practise the shots you will need to play later. One obvious example is the situation where you are hitting your first ball into the game. The wise player will take great care in checking his grip; positioning his feet; selecting his line of aim; effecting a high, straight backswing and smooth, flowing forward swing; and judging the strength of the shot required to send the ball (probably) over the boundary to an exact point outside the lawn. This enables him to practise getting right the timing of his swing and all these things which he may possibly overlook in later shots when he could have other things on his mind. It should also assist him in gaining some appreciation of the speed of the lawn.







In the first diagram red is for hoop 1, and has taken off from yellow to the opponent's balls on the south border. He is about to play a roquet of less than one yard on the blue ball. This is an excellent opportunity to practise either the rush or the hoop-running which he will be playing in the next few shots. If he wishes to practise his rushing, he will stand a little further back than for a normal roquet, lean his weight back a little, and use a long, flat, smooth swing to actually rush the blue ball firmly out of court, noticing whether his striker's ball jumps slightly or fails to hit the blue ball dead centre, so that he can correct such slight errors when he plays the forthcoming rush.

If he wishes to practise hoop-running, then he may instead stand slightly further forward than for a normal roquet, take a perfectly straight backswing, and use a smooth forward swing to gently roll (rather than hit) his ball, again expecting to roquet the blue ball absolutely dead centre and looking for any slight error that may need correction.

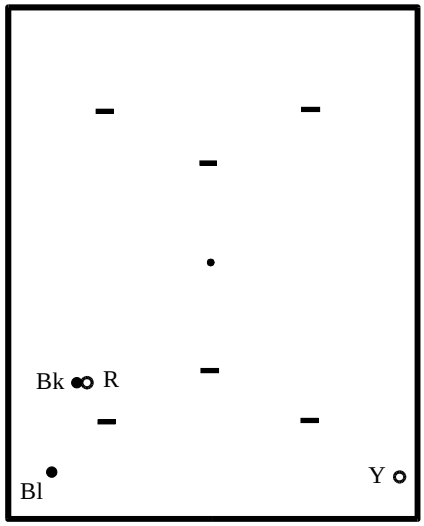
After roqueting blue, the player of red will have reached the position shown on the second diagram. Here he will send blue a short distance into the lawn and get a rush on black to hoop 1. This involves playing a fairly simple croquet stroke which can be used to practise the hoop approach he will soon be playing. The third diagram gives an enlarged view of the three balls at the bottom of the second diagram, and shows an imaginary hoop near the yardline. By imagining a hoop in the right place and playing the croquet stroke as if he were approaching it, the player of red is able to practise the grip, stance, backswing, forward swing and strength of a fairly simple hoop approach. In most cases this will increase, rather than lessen, his chance of getting a good rush on black to hoop 1. He can then proceed to play the rush, hoop approach, and run the hoop using the shots he has practised, and correct any slight errors he has noticed.

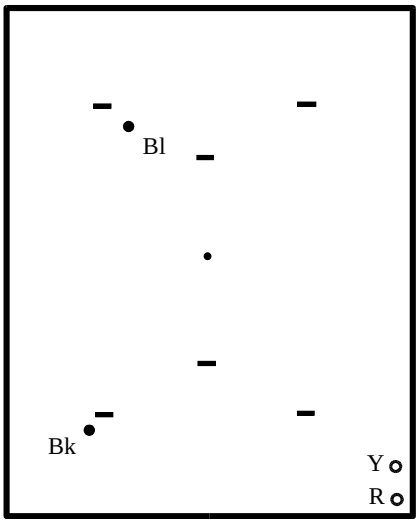
These are merely examples. The astute player will be aware of the things he needs to concentrate on getting right when playing the various shots, and will find many such opportunities to practise them so that he can correct any likely errors before disaster strikes. This is why most of our leading players seem to be painstaking in their approach to shots which a less experienced player would see no need to be so concerned about. They are practising during the game, and it is perfectly legal under the Laws!

HOW TO PLAY AGGRESSIVELY (part 1)

In my booklets on Strategy and Tactics I explained in detail the point that aggressive play is tactically correct, in that it almost always gives the best percentage chance of winning the game. It is unfortunate that many players, whose shot making has developed to the stage where they can make consistent breaks, fail to adopt the more aggressive tactical approach that their skill level (and that of their opponents) now not only allows, but demands. It seems that they fail to realise that if both you and your opponent can make sizeable breaks, you cannot expect to win games by making one or two hoops at a time. The game will be won by the player who gets breaks established before his opponent does; and your whole strategy should geared to ensuring that it is you, and not your opponent, who does this. The making of one or two hoops here or there is irrelevant; in fact, until 1-back is made, even a break of six is largely irrelevant, since it will still take you at least three turns to finish the game, assuming that you cannot afford to concede contact. At the highest level, a break of six can even be a disadvantage, because if your clip was still on hoop 1 you would have the opportunity to finish the game in two turns by doing a triple peel; but with it already on hoop 6 this would be far more difficult, and in most cases not worth trying.

The first diagram shows a position at the start of a game where red has just made hoop 1 and roqueted black. How should the player of red continue? Most would take off from black to blue, trying for a rush to either hoop 2 or the yellow ball. However, there is no way of loading hoop 3 or even hoop 4 before making hoop 2, so the chance of getting a break established is very small indeed. We have just seen above that it is largely pointless to try to make one or two hoops with little chance of establishing a break. Taking risks by making odd hoops with an opponent's ball when there is no break to follow is usually not aggressive; it is foolhardy. The truly aggressive player is willing to take risks, but only when, if they come off, he will have a break set up. The correct play (for a player who can make breaks) is to use a small pass roll to position black near hoop 1 and obtain a rush on blue to yellow in the 4th corner. If the rush is not obtained, blue can simply be sent to hoop 2 and red then hit out into the 4th corner, obtaining the leave shown in the second diagram. Even if blue can be rushed right to yellow, it should be sent with a stop-shot to hoop 2 and the same leave made. It is pointless to try to rush yellow to hoop 2 and make it, as the great majority of players would do, since it involves leaving blue out of play and very likely allowing the opponent a relatively safe shot on his next turn. In the second diagram, the opponent gets one long shot, but a miss will give you an easy break. This is real aggression! It says to the opponent, "Shoot if you dare, but you'd better not miss, because if you do, I'm going around!" It is always tempting, especially against a very strong opponent, to take the opportunity to make another hoop or two while you can; and who knows? - if you happen to play several good shots in a row, or fluke a long roll that ends right in front of your hoop, you may even succeed in getting a break established immediately. Such happy possibilities are pleasant to contemplate, but in reality the odds are very much against them. You are far more likely to end up having to allow the opponent a chance to roquet in a position where even if he misses, you will still be a long way from setting up a break.



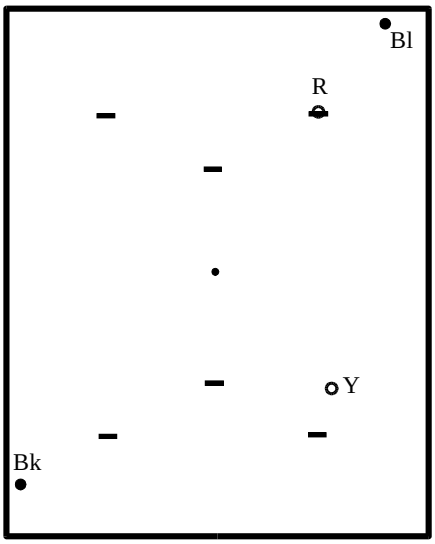


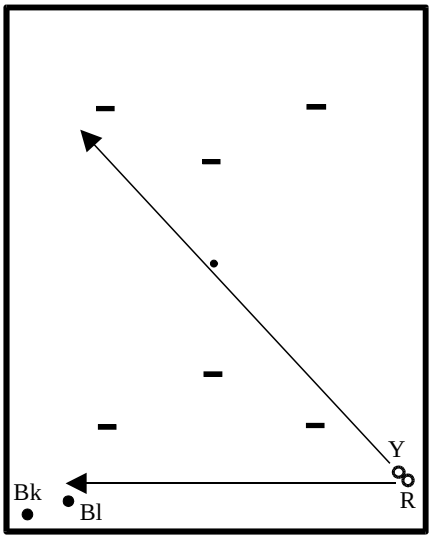
This is why it is tactically far better to recognise right from the start that your chance of setting up an immediate break is very small, and take the first opportunity to set up an "ideal leave" as explained in my previous books, allowing your opponent one long chance to roquet, and one only, before you have your break established. Note also that in the second diagram, if the opponent chooses not to shoot, and instead hits a ball away into a corner, you will still have at least a 3-ball break.

HOW TO PLAY AGGRESSIVELY (part 2)

Aggressive play involves the willingness to take a reasonable risk which, if it comes off, will give you a break, especially when the opponent will not have an immediate break if it fails to come off.

In the first diagram blue, which is for hoop 2, has just missed a shot at red, which had stuck in hoop 3. The player of red can now hit red through the hoop and down to yellow near hoop 4. Most players would do this without stopping to think. But the aggressive player thinks of making breaks, not hoops. He will realise that the chance of setting up a break after making hoops 3 and 4 is extremely remote, and if something goes wrong there is a fair possibility that he will have to leave one or both of his balls out in the lawn and allow the opponent to take a relatively safe shot at them. A risk such as this should not be taken, since the only thing you stand to gain is one or two somewhat meaningless hoops. Correct is to make hoop 3 gently and then roquet blue, provided you can play the fairly long split roll from near the 3rd corner to load hoop 5 with blue while going to yellow at hoop 4. The roquet may be far from a certainty, but if you hit it you have a good chance of a break to follow; and if you miss it blue can do little. This type of risk is the sort that should definitely be taken, although far too many players, even at state level, would prefer a "safer" course of action which in fact gives them less chance of winning the game. Suppose, for example, that you believe you can roquet blue (after making hoop 3) eight times out of ten. Is there any other way you can assure yourself an 80% chance of getting a break established before your opponent does? If you simply make hoop 3 and then hoop 4 with both opponent balls out of play, you are soon going to have to give him a chance to roquet, which he could expect to hit, say, one time out of four. That gives him a 25% chance, and you only a 75% chance, even in the unlikely event that you only have to allow him the one chance. The 80% chance you could have taken in the first place was clearly your better option.





In the fourth diagram all clips are on hoop 1 and red has roqueted yellow in the 4th corner. The aggressive play is to split yellow to hoop 2 while going to the opponent's balls in the 1st corner. Once again, you do not need to be certain of getting to the opponent's balls without going out, and then roqueting one of them. If instead you take off to the opponent's balls, you will almost certainly have to give the opponent another chance to roquet before you get a break established. No matter where you put the balls, he should have a 20% or better chance of roqueting. In order to ensure that he gets only the one chance, you would need to leave them so that if he misses you can make an immediate break yourself, and this means that you must leave his balls near hoops rather than out on the borders, giving him more likely about a 30% chance of roqueting. All of this means that failure to attempt the big split-shot needed to immediately set up your break involves conceding a 20-30% (say, 25%) chance to your opponent. Therefore, if you would expect the split to be successful 4 times out of 5 (i.e. 80% of the time) or better, you are reducing your chance of winning the game by not attempting it. In addition to this, the psychological advantages of playing aggressively are not to be dismissed lightly.

Note that if you rate your chance of playing the split-shot successfully at noticeably less than, say, 75%, then you would be incorrect to attempt it. In that case, you should take off to the opponent's balls, make hoop 1 from one of them, and set up a leave similar to that shown in the second diagram on the previous page. This gives the opponent the one (approx. 25%) chance to roquet, so it is preferable to attempting the split if your success rate would be less than 75%. Also note that the fact that the opponent would have an immediate break if the split is unsuccessful does not matter. Allowing him a 20% chance of a break, and yourself an 80% chance, is pretty good odds, and better than you are likely to obtain by pursuing any other course of action. Such chances should be taken without hesitation!

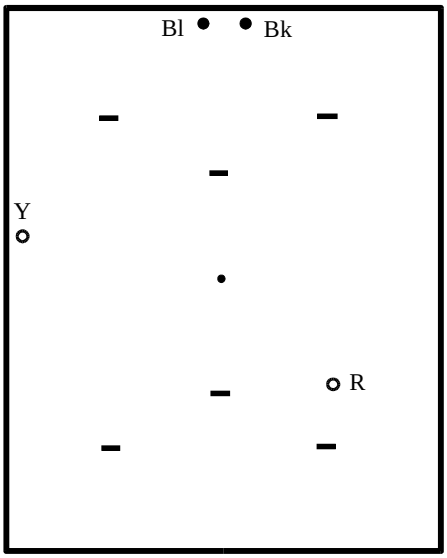
MORE ON THE 'THREE-ONE' PRINCIPLE

The 'Three-one' Principle, as explained in "Croquet: Lessons in Tactics", states that when all four balls are on or near a border, it is usually harder to establish a break with three balls together and one separate, than with two and two. Therefore, when you have one of your balls out in the middle of the lawn, it is usually safer to shoot at the opponent's balls when they are together near the border, instead of shooting at your partner ball. This applies regardless of the fact that the opponent may not have a useful rush, and if you miss you will allow him to get one, since he will able to rush only one ball to his hoop, without having loaded the following hoop. When players are capable of playing reasonable split-shots and making breaks, allowing the opponent to make one hoop is of little consequence. However, returning to your partner ball (unless both his two balls and your two balls will be in different corners and he has no useful rush) is likely to allow him to use a rush and/or split-shot to load the following hoop with his partner ball while coming to your two balls, then rush one of your balls to his current hoop with at least a 3-ball break set up.

We have also seen in other articles that against a thinking opponent it is almost always suicidal to "return wide" of your partner ball, as there is no reason why the opponent should allow you any safer chance to roquet, before he gets a break established, than the one you passed up by returning wide.

It is surprising how often one sees some of our leading players, as well as those at lower levels but still capable of making breaks, who either do not understand this principle or fail to apply it in their games, and so greatly reduce their winning chances.

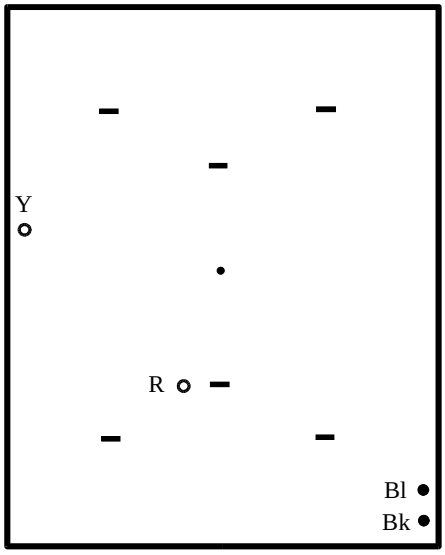
The first diagram shows a situation where black is for hoop 3 and blue is for 4-back. Although black does not have a useful rush, and there is no double target, the only sensible thing for the player of red to do (in a game where both players are capable of making sizeable breaks) is to shoot at the opponent's balls. A useful exercise is to work out which of the two opponent balls red should shoot at. Players may argue either way, e.g. -



(a) "If I shoot at black and miss, the opponent will probably have to leave my red ball on the border and take his partner ball to hoop 3. If he cannot make the hoop, he will then be unable to set up safely, and will have to leave at least one of his balls out near the hoop. If he takes my ball to his hoop, he has the blue ball to return to if anything goes wrong."

(b) "If I shoot at blue and miss, it will be harder for black to create a cannon, which is probably his best chance of getting a break established. He would in any case be having to make hoop 3 with my red ball, so that if he fails at the hoop he will immediately let me in."

It seems that the second of these two arguments is the stronger one. The possibility of the opponent creating a cannon should be taken into consideration, and he is likely to be less happy with a cannon in which he must send his blue partner ball into the lawn to load the next hoop and make his current hoop from your red ball, than if the red and blue balls were interchanged.



In the second diagram black has now made hoop 3 and is for hoop 4. Here again red should shoot at the opponent's balls rather than at yellow, for reasons similar to those given above. Very few players, it seems, are willing to "risk giving the opponent an extra ball", and so most prefer to shoot at their yellow partner ball or 'return wide' of it. As with other tactical considerations, they mostly have failed to realise the dramatic change in the level of risk they are taking once they start playing opponents capable of maintaining breaks. Tactics which were rightly considered fairly safe against weaker opponents now become extremely risky, and vice versa; and defensive tactics become far less likely to prove successful.

SECTION 10

RISK TAKING

Although many references to this topic have necessarily been made in other sections, it is of sufficient importance, and so little understood, as to warrant separate consideration in a section of its own.

Some of the ideas are difficult to explain clearly in words, and really need to be reinforced by demonstrations out on the lawn. Even when they are understood by a player, he may well experience difficulty in bringing himself to adopt them, think of them in a match situation, and actually put them into practice.

The series of articles on 'manoeuvring' in particular will require a considerable amount of persistence from the reader if he is to fully grasp its importance and usefulness, and be able to apply it in his own games. Perhaps the point should again be made here that many of the ideas explained in this section, as well as some in other sections, will mainly be relevant when both players are capable of making sizeable breaks.

PRINCIPLES OF RISK-TAKING

The most difficult part of teaching and learning correct tactical play is that which deals with the type of risk which should, and should not, be taken during a game. All such decisions should ideally be based on the estimation and calculation of percentages, but there are some principles which can often prove helpful:

1. The stronger your opponent, the more risks you should be prepared to take. For example, suppose that I am offered the possibility of playing a shot which I would expect to hit 4 times out of 10, and if successful would give me an all-round break, but if unsuccessful would give the same break to my opponent. I would take the shot and grab the 40% chance against an international player, because in general play his superior shots and greater experience would assure him of a much better than 60% chance of beating me. But if the opponent is weaker I would not want to allow him a 60% chance, and would wait hopefully for a better chance later on. This is in direct contrast to the common and incorrect idea that when you play a strong opponent you cannot afford to give them any chances, so must play safe. Such negative play will perhaps make the game longer and more boring, but will guarantee the stronger player will eventually win.

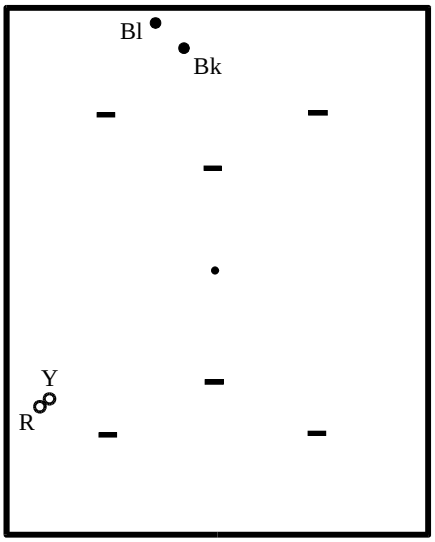
2. Be prepared to take reasonable risks at the start of a game, especially if it is the first game of the day for both you and your opponent. Some players have a habit of "playing dry", which involves (in their opinion) playing safe and refusing to take any risks, until they have "got the feel of the lawn and played themselves in". In fact, there is nothing "safe" about the adoption of such tactics, except that on percentages it is a safe way of allowing your opponent to get a long way ahead before you get started. The best time to take risks is when your opponent also does not have the "feel of the lawn", so is less likely to be able to profit if anything goes wrong. In addition, if the risk happens to come off, then it will give you a valuable boost in confidence.

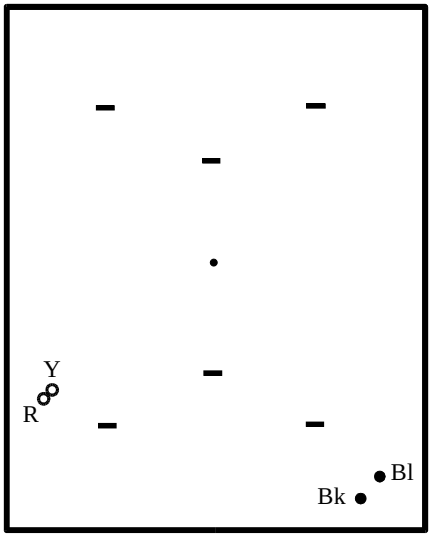
3. **Take any risk which offers you a 60% or better chance of setting up (or continuing) a break.** You do not need to be <u>certain</u> of succeeding before attempting a hoop or roquet which, if unsuccessful, will let your opponent in and (even) give him a break. You should chance it, provided you estimate that you would expect to succeed more than 6 times out of 10. Refusing to take such chances is not playing safe; it is simply reducing your chance of winning the game. However, in most situations there is no point in taking even a much smaller risk if, when it comes off, it allows you to make only one hoop with nothing much set up ahead.

4. When you are the out-player, take any risk which gives you a 40% or better chance of gaining the innings. This means that you should attempt a roquet which you would expect to hit only 4 times out of 10, even though a miss will allow your opponent to set up an easy break. Both this principle and the previous one follow from the fact that the player with the innings has at least a 60% chance of getting the next break, regardless of where the balls are. By (for example) hitting a ball out of play without attempting a roquet, you give yourself no better than a 40% chance of getting a break established before your opponent does, and are immediately conceding him at least a 60% chance of getting the next break. Therefore any 40% chance of making a roquet is preferable.

5. Shooting at a ball is almost always safer than not shooting. The percentages greatly favour aggressive play. In most situations hitting away into a corner will allow your opponent much better than the minimum 60% chance of getting the next break mentioned in the previous paragraph. It is usually closer to 70% or 80%. Therefore you should attempt a roquet when you give yourself only 20% or 30% chance of making it, even if a miss will give the opponent an immediate easy break. I sometimes lie awake at night trying to think up positions where shooting at a ball may not give the best percentage chance of getting a break established before the opponent does, and so may not be the safest thing to do. Such positions are very rare, and almost always involve a situation where you are wired from one or more of the balls, and the ball you have to move is already around, so you do not particularly want to roquet with it anyway. If there are three balls you could shoot at, then there should be at least one of them which you would expect to hit 3 times out of 10, or which if you miss will require the opponent to play some accurate and not-so-straight-forward shots in order to set up his break. The player who is prepared to take such risks will not expect to win every game, but will certainly win more games than if he refuses to take them. Occasionally the risk will not come off, and after losing the game you are tempted to say to yourself (or more likely have someone else say to you), "I should have played safe!" But it is important to remember that there is nothing safe about "playing safe" in the way that most people mean it. What reason could you give for supposing that you would have won the game if you had not taken the risk which failed to come off? In actual fact, you would have been even more likely to end up losing. Of course, if you knew you were going to miss, that would be a different thing; but you could well have made the roquet and ended up winning. That is what makes the study of croquet tactics, and playing the game, so fascinating: there are no certainties or guarantees. All you can ever do is maximise your chances and hope they come off.

RISK TAKING





The first diagram shows a common type of situation in which all clips are still on hoop 1 and red has roqueted yellow about 5 yards from the hoop. The player of red now must decide whether to play an approach shot and attempt to make the hoop, or instead take off to the opponent's balls near the north border.

The second diagram shows a similar situation, except that in this case the opponent's balls are near the 4th corner instead of near the north border. What would you do if you were red in each situation? On what basis would you make the decision - what things would you take into account in these or similar situations? Would the position of the opponent's balls (assuming they are together) make any difference?

The answer, of course, depends on the ability of both players, and particularly on whether or not they are capable of making sizeable breaks. If they are, then it is also likely that they are capable of making the hoop with a 5-yard approach at least 7 times out of 10 - maybe even more often. If this is the case, then the correct tactical move for the player of red in the first position is to make hoop 1 immediately, even though the opponent's clips are also on hoop 1 and a failed attempt at the hoop would give away an immediate break.

However, he would be wrong to attempt the same thing in the second position, even if the opponent's clips were on other hoops. This will no doubt surprise many readers, as for most players the change in position of the opponent's balls would seem to make little difference. Why is it correct to try to make the hoop in one case and wrong in the other?

The answer lies in the fact that if the hoop is made in the first position the player of red will be able to continue and easily set up a break. Even if he does not get a forward rush after making the hoop, he can take off to blue and use a stop-shot to send it toward hoop 3 before making hoop 2 from black. However, in the second position the chance of setting up a break after making hoop 1 is very small. For most players the best way would be to hope to obtain a rush on yellow to hoop 3, then take off back to the opponent's balls in the 4th corner and rush one of them to hoop 2. The chance of succeeding in this case is probably no better than 20% (if you doubt this, set up the position on the lawn and see if you can establish a break - that is, reach a position where you have made a hoop and have the next hoop already accurately loaded - more than two times out of ten), whereas in the first position, once the hoop is made, the player of red should be able to set up a break about 9 times out of 10.

This leads us to the principle on which we should base almost all decisions about whether or not to take any particular risk: **Any better-than-even (say, 60%) chance should be taken if its success will result in an immediate break, but even a 90% chance is normally not worth taking if it is likely to result in the making of only one hoop**. Although it may seem rather obvious when stated like this, it is surprising how few players think this way during a game. Many would consider it too risky to try the hoop in the first position, while others would attempt it in the second position - and then not realise that they are losing games, not because of missed roquets or hoops, but through poor tactics.

MANOEUVRING (part 1)

We have seen already that one of the principles of risk-taking is that shooting at a ball is almost always safer than not shooting. The main reason why the out-player (i.e. the one who does not have the 'innings') should elect to shoot at a ball on almost every opportunity is that failure to do so allows the opponent to strengthen his position without risk by 'manoeuvring'. The manoeuvring process usually (but not always) begins when the opponent has turned down an opportunity to roquet, and instead has hit his ball into a corner or returned wide of his partner ball, imagining that thereby he is "playing safe".

The aim of the process is to strengthen your position without taking any undue risk or allowing the opponent any safer chance to roquet than the one he has already passed up. During the process you can hope to make hoops and /or work toward the establishment of a break. The idea is that your opponent can do nothing to prevent you from achieving one or both of these objectives unless he is prepared to risk a shot which, if missed, will give you an immediate break. Once they start hitting away without shooting at a ball, most opponents will find it difficult to bring themselves to attempt a shot which is obviously riskier than the one(s) they have already chosen not to attempt.

The break is usually achieved by eventually setting up a position where you will have at least a 3-ball break regardless of which ball the opponent moves, and in which any shot he attempts and misses will give you the fourth ball as well. It is important to realise that this should, and can, always be accomplished without taking any real risk of either losing the innings or allowing the opponent a "safe" shot.

The main principles of 'manoeuvring' are as follows:

(1) Until you can get the break set up, leave your partner ball within 6 yards of a border so that you can cover the boundary behind it, if necessary, to prevent the opponent from shooting at it with the ball he must move. Note that this is different from the "Aunt Ernma" idea of leaving your partner ball <u>on</u> the border "so that you will have somewhere safe to come home to".

(2) Do not risk making a hoop unless:

- (a) you are sure you can make it with ease, or
- (b) the opponent's balls are well apart, or
- (c) after making the hoop you can fairly easily use his balls to set up a break.

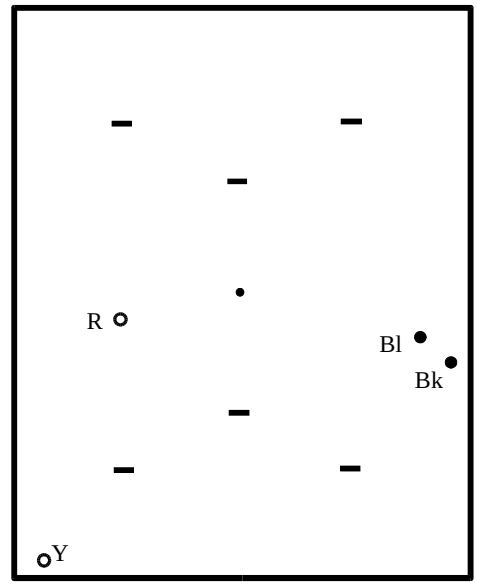
(3) At the end of a turn, leave the balls so that any missed shot by the opponent gives you either: (a) a ball near your hoop and another ball you can easily use to load the following hoop, or (b) a rush to your hoop and two balls in forward play, or (c) a rush to a ball at the following hoop, so that you can leave your partner ball there and rush that ball to your current hoop. In each of these cases you would have an excellent chance of establishing a break, so it would be quite inconsistent for an opponent who has already passed up roquet chances to risk taking any such shot.

(4) Be prepared to play the 'other' ball - i.e. the one other than the ball you want to make hoops with.

(5) In general, prefer to set yourself a rush to the following hoop rather than to your current hoop.

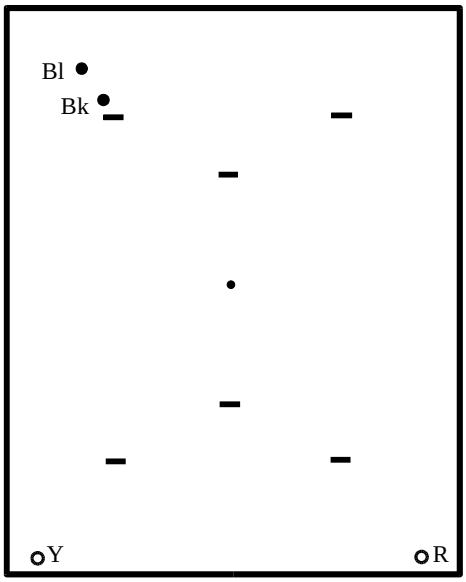
It may seem that these 'principles of manoeuvring' amount to a rather negative, "no-risk" strategy. In reality it is quite the opposite. It is a very aggressive process because it keeps the opponent under pressure, ensuring that any shot he attempts and misses will cost him a break. This is a far cry from the "take-off and separate" style of Aunt Emma, which is aimed at frustrating the opponent rather than pressuring him. Emma does not plan her set-ups so as to establish breaks, and will not take the risks needed to maintain a break even when she has one started. She leaves the opponent's balls on the border as far apart as possible rather than placing them where she will be able to use them; and relies on the opponent missing roquets, instead of setting so that he cannot risk attempting them. She does not play (and would not risk) even the fairly safe split-shots involved in the manoeuvring process. In following articles we shall look at practical examples of the manoeuvring possibilities that are available, but often overlooked, in common game situations.

MANOEUVRING (part 2)



In the position shown on the first diagram the black clip was on hoop 1 and blue on hoop 6. The player of red needed to move his ball from its position in the lawn and realised that if he shot at yellow and missed he would leave two balls near black's hoop. Black could have then rushed blue to hoop 2, taken off to red and yellow, and set up at least a 3-ball break. Therefore he chose to hit his ball into the 4th corner. This allowed black to (at least) engage in a simple 'manoeuvre' by rushing blue to hoop 2 and setting a simple rush with the boundary covered as shown in the second diagram. Now if red shoots at yellow and misses there will again be two balls near black's hoop, while if yellow shoots at red unsuccessfully then blue has a reasonable chance of making hoop 2 with a rush to hoop 3 and two balls near hoop 4.

The player of red and yellow, confronted with the situation in the second diagram, may well decide to shoot with yellow at red and hope that blue will not succeed in getting a good rush to hoop 3 after making hoop 2, and so have difficulty in establishing the break. This would certainly be preferable to again refusing to shoot at anything.

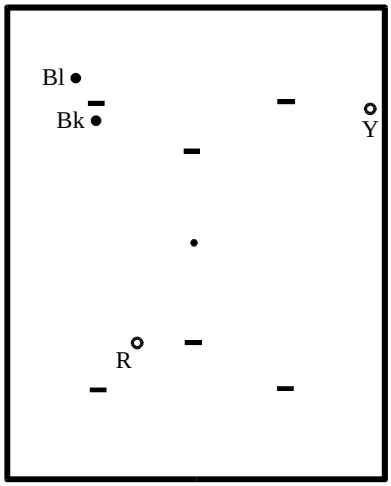


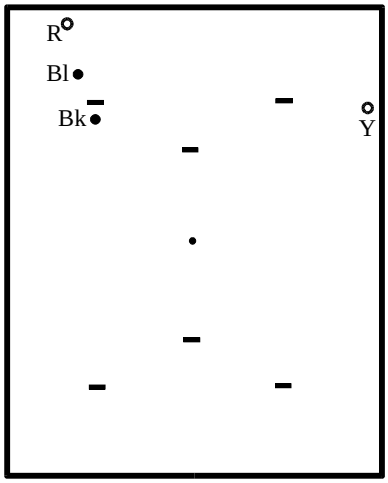
But it is obvious now that it would have been far more sensible for red to shoot at the opponent's balls in the position of the first diagram. "He doesn't have a rush to his hoop," is the common protest at this suggestion, "and a miss will make it easy for him to get one." This is indeed true - but how can he load the following hoop for either ball before making the current one? His best chance of establishing a break is to play black, rush blue to hoop 2, take off to yellow and roll for hoop 1. There is a chance of this succeeding, but few players could expect to do it more than 3 times out of 10, and black could always have tried this, even after red was played into a corner.

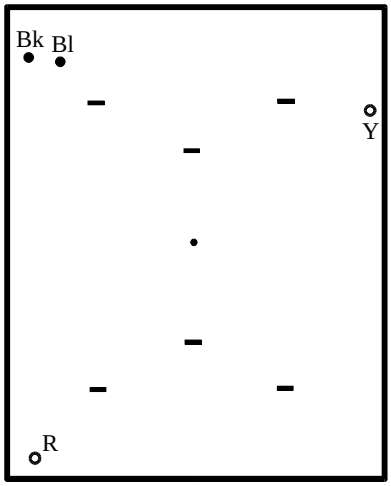
Most players of red could expect to roquet in the first diagram about 3 times out of 10, so by electing to shoot you are giving yourself as good a chance of achieving your objective as you are conceding the opponent of achieving his. Of course, the objectives are different - yours is to gain the innings, while his is to establish a break; but failing to shoot gives you no chance at all of gaining the innings, and makes it easier still for the opponent to set up a break. Yet players continue to hit into corners and later complain that there was nothing more they could have done because they never had the innings!

A word of caution: the above reasoning applies only to games in which both players are capable of making breaks and consequently neither can expect to win by making one hoop at a time. If you are still at the stage where you regularly win or lose games with scores such as 11-9, then an unsuccessful shot with red at the opponent's balls could allow him to make one more hoop which may indeed be critical. At that level you should be spending your time out on the lawn practising the shots needed to establish and maintain breaks, rather than concerning yourself with advanced tactical considerations. The best advice is, "First learn to split confidently from any hoop to the next two; then start thinking about tactics." Both of these things require the assistance of a competent coach, and any player who wishes to improve his game in any way should realise that without the assistance of a good coach he cannot expect to progress as rapidly as he should.

MANOEUVRING (part 3)







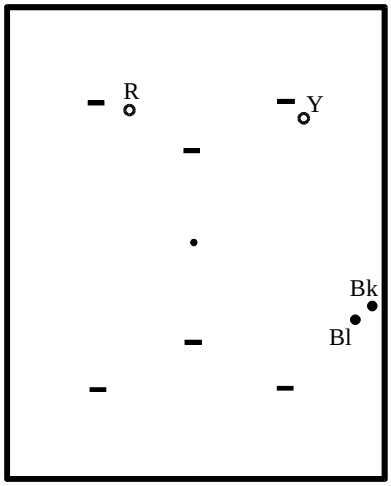
The previous article showed that you should shoot at a ball when a miss would allow your opponent to make only his current hoop without being able to set up a break by first loading his following hoop. Now we shall see that you should also shoot even when a miss will allow the opponent to set up a break, provided that he has to play two or three good, accurate shots in order to do so.

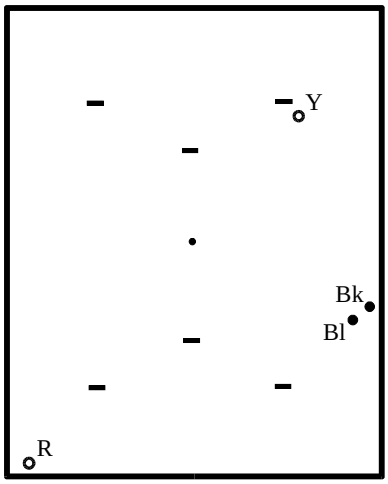
The first diagram shows a position taken from a division 1 doubles tournament. The player of black had made hoop 1 and failed at hoop 2, with his ball rebounding to a position from which the hoop could be made on the next turn without undue difficulty. The other three clips were still on hoop 1. The players of red and yellow decided that they should move the red ball, since blue had enough of the black ball to make it likely that he would take the turn if, say, yellow shot at red and missed. However, a shot with red at yellow would put two balls into black's 'forward play', and a shot at the opponent balls would produce the position shown in the second diagram, where black can (probably) run through hoop 2 to the boundary and make use of the 'extra' red ball. Therefore the player of red elected not to shoot, and instead played his ball into the 1st corner. This allowed black to start 'manoeuvring'. He made his hoop and set a rush to hoop 3 wired from yellow, as in the third diagram.

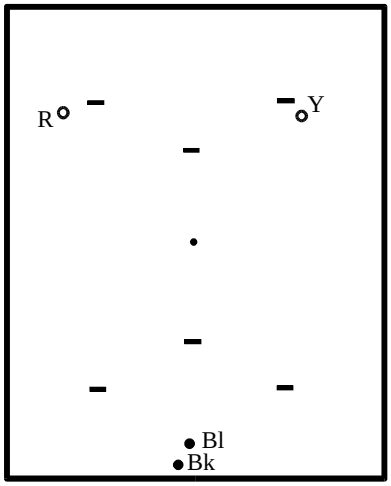
Once again red and yellow decided they could not risk shooting, so yellow was played into the 4th corner. It is almost impossible to imagine red and yellow winning the game with such tactics (they lost 26-3), yet there are many players who are quite capable of playing all-round breaks, but who deny themselves much chance of getting in and making a break by refusing to shoot in such positions.

In the original position red should have shot at black, since although he would have an 'extra ball' in the position of the second diagram, black would need to play some accurate shots under pressure to get a break fully established. Note that if blue takes the turn from the second diagram he will be unable to rush black to hoop 1. In the first diagram even a shot by red at yellow would have been preferable to not shooting, as black's only immediate way of establishing a break after making hoop 2 would be to split blue to load hoop 4 while going to the opponent balls on the border near hoop 3 - a shot which many players would find difficult and risky. Perhaps the principle involved can be explained this way: In the first diagram red should expect to roquet black about 3 times out of 10, so the opponent has no better than a 70% chance of getting his break going even if he were certain of playing the accurate shots required on each of the 7 times that red misses. But with red and yellow refusing to shoot, the opponent must surely still have at least 70% chance of eventually establishing a break without having taken any risk at all.

MANOEUVRING (part 4)







Previous articles have shown that you should shoot at a ball in situations where a miss will allow the opponent to make only one hoop without being able to first load the following hoop; and also in situations where in order to establish a break he will need to play some accurate shots. Now we will see that even when the shots required by the opponent to set up a break are fairly straight-forward, taking the shot may still give a better chance of winning than any alternative course of action against a player who thinks.

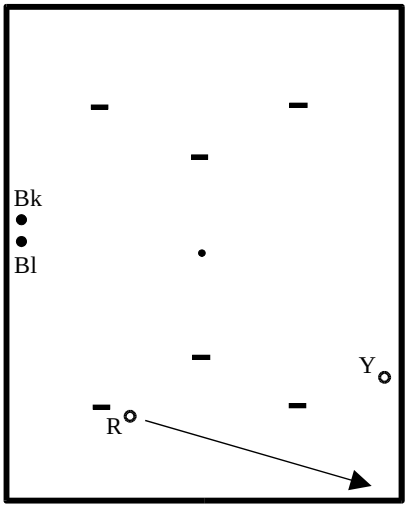
In the position shown in the first diagram I was playing with red and yellow, and my opponent's blue clip was on hoop 2. I shot with red at yellow and roqueted, but an observer asked me later how I could justify the 'risk' I took, since a miss would have allowed blue to roquet black, take off to red, place red at hoop 3 and rush yellow to hoop 2 - all fairly straightforward shots - with a break easily set up.

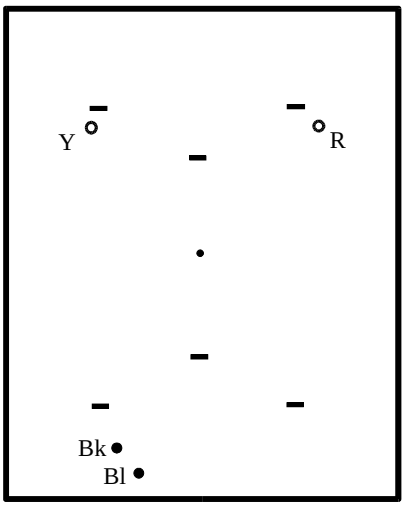
He suggested that instead of shooting I should have played red into the 1st corner (second diagram), as blue had no useful rush and would then not find it easy to set up a break. I explained that my opponent would not have needed to play blue at all. Instead he could play black, rushing blue to a point about 2 yards in from the middle of the south boundary, then taking off to red in the 1st corner. Then he could send red back to hoop 2 with a split in which no particular accuracy is needed, and finish by setting blue a rush to the yellow ball at hoop 3 (third diagram), or, if he preferred, direct to hoop 2.

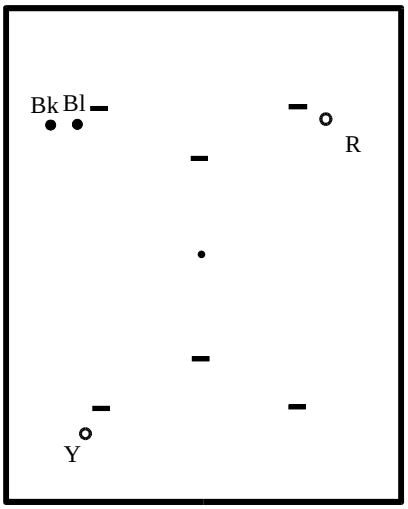
In this situation I would be faced with a (slightly) longer roquet than before, and the red ball may even turn out to be wired from yellow. Any missed shot would now give my opponent a 4-ball break which he could set up more easily than if I had missed yellow in the original position; and he would have at least the 3-ball break even if I again hit red away into a corner. Thus I had nothing to gain and stood to only make things worse for myself by failing to take the shot in the first place. A consideration of similar possibilities should convince the reader that hitting red into the 2nd, 3rd or 4th corners would have been no better, as in each case my opponent at the very least could without risk set up a position similar to the third diagram.

It is worth noting that in the first diagram I also seriously considered shooting with yellow at blue. Leaving the red ball at blue's hoop would not have mattered, since the long pass-roll placing black at hoop 3 while going with blue to red at hoop 2 may not have been all that easy for my opponent. However, yellow would have finished too close to the opponent balls, again allowing him to use it to set up an easy break for blue. Alternatively, he could play black and set up a leave similar to the one in the third diagram, but with his balls near the 4th corner. The reader will by now be starting to understand why players at international level tend to follow the principle, "Walk onto the lawn and take the shortest shot - regardless!"

MANOEUVRING (part 5)







In previous articles we have seen that hitting a ball out of play into a corner, rather than shooting at a ball, is in almost all cases an ill-advised course of action. Part of the reason lies in the fact that it takes all pressure from the opponent and, if he is astute enough, allows him to improve his position without taking any risks. If he does this manoeuvring properly he should be able to end up with at least a 3-ball break without having allowed you any less risky shot than the one you passed up in the first place.

Some players, however, instead of hitting into a far corner, prefer to retum 'wide' of their partner ball. This is intended to keep their opponent under some sort of pressure, since he will find it difficult to use the balls to set up a break, but they are close enough together to have a good chance of roqueting if he simply ignores them.

In the first diagram black was for hoop 2 and the other three clips were still on hoop 1. Red reasoned that shooting at yellow was too risky because if the shot was missed it would allow blue to rush black to hoop 2, take off to red and yellow, and rush one of them to hoop 1 with a break established. Therefore red was played into the 4th corner 'wide' of yellow. This sort of thing is seen frequently on our lawns, and the legendary "Aunt Emma" is particularly fond of it. However, it amounts to nothing more than giving the game away against a thinking opponent who understands the art and importance of 'manoeuvring'. Such an opponent, as black and blue, will not make the mistake of going to red and yellow with the idea of trying to rush one of them to his hoop. Instead, he will 'manoeuvre' to improve his position in one of two possible ways:

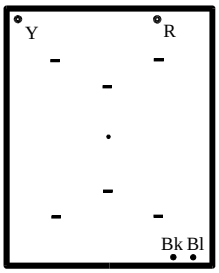
(1) He could play black, rush blue to the boundary in front of hoop 1, take off to red in the 4th corner and use a stop-shot to place it at hoop 3 while going to yellow. Then yellow could be sent to hoop 2 while black returns to set a rush for blue as in the second diagram. None of these shots is difficult or requires any great accuracy.

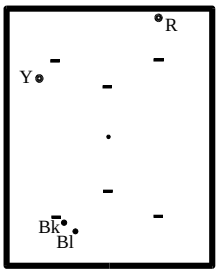
(2) Or he could play blue, rush black to hoop 2, take off to red, again send it to hoop 3, and put yellow at hoop 1 before returning to set up as in the third diagram. The same result could also be achieved by going to yellow first.

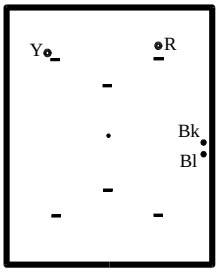
In either case the player of red and yellow is now faced with a situation in which any missed shot would give more away than if he had shot with red at any of the three other balls in the first diagram; and if he elects not to shoot he will be leaving either black or blue with an immediate 3-ball break. Note that method (2) involves one long take-off to a corner ball, but results in an even stronger set-up. In diagram 2 yellow could choose to shoot at red, but would risk leaving both balls in the opponent's forward play. It would make little sense for a player to do this when he was not willing to risk shooting in the first diagram. It is now apparent that in the first diagram red <u>should</u> have shot at a ball, as 'returning wide' only enabled the opponent to strengthen his position.

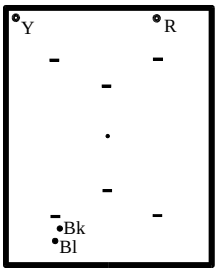
Yet so many players continue to do it!

MANOEUVRING (part 6)









In order to gain a deeper understanding of the 'manoeuvring' process referred to in previous articles, let us follow the moves in an imaginary game. In the first diagram, which was taken from a first division match, the blue clip is still on hoop 1 and black is already on 4-back. The yellow ball has just been played from near hoop 1 into the second corner because it was wired from blue and black, and the player considered that a shot at his red partner ball would have been too risky, since it would have given blue, which had a rush to hoop 1, two balls together in forward play. Now, if you are playing blue and black, you should start manoeuvring to set up a break for your blue ball. With the black clip already on 4-back the manoeuvring will be more difficult than if you could threaten to set up a break with either ball.

You can begin by playing the rush to hoop 1. If you do not get near enough to be almost certain of making it, then in approaching the hoop you should use the idea of placing the black ball within 6 yards of the boundary so that you retain the option of covering the south boundary against a shot by either yellow or red if the hoop cannot be attempted. With the boundary so covered, failure to make the hoop would not matter, since any shot by the opponent would give you either an immediate break or two balls in forward play; and so it is most unlikely that he would be willing to risk shooting.

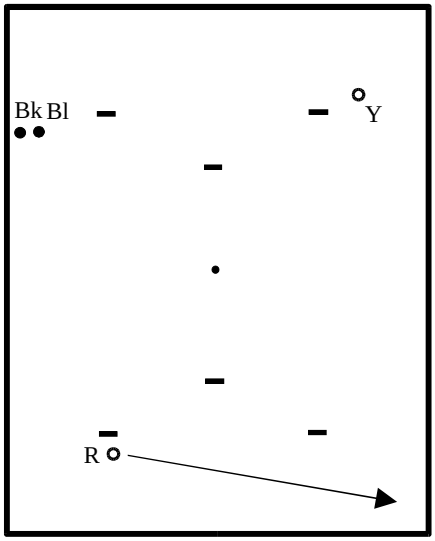
If the hoop can be safely made, then you try to do it in such a way as to be able to rush your partner ball to the east boundary, between hoops 3 and 4. Then a take-off to red, followed by a thick take-off to yellow, will allow you to roll with yellow for hoop 2. If the roll is successful, then you have the break under way; and if not, then you can return to black with the set-up shown in the second diagram, where yellow must move but once more finds that any shot he attempts is riskier than the shot he passed up originally. If he again hits yellow into a corner (say, the 1st), then you still have a good chance of a break by rushing black to red and then red to hoop 2.

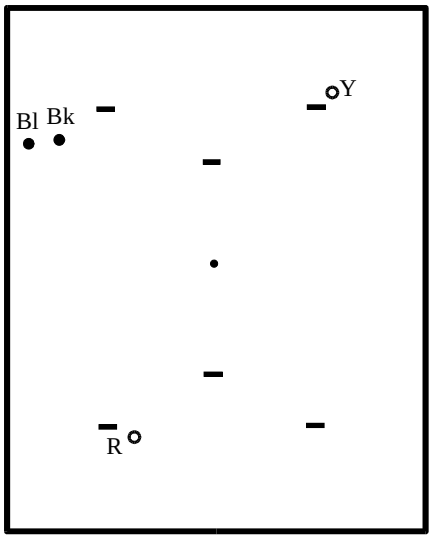
If on making hoop 1 you failed to get the desired rush to the east border, then you could have simply roqueted black and set blue a rush (preferably wired at least partly from yellow) near the south boundary to the red ball as shown in the third diagram. Although this set-up is not as strong as the one in the second diagram, it still gives you a reasonable chance of setting up a break by rushing black to red followed by red to hoop 2; and any shot taken by the opponent and missed will make the establishing of a break a simple matter.

Thus far, without taking any risk, you have made one hoop and given yourself an excellent chance (if you had got the desired rush and succeeded in setting up as in the third diagram) of establishing a break. Your opponent has had no better or safer opportunity to shoot at a ball than the one he turned down originally by hitting his yellow ball from hoop 1 into the 2nd corner instead of shooting at red.

If he is consistent in refusing to attempt such shots then by continuing the process in a similar fashion you can make hoop after hoop, until you finally succeed in establishing a break. It should be obvious that this 'manoeuvring' process, once understood and applied, is an almost certain way of beating the "Aunt Emma" style of the player who plays with the unrealistic aim of avoiding all risky shots.

MANOEUVRING (part 7)





This series of articles may have given the impression that when it is your turn it is never correct to do anything except shoot at a ball. This is not true; but against an opponent who plays correctly, positions are very rare in which failure to shoot gives a better winning chance than shooting. As suggested in a previous article, such positions usually involve wiring.

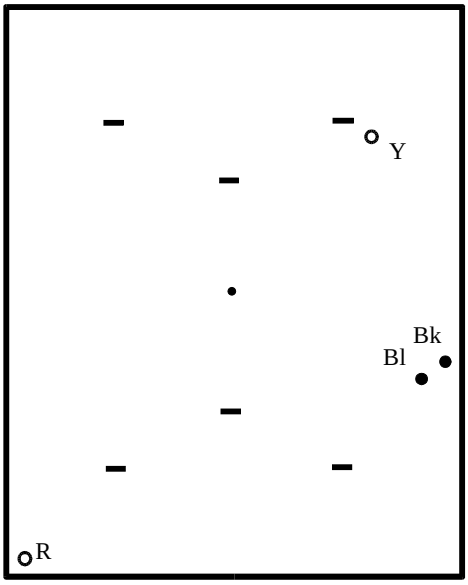
In the first diagram blue and yellow are both for hoop 3 and black is for hoop 1. Red, whose clip is already on 4-back, is wired from both black and blue. It would be reasonable to decide that the one possible shot with red (at yellow) is too long and risky, and any shot with yellow even more so. In this case red could sensibly be played into the 4th corner. Then, in order to establish an immediate break, black or blue would need to play some rather difficult and accurate shots.

If the opponent understands how to 'manoeuvre' to improve his position, he may (for example) play black, roquet blue gently, take off to yellow, roquet it and take off to red in the 4th corner, try a long roll for hoop 1, and if unsuccessful return to blue with a set-up as in the second diagram. Note that black and blue are now set the other way round so that the opponent's position is now stronger in that he will now have an immediate break whichever ball (red or yellow) is moved, unless it roquets. However, a shot with either red or yellow is now no longer than in the first diagram, and will give no more away - there was an easy break for black or blue in either case. There was also the slight possibility that something could have gone wrong for black during the 'manoeuvring' process, which of course could also have been done in ways other than the one described.

In the first diagram the situation for red and yellow could hardly get any worse than it already is. By hitting red into the 4th corner you are more or less saying, "I am almost willing to concede you the break, but let's see you play a couple of long take-offs first." The difference between this and the positions considered in previous articles where failure to shoot was incorrect, is that in those positions the opponent by 'manoeuvring' with little or no risk could bring about a situation in which you were left with a noticeably longer roquet than the one you could have attempted originally, and he had an easier break if you missed or chose not to shoot.

This 'manoeuvring' presupposes the ability to play and maintain a break once it is set up, and is facilitated by an understanding of 'ideal leaves' as explained in my booklets on Strategy and Tactics. Hopefully the examples given in this series of articles will have made clearer the point of the whole process and the sort of way in which to go about it. It often means declining all chance (usually a low percentage one anyway) of making an immediate break, and often involves playing the turn with the ball other than the one with which you want to make hoops. However, against certain types of players the rewards are considerable, and, if sufficient of our up-and-coming younger players can be assisted to understand the art, then the day may well arrive when "Aunt Emma" is nothing more than a dim and distant memory in the minds of those of us who played "B.M." - "Before Manoeuvring".

MANOEUVRING (part 8)



In an earlier article (see part 4) we looked at the situation shown in the diagram, where the blue clip was on hoop 2. The red ball had been left at hoop 2, and has just been played from there into the first corner because the player considered it too risky to shoot at any ball. We saw that the decision not to shoot was ill-advised because it allows the opponent (black and blue) by 'manoeuvring' to strengthen his position without risk, thus forcing red to either allow blue a break without a roquet having even been attempted, or else attempt a roquet which, if missed, would give blue the break more easily than if the player had taken one of the shots on offer in the original position (when red was at hoop 2). This 'manoeuvring' process involved black taking the turn in the diagrammed position, rushing blue to the centre of the south boundary, taking off to red, and sending it back to hoop 2 while going to set a rush for blue to yellow at hoop 3.

Note that although it is an almost certain way of beating Aunt Emma, this type of manoeuvring, which is the correct play for the player of black and blue in the above situation, may not be advisable against an aggressive opponent. Of course, an aggressive opponent would have taken a shot rather than hitting red from hoop 2 into the 1st corner in the first place. However, there are other ways in which the same position could have arisen against an aggressive opponent. You must bear in mind that an aggressive player of red and yellow is almost certain to shoot after the player of black and blue has strengthened his position by manoeuvring as suggested above; and unlike Aunt Emma he would not have already passed up a chance of a shot involving less risk than the one he is now faced with.

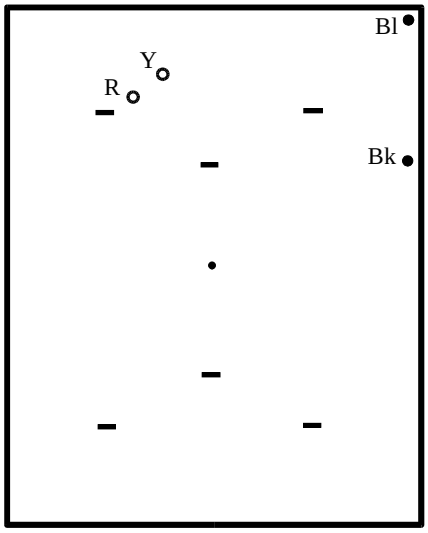
If he does shoot and roquet, he is also likely to make more hoops than Aunt Emma, who obviously over-rates the risks involved in shooting, and so is almost certain to similarly over-rate many of the risks needed to keep a break going.

If you can now switch sides and imagine yourself playing black and blue against an aggressive opponent, you can see that it is necessary to consider the advisability of trying for a break immediately, without allowing him the extra chance to roquet. This involves playing blue, roqueting black and rolling both balls to hoop 3 in the hope of getting a rush on yellow to hoop 2 and making it. If you are confident that you can do this successfully under pressure about 5 times out of 10 (try it at practice not under pressure - the results may surprise you!) then this would be the thing to do. But against Aunt Emma, 'manoeuvring' will give a higher percentage chance of winning unless you can expect to roll successfully at least 8 times out of 10. By ending the manoeuvre with a rush for blue to yellow rather than to its hoop you can almost guarantee that Aunt Emma will again refuse to take any shot, so the success rate on the roll required to make it the better option would be close to 100%!

Note that it is necessary to estimate to some extent the likelihood of your opponent being willing to 'risk' shooting after you have strengthened your position by manoeuvring. (In actual fact we have seen that he is taking a greater risk by not shooting.) Against an aggressive opponent you will be forced to take greater risks in attempting to get a break going as early as possible; but against Aunt Emma there is no need to take such risks.

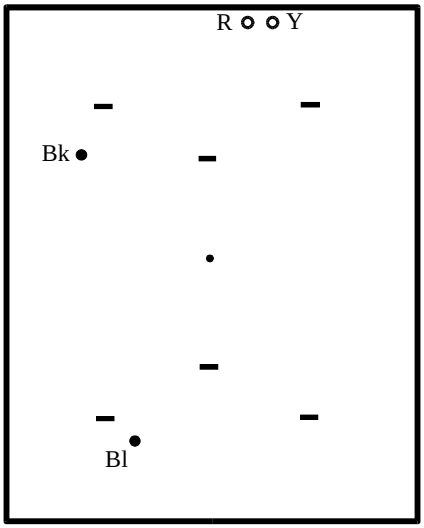
Even against an aggressive opponent the manoeuvring process may be your best option. (This would be the case if in the diagram you could not expect, as blue, to play the roll and get the rush to hoop 2 with 50% success rate.) Against Aunt Emma it will almost always be the best option.

STRENGTHENING YOUR POSITION



In previous articles we have seen how it is often possible strengthen your position without risk, especially against an opponent who has already passed up a chance to roquet by hitting a ball 'out of play'. Even when there is a small amount of risk involved, a manoeuvre to strengthen your position may be worthy of consideration.

The first diagram shows a position from one of my matches. Red and black clips were both on 4-back. Yellow and blue were still on hoop 1. My opponent had just played blue from near hoop 1 (where I had left it after rolling unsuccessfully) into the 3rd corner. He had decided that shooting at my balls was too risky, as a miss would have given me an excellent chance of a break with yellow; and a shot at black, if missed, would have made it even easier for me as I could take-off to his two balls and rush one of them to hoop 1.



Now I considered the possibility of playing yellow, roqueting red, taking off to blue, and trying to get a rush on black to hoop 1, but felt that I was unlikely to succeed in this more than about 3 times in 10. Since there was a better than even chance that I would have to give my opponent another chance to roquet, I decided to make sure that he would get only the one chance, and unless he roqueted I would have a fairly easy break.

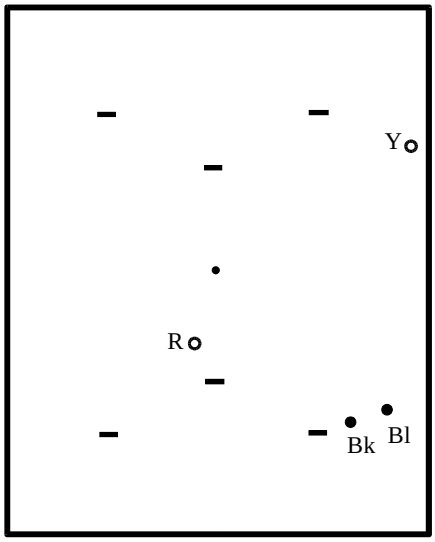
Therefore, instead of playing yellow I used red, cut-rushed yellow to the south boundary, then took off to blue in the 3rd corner. A long, but not difficult, stop-shot sent blue to hoop 1 while red went to black, making no attempt to get behind it. Then I placed black near hoop 2 and hit red out near yellow, producing the position shown in the second diagram.

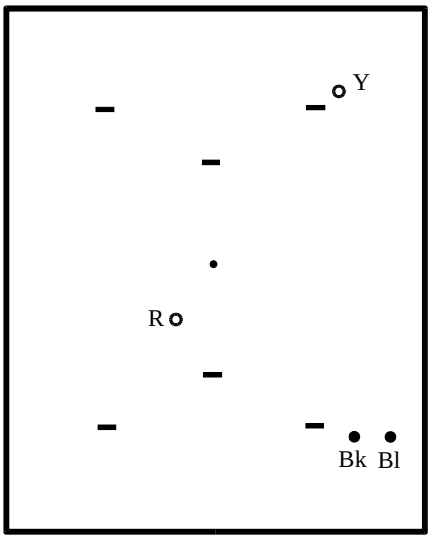
In this position my opponent now has another chance to roquet, but what are his choices? Any missed shot with blue would give me a break more easily than the one he had originally considered too risky to attempt. Black has a shorter shot, but it involves leaving blue at my hoop and playing the ball which he does not want to use because it is already on 4-back. But if he again takes blue 'out of play' into, say, the 4th corner, then I can cut-rush red toward hoop 2 and still have a good chance of establishing a break!

He elected to shoot with black at my balls, which was probably the correct choice in this situation, but it is not easy to roquet under such pressure when you are not at all sure you are doing the right thing by shooting anyway. He missed and I had a simple break for yellow under way.

I considered it worthwhile to take the risk of my opponent roqueting in order to give myself an easy break if he missed. If he had known what I would do, I am sure he would have shot at red with blue in the first place, instead of hitting into the 3rd corner. He had expected me to try for a low-percentage chance of an immediate break with yellow. When your opponent understands how to strengthen his position by manoeuvring in this manner, hitting balls into corners just does not make sense. We shall consider this theme further in the next article.

WHY NOT SHOOT?





This article is a logical continuation of the previous article on 'Strengthening Your Position'. The first diagram shows a common type of position in which many players, as red and yellow, would consider it too risky to shoot at a ball. The opponent has his blue clip on hoop 4 and black on hoop 3. Some players would hit red into the 3rd (or some other) corner, hoping that the opponent will play the next turn with black and try to get a break going by using red and /or yellow to make hoop 3, which few players could succeed in doing more than 5 times out of 10. Or perhaps blue will try to make a 2-ball break up the centre, which would have an even lower chance of succeeding.

However, the opponent can simply make hoop 4 with blue and then take off to yellow and set up a yet stronger position such as the one shown in the second diagram. Here the player of red and yellow is faced with a shot at least as risky as the one he refused to take in the first diagram, but the opponent will have at least a 3-ball break even if no shot is taken.

In the clubroom at Broadview Croquet Club we have a sign which proclaims:

The Broadview Principle: When it is your turn,
nine times out of ten you should shoot at a ball.
On the tenth occasion, when a miss would allow
the opponent an easy break you should pause
to consider the possible alternatives - and then still shoot!

Of course, this is not a principle to be followed slavishly, but most of our members do accept the philosophy that attack is more likely to win games than defence.

In a position such as the one in the first diagram it makes little sense for red to do anything except shoot at a ball. There are several excellent reasons why shooting is almost always preferable to hitting a ball into a corner or returning wide of your partner ball:

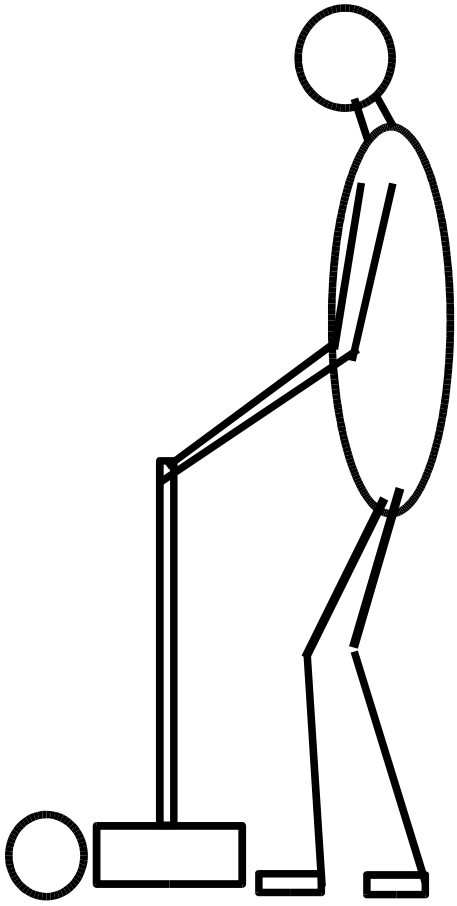
1. It is an absolute necessity in a game of croquet to maintain a confident mental approach, which is much harder to do when you start conceding turns to the opponent without any resistance.

2. Even if you shoot and miss, you are practising your roquets and can set about correcting errors in your swing. If you hit 3 times into a corner, rather than taking 3 shots and missing them, you are less likely to roquet the next time when you at last decide to take a shot. For this reason it follows that if you do decide that there is no alternative to hitting a ball out of play (perhaps because you are wired from the only reasonable shot), you should pick a definite aiming point, such as a corner peg or flag, carefully stalk the ball, and play the shot with as much concentration as you would the most important roquet or hoop shot.

3. By refusing to shoot, you invite the opponent to find a way of strengthening his position without taking any noticeable risk, as explained in previous articles and above. He should be able to eventually get a break going without having allowed you any less risky shot than the one you should have taken in the first place.

4. From a percentage viewpoint, failing to shoot immediately concedes the opponent a better than even chance (say, 60%) of getting the next break. No matter how far apart you put your balls this must be true simply by virtue of the fact that he has the innings and you do not! Therefore, even if a miss gives him a <u>certain</u> break (and it rarely does) there is still usually at least a 10% chance that something may go wrong for him. You would therefore only need to have about a 30% chance of roqueting to make shooting the <u>least</u> risky course of action. If both players can play breaks, this will be true at almost any stage of the game.

CROQUET: FINER POINTS



by John Riches

The cover on the preceding page can be printed on maroon card to allow binding of the complete booklet. John Riches did it this way in the days before cheap colour printers.