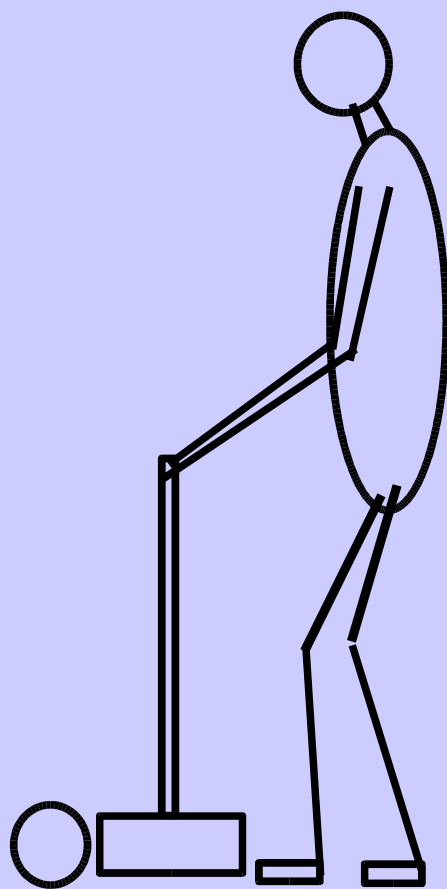


CROQUET: COLLECTED ARTICLES



by John Riches

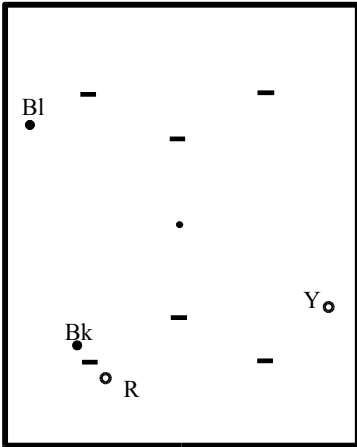
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SITTING IN FRONT *by John Riches*

It is a common practice of players in lower grades, when they find themselves unable to make their hoop, to "sit in front". The diagram illustrates a situation where all clips are still on hoop 1, and the player of red has approached the hoop but is unable to make it. Many players would now sit the red ball in front of the hoop wired from black, reasoning that if black moves red will be able to run through the hoop and hopefully roquet blue.



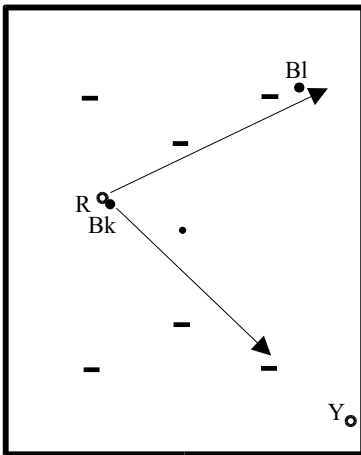
Firstly it should also be realised that the very first shot required, hitting the red ball a foot or so to an exact position in front of hoop 1 wired from black, is not simple and is fraught with danger.

Even then, if black is hit, say, into the 4th corner, the chance of red being able to establish a break is remote, and most times he would find it difficult to even obtain any sort of satisfactory leave. He will have made one hoop - possibly two if lucky - but the price is too high.

An alternative reply for the opponent, and usually the recommended one, would be to shoot with blue at black. This shot, if missed, again allows red to make the one hoop but with little chance of doing anything afterward; and if the opponent makes the roquet he will have an immediate break. Tactical choices which allow the opponent chances to set up an immediate break while giving yourself at best a chance of making only one or two hoops can hardly be correct for players capable of making breaks.

An experienced player will sit in front of the hoop very rarely if ever, preferring in the diagrammed position to hit red out near yellow with a rush to blue and a likely break next turn, whereas inexperienced players even sit in front of hoop 2 with one opponent ball behind the hoop and the other at hoop 3, giving away the innings as well for the chance to make one hoop.

WHAT IS YOUR ANGLE? *by John Riches.*



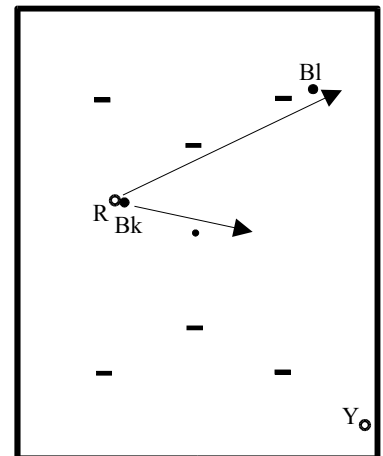
It is interesting as a coach to note how few players, even at state level, are comfortable playing splits which involve wide angles. This is a great pity, because such shots will at times be the best or only way of setting up an immediate break. The ideal is for each player to be able to estimate the size of the angle involved in any split he is thinking of playing, and know how to adjust his stance, grip and swing accordingly.

If estimation in degrees is asking too much, then at least he should be able to judge whether the angle is "narrow", "starting to open out", "fairly wide", or "very wide - approaching a right-angle".

A good trained and accredited coach will be able to explain how and why, as the angle opens out, you need to stand further back, take a longer grip, and swing flatter, as well as select your line of aim and adjust it to allow for changing amounts of pull and 'mallet drag' as the angle becomes wider.

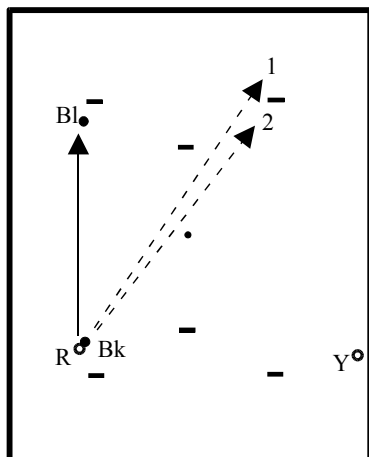
An understanding of this will allow you to confidently load hoop 4 as you go to the blue ball to make hoop 3 when you find yourself in the situation shown in the 1st diagram, instead of taking off or playing the pass-roll shown in the 2nd diagram, which is in fact harder to play.

Loading hoop 4 accurately is the only way of ensuring that you will be able to bring the yellow ball into your break without difficulty.



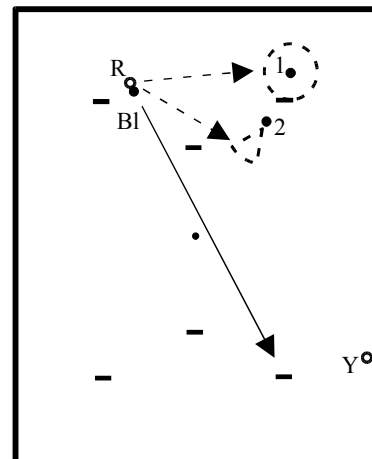
INSIDE THE RECTANGLE? *by John Riches*

When I learnt the game I was taught to play a 3-ball break by keeping the balls within the rectangle formed by the four corner hoops. This involved sending the croqueted ball about a yard short of the hoop when using a split or stop-shot to load your next hoop. In the diagram at left, after making hoop 1 you would send the croqueted ball to position 2 behind hoop 3 instead of position 1 which is in front of the hoop. Now we place less emphasis on this idea, and instead prefer to send the croqueted ball in front of the hoop to



position 1. The reasons for the change are:

- (1) As illustrated in the diagram at right, there is a much bigger (circular) area into which you can get your red striker's ball after making hoop 2, and still be able to easily make hoop 3, compared with the smaller wedge-shaped area for position 2.
- (2) Loading the hoop within the rectangle often meant making the hoop from behind.
- (3) It is easier to get a useful forward rush when approaching the hoop from the front. Against this we must weigh up the fact that some players will find the wider angle split harder to control.



The moral is: Learn to play wide-angle splits confidently, then load your hoops in front rather than behind. One exception in a three-ball break is the 1-back hoop which should still be loaded with a ball placed inside the rectangle and behind the hoop - if you do not understand why, ask your coach to explain it.

DO YOU HAVE THE RIGHT ADDRESS? *by John Riches*

One of the things we tell players who play centre-style as most do nowadays is that when you address the ball your hands should be well out in front of your body - in fact there should be a gap of about one foot between hands and body for most people, depending on stature and body shape. (I had one player who said "but my arms are not long enough for that. My body is a foot out in front already!") This allows plenty of room for a full backswing, so that the stroke can be played using the full weight of the mallet without having to jab or hurry the forward swing, and applies to all grips and stances, whether the hands are together or apart.

Many players address the ball with their hands much closer to the body, with elbows bent so that the back swing will be severely restricted, and a common reaction when they are told to comfortably straighten their elbows, so that their hands are further forward, is "But if I do that I will not be able to see the ball as I hit it". They are often surprised when we tell them that you do not need to see the ball as you hit it, because they have been told in past years to fix their eyes on the back of the ball and keep them there during the swing.

This is good advice, and is essential during the lining up and the backswing in order to get the body square to the line of swing and ensure that the mallet is swung back in the correct line. Fixing the eyes on the ball and keeping them there also helps to keep the head and shoulders still during the swing, but as long as the shoulders do not move it is not essential that you be able to see the ball during the forward swing.

To illustrate this you can line everything up, swing the mallet back, then close your eyes as you start the forward swing. It will make no difference to your ability to roquet or run a hoop that your eyes are shut. In fact, if your eyes are open and you see something going wrong (e.g. your mallet starting to go off line) there would be nothing you could do about it anyway, because your reaction time is too long to make any correction after starting the forward swing. Your hands should come forward slightly ahead of the mallet head, and will usually block your view of the ball before the mallet impacts it, but this will not be a problem. So when addressing the ball remember to push your hands out away from your body and give yourself more room.

ROQUETING: SWINGING IN LINE *by John Riches.*

One of the hardest things a croquet player has to try to do is swing the mallet in the correct line. It has been pointed out by other authors that the human body is very poorly designed as far as performing such an action is concerned, although one must admit that the design does have certain advantages for various other functions that may need to be performed. It would be far easier if we had one arm about six inches (15 cm) longer than the other and our eyes one above the other instead of side by side. Since we cannot change the design of our bodies, we just have to learn to do the best we can with what we have.

It is obvious that you will give yourself the best chance of roqueting consistently if you can train yourself to swing your mallet straight along the line in which you want the ball to travel, with the mallet head also aligned in this line. Note that similar considerations apply in sports like darts and snooker, but not so much in sports like tennis or table-tennis where you will often do better to swing across the line in order to deliver more power and impart useful spin to the ball.

Two things are important: the mallet should swing straight back and then forward along the correct line; and the mallet head should be pointing along this line before, during and after contact. These two things are very difficult to achieve - so much so that if you watch closely you will see that few players can do it - and require ideally (1) a stance that allows the mallet to swing freely back and forth under the dominant eye, and (2) a grip such that the bottom hand does not tend to "take over" and turn the mallet off line.

It may seem that it would not matter if the mallet head goes off line or loses its straight orientation after contacting the ball, but in fact the follow-through seems to be the main thing you should concentrate on, as it makes you get the earlier part of the swing right as well. It is hard to tell where the mallet is pointing during the backswing and early part of the forward swing, but you can more easily tell whether or not the mallet head remains correctly in line after you have hit the ball. The grip should not be too tight (or 'tense'), the shoulders should remain still, and the muscles in the wrists, forearms and shoulders should be completely relaxed. Practise getting these things right one at a time, and notice the gradual improvement.

DO YOU SUFFER FROM CRAMP? *by John Riches*

Any coach who takes the trouble to watch the roquet action of players at various levels will soon come to realise that one of the most common problems is that many of them bend over too far and so cramp their swing to the extent that they are unable to swing the mallet freely from the shoulders. Instead they swing mainly from the wrists and elbows, providing additional power from the muscles in the forearms instead of making full use of the weight of the mallet. Some are so bent over at the waist that their nose is only an inch or so from the end of the mallet handle, and their elbows are bent outwards so much that they resemble a pelican with its wings outstretched.

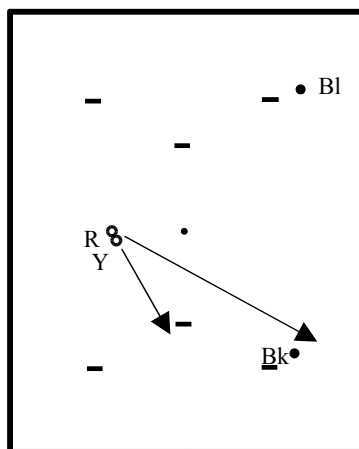
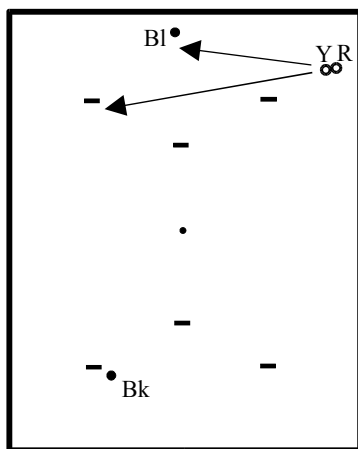
Some players manage to play quite well with such a restricted action, but it usually requires considerable strength in the forearms together with excellent judgement and co-ordination. Most will find it much easier if they stand up straighter - the elbows should be comfortably straight - and keep their elbows in, rather than out to the side. This allows the grip to be more relaxed, the weight of the mallet to be fully utilised so that the same result can be obtained with less muscular effort, and the body to remain steadier during the swing because it is better balanced.

Of course, there will be some shots such as pass rolls and equal rolls which require a bent-over stance with one hand down near the head of the mallet in order to accelerate the mallet smoothly through the ball, but most other shots can be played more easily and with greater consistency by standing up straighter and using a longer grip so that you can swing the mallet more freely from the shoulders.

The main time players tend to bend over too far and cramp themselves is when they are tense and lacking in confidence. You may need to recognise the times when tension is most likely to affect you, and train yourself to resist the urge to cramp yourself. Do this by consciously standing up straighter, straightening your elbows, and adopting an air of confidence - tell yourself that you will give yourself the best possible chance by using a long, flowing, relaxed swing from the shoulders instead of "huddling" down over the ball and jabbing.

GIVE YOURSELF A BREAK! by John Riches

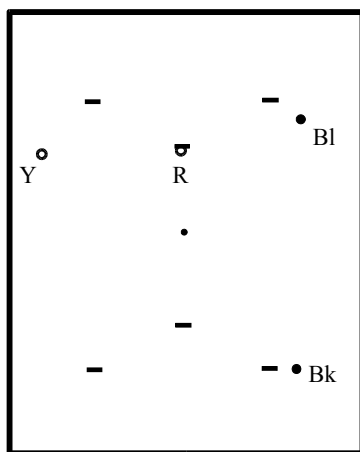
One of the most frequently heard complaints by people I coach is "I can make breaks when I have them set up, but I find it very hard to get them started." It usually turns out they have had several opportunities, but have failed to grasp them because it would have involved playing a stroke in which they were not fully confident. I have recently seen players at state level fail to set up breaks as they should have done in the two positions illustrated below. In the first diagram all clips were on hoop 1 and the player of red, having roqueted his yellow partner ball, should have rolled yellow to hoop 2 while going to blue (see arrows), then taken off to black at hoop 1. Instead he took off to blue, did not get a useful rush, and ended up making hoop 1 without hoop 2 loaded.



In the second diagram red was for hoop 4 and he should have pass-rolled yellow to load hoop 5 as shown, but instead he took off to black and made hoop 4 without hoop 5 properly loaded. In each case the current hoop was well loaded and should be made with little difficulty, so before making it you should load the next hoop accurately. The two shots needed to do this in the diagrammed situations involved very little risk, but in any case you should be prepared to take a reasonable risk in order to make certain of the break.

Don't be timid. Play confidently the shot needed to give yourself a break.

GENEROSITY MAXIMISED by John Riches



The diagrammed position arose in a recent game I was watching. The player of blue had taken off from red to the front of hoop 3, leaving red in the penultimate hoop. Blue succeeded in gaining reasonable position to run hoop 3, but played the hoop shot poorly and bounced off the hoop, finishing as shown.

The player of red and yellow (an experienced player, but well below state standard) now called me as referee and asked for a wiring lift with red, to which I ruled she was entitled because red was partly in the penultimate hoop. She then quickly picked up red (which was also for hoop 3), took it to B-baulk and shot at yellow, but failed to roquet.

After the game I suggested that she could have left red in the hoop, and since the opponent had generously given her a wired ball, she could have played to gain maximum advantage from his generosity by simply playing the yellow ball to A-baulk (or even to a position on B-baulk wired from blue).

Then, unless the opponent roquets, on her next turn she could claim the wiring lift, take red also to the baulk, and give herself a simple rush to hoop 4 and the black ball, which in turn can be rushed to hoop 3. Or if she had placed yellow on B-baulk she could take red there also and give herself a cut-rush to hoop 3, with hoop 4 already loaded.

The player admitted that she was so excited about being entitled to a wiring lift that she failed to consider retaining the option of taking it in a later turn. In fact, she was unaware that the laws allow this, and had assumed that the wiring lift had to be taken immediately.

Of course, my suggestion in this case would have involved taking the risk of the opponent roqueting, so a top player would no doubt take the lift and expect to roquet a ball from B-baulk.

SOMETHING AFOOT *by John Riches*

Much has been written about the importance of foot placement in roqueting. Some favour a "level stance", while others find that a "step stance" gives a more stable base from which to swing, with less chance of overbalancing and stepping forward or otherwise introducing unwanted body movement during the swing. Some have their feet close together, while others prefer a wider stance. It is obvious that preferences will vary according to body size and weight, as well as mallet length and the type of grip used.

One aspect which is little understood is the need for the foot muscles to be completely relaxed during the swing, with the instep flattened down against the ground. Some players tend to tense the foot muscles into a tight ball, and this makes it very difficult to swing the mallet smoothly. They are helped immediately by the coach simply telling them to flatten their insteps onto the ground when they take up their stance. Others, of course, have always done this correctly without needing to be told.

To convince yourself of the benefit involved, try balancing on one foot like a flamingo, firstly tightening the muscles of the foot you are standing on, and secondly allowing them to relax so that a wider base of your foot is in contact with the ground. It will be apparent that relaxing the foot muscles gives a more stable base, making it easier to maintain balance.

Perhaps the main benefit is that the flattening of the insteps against the ground can be used as a simple relaxation exercise, since relaxing your foot muscles tends also to assist relaxation of muscles in other parts of the body, and helps overcome nervous tension. Thus the movement of muscles in the shoulders and arms can be more easily controlled, producing a smoother swing with less tendency to twitch and jerk - all this from such a simple exercise as flattening your insteps!

A minor coaching point such as this will not overcome flaws in technique such as a tendency to tighten the grip during the swing, or to take too short a backswing and hurry the forward swing; but it can make a difference to performance by helping the player "fine tune" his game, provided he remembers to do it during the 5-minute hit-up, and continues to do it throughout the game, even when distracted by such things as 'lifts' and time-pressure.

SMILE, BUT DON'T BREATHE! *by John Riches*

There are many methods used by croquet players to help themselves relax and concentrate fully on the task at hand. In addition to the simple ideas we will mention here, some adopt quite complicated visualisation and relaxation procedures which they have either developed themselves or 'borrowed' from other sports such as rifle shooting, golf, snooker, archery, darts, high jumping and pole vaulting. In each of these activities it is desirable to relax all muscles other than those needed to perform the immediate task, e.g. pulling the trigger.

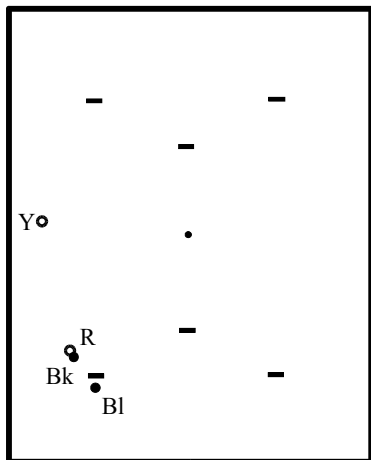
In a previous article we looked at the idea of flattening the insteps onto the ground. Here are three further things which may prove helpful:

(1) Years ago a leading player who was partnering me saw me walking onto the lawn to play my turn with a frown on my face. Not realising that it was in fact my 'normal happy look', she said "You can't play good croquet with such a frown on your face. Smile!" Her advice sounded rather trivial to me at the time, but in more recent years I have found that many players do in fact play better croquet if they simply smile to themselves and open their eyes wide before playing each stroke, particularly a critical one. Of course, you must be prepared to have people think you are a bit queer, but then again, it may get your opponent wondering what you are up to. If, for example, you find yourself tensing up and jerking when you attempt to run a slightly sidey hoop, why not give it a try?

(2) Suspension of breathing is widely used in the sports listed above, and can be helpful in croquet also. The idea is to expel all the air from your lungs, and then play the stroke (or pull the trigger) before you breathe in again. This avoids the slight shoulder movement produced by breathing, and allows the arms to swing from a slightly more stable base. It also assists relaxation, but don't get it wrong by taking a deep breath and trying to hold it while swinging! Deep breaths should be avoided just before a swing.

(3) When something goes wrong, never display any emotion such as disgust, annoyance with yourself, disappointment, etc. If you miss a four-foot rush, or stick in a hoop, walk off the lawn as if it was exactly what you intended to do and everything is under control. You may be able to fool yourself, if no-one else, and enable yourself to remain relaxed instead of getting uptight.

WHEN RISK BEATS CERTAINTY *by John Riches.*



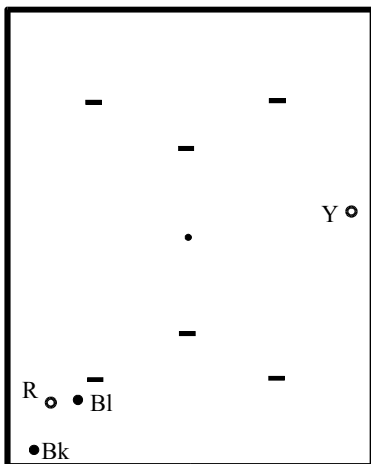
A common tactical error made by players, particularly in lower grades, is that they are not prepared to take reasonable risks. In many situations you are more likely to win by giving yourself a chance of making a break, even if in setting it up you are also taking the risk of breaking down, than by "playing safe" and making certain of just one hoop.

The diagram at left shows a situation with all clips still on hoop 1, where the player of blue had rolled with his partner ball to hoop 1, and finding that he could not make the hoop had sat just in front of the hoop. Then the player of red has shot from near hoop 6 and roqueted black. (Note that although it would have been a slightly shorter shot, shooting from near hoop 6 at the yellow partner ball would have been a tactical mistake because a miss would have left both red and yellow where blue could easily use them after making hoop 1.) Having roqueted black as shown, there is for many players a strong temptation

to immediately go to blue and make hoop 1. This is so simple and inviting that it is difficult to think of anything else, but experienced players will recognise it as a serious tactical error, because it will be far from easy to make more than just the one hoop.

The correct play, which seems obvious when pointed out but is frequently missed or ignored in matches, is to send black to hoop 2 with a half-roll which takes red near enough to roquet yellow safely, then take-off (there is no need to send yellow into the lawn unless you are really confident that you can do it without any further risk - for example of wiring red from blue) to blue and make hoop 1 having already loaded hoop 2 and given yourself an excellent chance of making several hoops instead of just the one. In such situations the chance of a break is almost always better than the certainty of one hoop. I am sure you know this, but do you do it?

CHOOSING THE RIGHT RISK *by John Riches.*



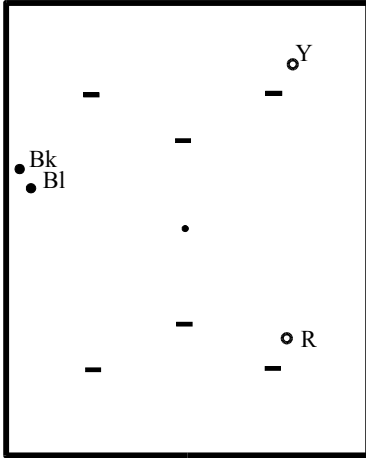
In the diagrammed position red was for hoop 1 and had taken off from yellow intending to go to black. The player of red looked at the roquet on black, knowing that it would have given her the chance to set up a break by stop-shooting black to hoop 2 before making hoop 1 from blue, but also realising that because the black clip was also on hoop 1, a miss would give the break to the opponent.

She decided not to take the risk and instead roqueted blue, made hoop 1, then rushed blue back out to black, got behind black and rushed it toward hoop 2. After playing an approach shot for hoop 2 she found herself about 5 feet out and almost directly in front of the hoop. After more thought she decided to attempt the hoop but considered herself unlucky when she failed and let the opponent in. Does this all sound reasonable to you? If so, you surely need to re-think the sort of risk you are, and are not, prepared to take in a game. The player was

experienced and had a single figure handicap; so although it may not have been a certainty and she obviously did not think it was, her chance of making the 5-yard roquet on black was at least as good as, and probably better than, her chance of making a hoop from 5 feet out directly in front. In fact it would have been an interesting exercise to get her to have ten goes at each and see which she could do most often.

Yet she passed up the roquet chance when it would have given her a break, and instead attempted the 5-foot hoop with nothing set up ahead! The loss of the game was in no way the fault of bad luck, but of her poor tactical choices, when she neglected to take the risk that should have been taken and instead chose to take a greater risk that would have given her only the one extra hoop even if it had been successful. The lesson is clear: the key to good tactics is the correct assessment of which risks to take and which not to take.

WHY DO GOOD PLAYERS SHOOT? *by John Riches*

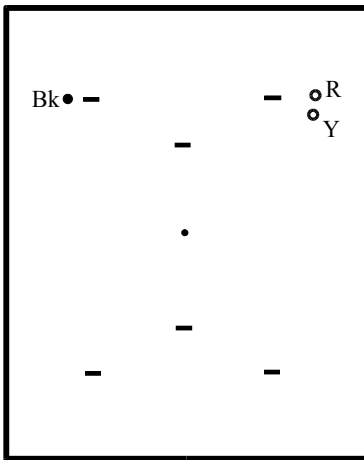


What would you do if you found yourself in the diagrammed position as red and yellow, when black is for hoop 3 and the other three clips are still on hoop 1? Your first thought will no doubt be that you should move your yellow ball away from black's hoop. However, if you shoot at red and miss you will give the opponent two balls in his forward play with a rush toward them, while a missed shot at his balls will allow him to use it to get a "dolly" rush to his hoop. The average player may well decide in such a situation to hit yellow away into a corner, but if both you and your opponent are capable of playing breaks then you should not hesitate to shoot. If red has a good double target your best chance may be to shoot with red at the opponent's balls, but it is more likely that the correct shot will be with yellow at red. If this shot is missed players commonly assume that the opponent should have no difficulty setting up a break with your two balls in his forward play and a rush in that direction also; but in fact the percentages are not as good for him as they may appear. If he

goes to yellow on the south boundary, he still has to roll yellow out to hoop 4 while getting a rush on red to hoop 3, then play the rush reasonably accurately.

Even at state level players tend to succeed in this and set up an immediate break no more than about 6 times out of 10, and in the diagrammed position there is also the possibility that hoop 4 will interfere with the rush. If yellow does shoot at red and miss, black should cut-rush blue as close as possible to yellow on the south border, then get behind yellow and rush it out to red in order to then get a really good rush on red to hoop 3. Many opponents would hesitate to do this because it can involve leaving blue rather close to yellow, so they adopt a line of play which gives them even less chance of setting up an immediate break.

WIRING DOES NOT ALWAYS HELP *by John Riches*



Although 3-ball games can happen at any level, this article is aimed at more advanced players, since at lower levels of play they tend to occur more rarely, and then by accident rather than by design.

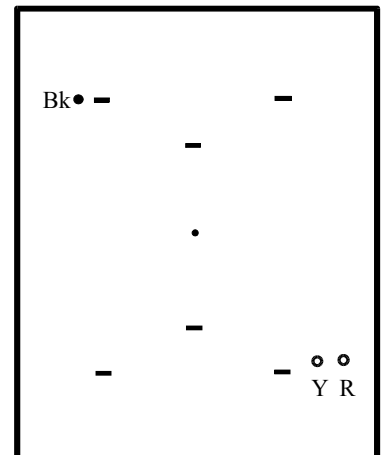
In the diagrammed position the blue ball had been pegged out and black is for the peg. Red had just made hoop 3 and "cleverly" contrived after roqueting yellow to set a rush to hoop 4 with both balls wired from black. The opponent was responsible for the position of black, so he was not entitled to a wiring lift.

The player of red was pleased with himself for achieving a completely wired position, but in this case he is forcing black to take a relatively safe shot at the peg, and would have done better to roll his two balls to a position between hoop 4 and the east border, then set with red "covering the border" - not on the border - as shown in the second diagram.

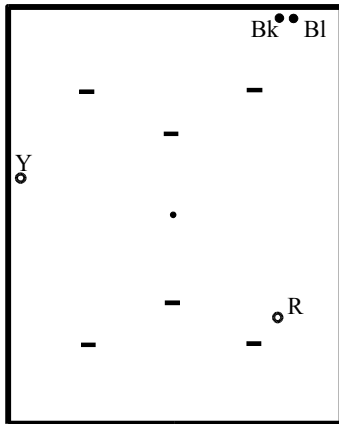
Now black can still shoot at the peg and /or the red and yellow balls, but a miss will allow red to roquet black and easily set up a 3-ball break.

It should be clear that even if yellow is already around, the only real winning chance for red is to play a 3-ball break, since making one or two hoops at a time will allow black to shoot at either the peg or a ball so many times that the chance of him missing every time is negligible.

In the second diagram black could, of course, shoot gently at the peg, but red should still be able to set up an immediate 3-ball break.



PLAYING THE ODDS *by John Riches*



The diagrammed position shows a situation where black and yellow are both for 4-back, blue is for hoop 4, and your red ball (which you will want to move from the opponent's hoop) is still for hoop 1.

The only sensible thing to do is shoot with red at the opponent's balls, which are a yard or so apart on the north border. When this idea is first suggested to them many players protest: "But my opponent doesn't have a rush to his 4th hoop. If I shoot at his balls and miss it will allow him to get a good rush and easily make the hoop".

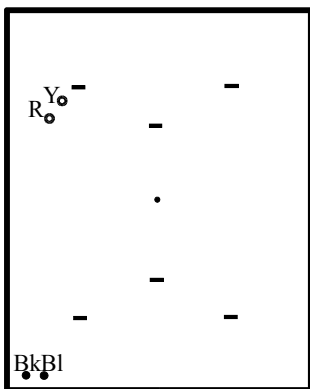
This is true enough, but if you shoot at yellow and miss he will be able to rush black over that way and use your balls to at least get a rush to his hoop and make it. If you return wide of yellow on the west border he will do the same, and you will have passed up a chance to gain the innings by roqueting. If you

hit red away into a corner you will have gained nothing because he can simply set himself a rush to his hoop for next turn, or better still rush black over to yellow and put yellow into the lawn before setting himself a rush, thus forcing you to play the yellow ball in your next turn, so that even if you roquet it will not be with the ball you need to make hoops with.

The main point, however, is that if you shoot at his balls immediately and hit one, you have an excellent chance of an immediate break yourself. Taking shots which allow him to make one hoop if you miss, but give you the chance of a break if you hit, will tip the odds very much in your favour. You only have to hit about one in five of such shots in order to come out well ahead.

The moral of this little story is well expressed in the motto on display at the Broadview (S.A.) Club where I am a member, and which was borrowed from a basketball coach: "You miss 100% of the shots you don't take".

TAKE THE BREAK *by John Riches*



In a recent article I made the point that the only effective way to beat 'Aunt Emma' tactics is to learn to play the split shots needed to set up breaks and keep them going. Sometimes players complain that they tried to set up breaks but were unable to do so; when in fact they did not take the opportunities which were presented to them.

In the diagrammed position red is for hoop 2 and yellow is for hoop 5. "Aunt Emma", rather than shooting with blue from near hoop 3 at the opponent's balls, has predictably (and in this case correctly) returned to her black partner ball in the first corner.

The player of red now made hoop 2, then tried to set up a break by rushing and splitting yellow to hoop 4 while going to Aunt Emma's balls in the first corner and rushing one of them to hoop 3. The idea was not unreasonable, and at

least he was trying to set up a break rather than simply make the hoop and then separate the opponent's balls as Aunt Emma would have done; but the method he chose required him to play some long and accurate shots, and he did not succeed in setting up the break.

He had not even considered playing yellow instead of red in the diagrammed position, roqueting red, taking off to Aunt Emma's balls and then rushing one of them to hoop 5, after which a rush to either hoop 6 or one of the other two balls would give him the desired break. This is an easier and more likely way to set up a break, but of course he has passed up the chance to make an easy and "safe" hoop, when making hoop 5 instead of hoop 2 is not quite so easy and somewhat less certain.

It is hard to convince players that such "safety first" thinking in fact loses games. Ray Howell, a member of the S.A. state team, has been preaching the right attitude: "Winning without risk is victory without glory!"

THE HIT-UP *by John Riches*

In most tournaments nowadays a hit-up of at least 5 minutes is permitted before the start of each game. It is important that players know how best to use this time, and for this reason every club should allow a 5-minute hit-up before club games. In fact the really enlightened clubs encourage players to arrive as early as they can on club days and spend time practising before games start.

The way you should use your hit-up time will depend on whether it is a singles or doubles game, whether or not you have just played a game on the same court, whether there are changing weather conditions to cope with, whether you have a particular aspect of your game that you are working on and need to concentrate on getting right, and the mistakes you made in your previous game. A good coach should be able to advise you on ways of putting the hit-up time to good use in each of these situations.

The main thing I insist upon with the people I coach is that they should never pass up the opportunity for a hit-up. Don't let your opponent or partner talk you out of it - if they do not want a hit-up, that is their business, but you make sure that you use the time wisely regardless of what they do.

In some places the hit-up time is optional and is taken out of the time allowed for the game by starting the clock before the hit-up begins. Don't fall for the trap of thinking that in this case it will be a disadvantage to spend the 5 minutes hitting up. It has been proven conclusively that with a hit-up games tend to finish quicker and scores are higher, as players take less time to get the feel of the lawn and establish breaks.

Some players like to hit a ball around the four boundaries during the hit-up, so as to find out where the border slopes in or out. Even on an unfamiliar court this is not a good use of a very limited hit-up time. It is more important to get your timing right by playing several short, gentle roquets, running a couple of hoops, then playing one or two take-offs and rushes across the lawn. Do not start with the longer shots, as you need to get your timing right first - a long backswing and an unhurried forward swing using the full weight of the mallet.

There is much more to know about the use of hit-up time. Perhaps we will return to it in a future article. In the meantime watch what good players do, and plan beforehand how you will use the time to best advantage.

AUNT EMMA REVISITED *by John Riches*

It always disappoints a coach to hear the common complaint: "She played such a dreadful 'Aunt Emma' game - separated my balls from one end of the lawn to the other, made one hoop at a time off her own balls, made no attempt to load hoops ahead, and wouldn't try to run a hoop unless she was right in front or my balls were a long way apart. I find it so boring playing against people who refuse to use correct tactics and won't take any risks."

There are several points to be made about this sort of complaint:

First, it is hardly reasonable for you to expect an opponent to play a particular style of game just so that you will enjoy yourself more, or so that you will have a better chance of beating them. Surely you cannot blame Aunt Emma for trying to beat you in the way she believes will give her the best chance.

Second, such complaints are never made by people who have just beaten Aunt Emma; it always turns out that they have managed to lose to her in spite of her "bad and boring" tactics.

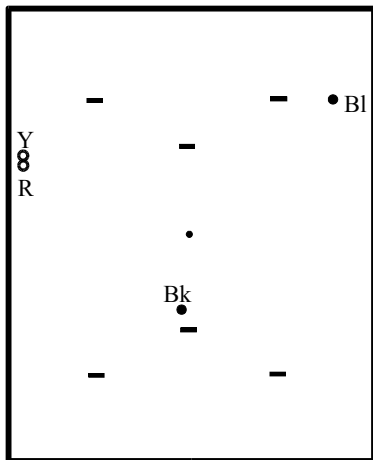
Third, the use of poor tactics by your opponent is something you should welcome, not something you should complain about, just as you should not complain (and no doubt won't) if they miss all their roquets.

Fourth, you should see it as a challenge to work out a way to take advantage of her poor tactics, and demonstrate that your style of game is superior to hers.

Fifth, the only chance of ever getting the Aunt to change her ways and play more adventuresome and enjoyable croquet is for her to keep on losing games until she comes to realise that she needs to do something different. This will not happen while people like you allow her tactics to frustrate and bore them into 'giving up' and allowing her to win the game because they cannot be bothered putting in the thought and care needed to counter her negative tactics.

It should be remembered that an accurate Aunt Emma can be a very strong opponent, and can present a real challenge. If you want to beat her the first thing to do is learn to play the split shots needed to set up breaks and keep them going. Accept the challenge and seek to play her as often as you can until you have learnt how to cope with her negativity. Soon she will start avoiding you and looking for other victims.

ONE HOOP AT A TIME *by John Riches*



In the position shown on the diagram red is for hoop 4. In such positions we often see the player of red taking off to black for a rush to make hoop 4, with very little chance of making more than one hoop. It is much better to roll yellow to hoop 5 while getting the rush on black to hoop 4, so that if you succeed in making hoop 4 you will have the next hoop loaded and will be able to continue the break. Almost any player other than a raw beginner is capable of playing such a roll, but some hesitate to do it because it involves some risk in that they are putting their partner ball out into the lawn and leaving the balls closer together if they do not succeed in making hoop 4. It is true that such risks should be avoided where possible, and here a reasonable alternative would be to take off from yellow to blue, aiming to get a rush to either hoop 4 or to black.

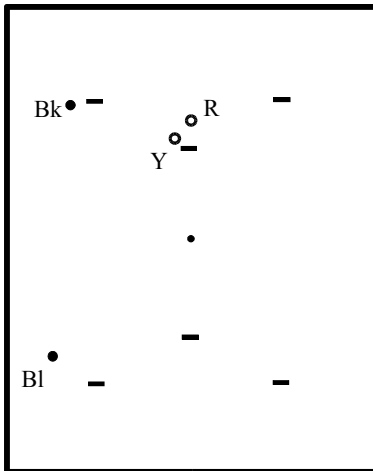
However, if the blue ball were (say) in the 3rd corner, then rolling yellow to hoop 5 is the only real chance of ensuring that you make more than one hoop.

Even though there is a risk, the risk must be taken. You will almost certainly succeed in making hoop 4 often enough to ensure that over time you gain more than you lose by 'risking' the roll in such positions, and if your level of play is such that you are not confident about making the 4th hoop it is likely that your opponent will also be far from confident about hitting one of your balls if you have to leave them near hoop 5.

One of the hardest parts of coaching is teaching players which risks to take and which to avoid; and when to follow 'principles' such as "don't set up in the middle of the lawn", and when to ignore them.

In general, the over-riding principle is that you can't altogether avoid the need to take risks, and it is usually worth taking a calculated risk in order to set up a break.

TIDYING UP *by John Riches*



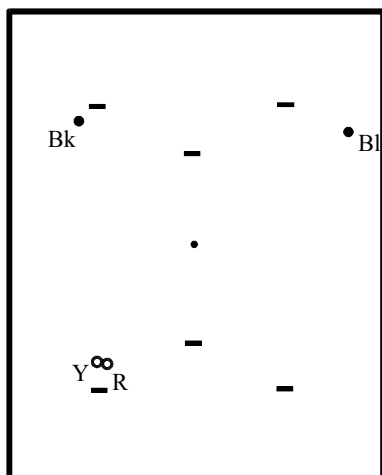
There are many players who know how to set out and play all-round 4-ball breaks, and have the shots to do it, but who break down because they fail to use simple opportunities to 'tidy up' the positions of balls which do not go exactly where they are wanted.

In the diagrammed position red has just made hoop 6. 1-back has been well loaded with black, and 2-back is reasonably loaded with blue. It is tempting in such situations to say that things are going well enough, so you simply roquet yellow a few yards to a position between 1-back and 2-back, then take off to black to make 1-back. However, although blue is reasonably well placed at 2-back, it could be better, and it is important to realise that it will cost you nothing to improve the loading of this hoop. It will involve playing a few extra shots as compared with the 'simpler' way of making 1-back immediately, but the shots will be no more difficult and if the balls fail to go where you want them you will hardly be any worse off, so there is something to gain and

nothing to lose by taking the trouble to 'tidy up' the position of the ball from which you will later have to make 2-back.

Yellow should be rushed near to blue and then placed more accurately in front of 2-back as you get a rush on blue back toward 1-back. Then you can leave blue (instead of yellow) between 1-back and 2-back, and go to black to make 1-back with your next hoop loaded really accurately. It is such care in the little things that distinguishes the top players from the average ones, and ensures that they are able to not only complete the break without breaking down, but also get the 'perfect leave' they want at the end of the break. In such situations it pays to follow the old Cornish motto: "Near enough is not good enough. When you get it exact, that is near enough."

MAINTAIN THE BREAK *by John Riches*

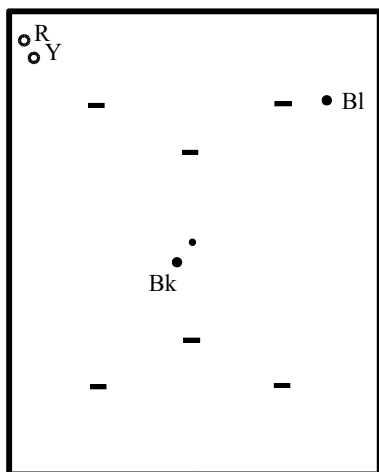


In the diagrammed position red has just made hoop 1. Black is at hoop 2, but blue is about 1 yard from the yardline and cannot be considered a satisfactory load of hoop 3. The player has several choices:

- (1) Many would take off to black, make hoop 2, and hope to find some way of both loading hoop 4 and making hoop 3 - perhaps with a dicey hoop approach from where blue is.
- (2) Slightly better is to pass-roll yellow near to hoop 6 while going to black, and after making hoop 2 hope to send black to hoop 4 and get a rush on yellow to either hoop 3 or to the blue ball.
- (3) Another possibility is to play a right-angle split which sends yellow vaguely toward hoop 4 while going to black, and after hoop 2 try for a rush on black to hoop 3 or to the blue ball.
- (4) A fourth alternative is to take off to blue, hoping to rush it closer to hoop 3, or else place it there with a long pass-roll, before making hoop 2 from black.
- (5) The best choice is to split yellow to hoop 3, so that after making hoop 2 you can send black to hoop 4 with either a rush or a split while going to either yellow or blue.

In making this choice you ignore the fact that yellow and blue will not be far apart. In fact you regard it as an advantage which will make it easier to continue the break after making hoop 2. If you cannot play confidently a split shot from any hoop to the next two hoops, then it is the most important thing you must learn to do as quickly as possible - far more important than improving your roqueting or your hoop running. There is no sense being concerned about leaving yellow close to blue if things go wrong, since if you fail to make hoop 2 black and yellow will almost certainly be together and your opponent will have the innings anyway. Assume that you will make hoop 2, and play the shot that makes it easiest to continue afterward.

DON'T SET UP IN YOUR OWN CORNER *by John Riches*

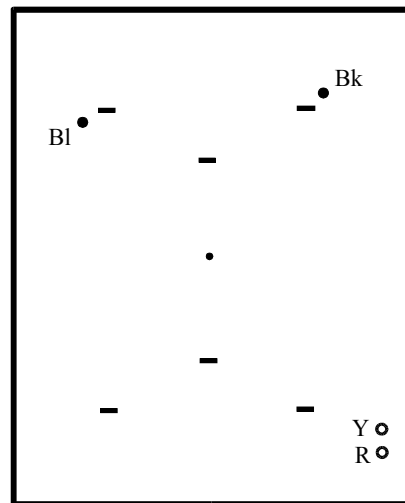


In the diagrammed position we can assume that yellow is already on 4-back and the player of yellow has again roqueted and set up as shown, hoping that in the next turn he will be able to get a break going with his red partner ball (or partner's ball in a doubles game) which is still for hoop 2.

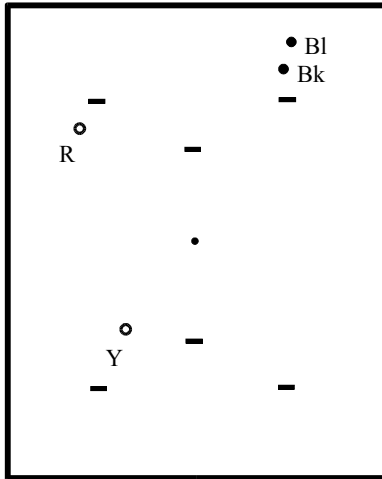
Many assume that the best place to leave your two balls is near the border close to red's hoop, with a good rush in so that the hoop can be easily made. However, if you (or your partner) are capable of playing breaks, then you should be looking to maximise the chance (if your opponent fails to roquet) of making not just one hoop, but a break.

The second diagram shows a far better leave from this point of view, provided the player of red is capable of rushing yellow to black and black to hoop 2.

Nor would the leave shown in the first diagram be any better if black were at hoop 4 instead of near the peg. Think through the shots the opponent may take and how you would continue as red, in order to convince yourself of this. You should work out and remember the "ideal leave" for each hoop, taking account of the shots you are capable of playing confidently and assuming that deliberately wiring balls will be impractical. Then be ready to use such a leave if the opportunity arises, and so maximise your chance of winning the game.



THE RIGHT SHOT *by John Riches*



In the diagrammed position the player of black had set up so that blue, which was for 1-back, has a good chance of a break in the next turn provided the player of red does not roquet. Regardless of where the red ball went, he should be able to rush black near enough to yellow, then leave black near 2-back and rush yellow to 1-back, with at least a 3-ball break.

The player of red elected to shoot at yellow and missed, thus making it even easier for blue to establish a 4-ball break by rushing black to red on the south border, then red to yellow and yellow to 1-back.

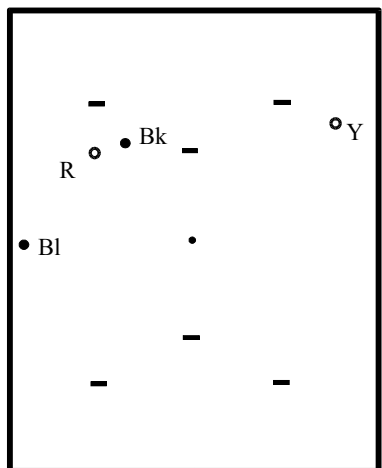
When asked why he had not shot at black, he replied that he thought he would finish too close to blue, who would turn around and roquet red, then get a rush on black to his 1-back hoop. This is a reasonable answer, and in fact there is not much to choose between shooting at black and shooting at yellow in the diagrammed position. (Of course, readers of my coaching articles will realise that the idea of not shooting at a ball, and instead hitting away into a

corner, should not be given any consideration at all.)

In such a situation, where the two shots are of approximately equal length, it is a good idea to ask yourself which position you would prefer to face if you were to play the next turn with blue: would you rather have the red ball on the south boundary (having missed yellow), or in the 3rd corner (having missed black)? Not many would relish the idea of having to play a 6-yard pressure roquet; nor would they want to have red left near the baulk-line after making the 1-back hoop by rushing black to yellow and yellow to 1-back.

Whatever you do with red, you must accept that the opponent will have a good chance of setting up a break with blue unless you hit a roquet. Since you are equally likely to hit either shot, choose the one which, if missed, creates the situation you would least welcome if you were the opponent.

USE ALL THE BALLS *by John Riches*



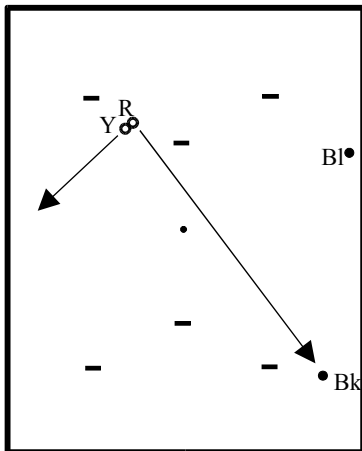
You are playing red in the position shown, and have just made 1-back. What will you do now? One possibility is to roquet black and send it to load 3-back (or worse still take off) while trying to get a rush on blue to 2-back; but with blue either on the yard-line or fairly close to it, it is likely that you would be faced with a rather long approach to 2-back after having given a 'lift'.

Even if blue were two or three yards in from the yard-line, where this shot would have a much greater chance of succeeding, you should not miss the opportunity to use the yellow ball which is about 4 yards from 4-back and cannot be considered a satisfactory load of that hoop. If you will have to end the break at 4-back to avoid giving contact, then it is even more essential to get yellow into the break immediately, to facilitate a good 'leave'.

Therefore the correct play is to rush black somewhere near the 3rd corner, use a stop-shot to send it to 3-back, and get a rush on yellow to blue (best) or to 2-back. It is rather too common for players to forget all about the yellow ball in such situations because it is outside their field of vision. They think only of how to make the next (2-back) hoop as quickly as possible. There is also a temptation, when stopping at 4-back, to be satisfied with simply making the remaining two hoops and not giving much thought to the need to obtain the best possible 'leave' in order to maximise your chance of making another break with your other ball in your next turn.

There are several noticeable differences between Australian states in the way breaks are usually played, and one difference is that in SA our players strive to bring the 4th ball into a break as soon as possible, while in other states it is more common to play a 3-ball break and pick up the 4th ball later. There are reasons for such differences which could perhaps provide material for a future article.

DON'T LEAVE PARTNER IN THE MIDDLE *by John Riches*



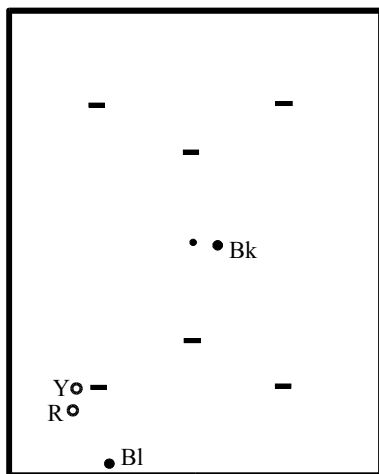
In the diagrammed position red has just made hoop 2, having run through to border, then roqueted yellow, sending it about half-way between hoop 2 and hoop 6. Many players would now take off to black, and try to continue the break by taking-off to blue, hoping to be able to rush it near enough to hoop 3. The problem with this method is that it leaves the partner ball out in the lawn when it is far from certain that you will be able to establish an immediate break.

A more conservative player may take off from yellow to hoop 3 immediately, or else roll both balls to the north border (possibly trying to get red in front of hoop 3) and set up there, allowing the opponent an extra attempt to roquet. An immediate take-off to blue is also possible.

In such situations the best option is to play a thick take-off as indicated by the arrows, sending yellow within 4-5 yards of the border while going to black to try to establish the break. Then it should not be difficult to bring yellow back into the break, for example after making either hoop 3 or hoop 5.

Most players give far too little attention to practising thick take-offs, and so are not confident in playing them. Perhaps they do not fully understand the mechanics involved, e.g. how to find the correct line of aim in order to allow for 'pull' on the yellow croqueted ball, 'mallet drag' on the red striker's ball, and the fact that in a thick take-off the red ball will tend to slide across the surface of the yellow ball in a way that does not happen in most other split shots. If you play the thick take-off and find yourself unable to make hoop 3 after approaching it with blue, you can return your red ball to the west border near yellow, possibly with a rush in the direction of hoop 4 so that blue would have no safe shot and you are threatening to establish the break in your next turn.

LOAD THAT HOOP! *by John Riches*



The diagram shows a situation where all clips are still on hoop 1, and blue has just shot from near hoop 2 at yellow, finishing on the south border in front of hoop 1. In such situations it is very difficult for a coach to persuade players NOT to immediately make hoop 1.

This would be incorrect (provided the player is capable of playing any sort of reasonable rush) because it guarantees only one hoop, when you should be thinking about establishing a break.

A slightly better line of play is to roquet yellow with red (or vice versa), take off to blue, and use a stop-shot to send blue to hoop 2 while trying to stop in position to run hoop 1. However such "load and hold" shots are not high percentage shots, and should only be used when there is no better alternative.

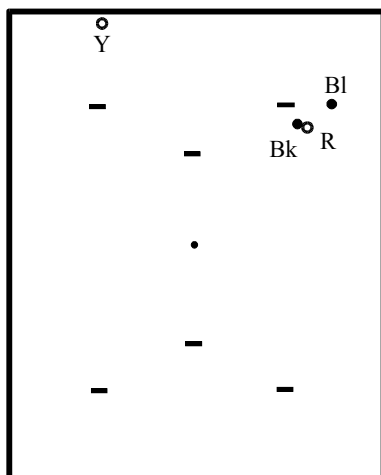
In this situation the best chance for most players to establish the break is to play red, rush yellow to hoop 2, and then take off to black near the peg, hoping to rush it either to hoop 1, or (better and easier still) near to blue on the south

border, after which blue can be rushed to hoop 1. If you fail to get any sort of rush on black in the desired direction you can simply take off to blue and roll for hoop 1 from the south border.

One final word: If for some reason you still prefer to make hoop 1 immediately, then make it with a rush back to blue, which can be obtained more easily and certainly than a rush to black. Then blue can be rushed past hoop 5 toward black and sent to load hoop 3 before rushing black to hoop 2. This way you at least get both opponent balls out into the lawn.

As you walk onto the lawn to start your turn you should always be asking yourself not "How can I make my hoop?", but "How can I load the next hoop before I make the current one?"

GO FOR THE BREAK *by John Riches*



The diagram shows a situation where red, which is for 4-back, has roqueted or rushed black toward blue, hoping to use black to load penultimate before making 4-back from blue. Unfortunately black has stopped on the inside of blue, which is about halfway between the 4-back hoop and the yardline.

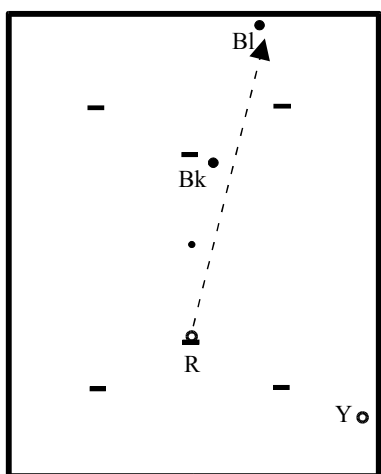
Many players would now take off from black to get a rush behind blue, making 4-back without penultimate loaded and hoping to organise a rush on black to penultimate afterward. This involves giving a 'lift' with the yellow ball rather close to B-baulk, and makes it difficult to either peg both yellow and red out, or obtain a satisfactory 'leave' after red has made rover.

A better line of play for red from the diagrammed position is to send black to penultimate with a stop-shot, then turn around and roquet blue. This means that red has to approach 4-back from at least 4 yards out, so is slightly less certain of making the hoop; but if he does succeed in making it the following play will be far easier. With penultimate well loaded he can go to yellow and send it to

the peg or rover before making penultimate from black, thus facilitating the peg-out after rover, or enabling him to more easily place all four balls in the best possible places so as to give himself the maximum chance of finishing the game with yellow in his next turn.

It is a noticeable difference between players of different levels that those in lower grades tend to think only of making the next hoop, whereas the better players are always thinking of ways to make their future play as easy as possible, and in order to do this they are prepared to slightly reduce the chance of making the current hoop, knowing that on average over time they will gain far more often than they lose by adopting such an enterprising approach.

A MISSED OPPORTUNITY *by John Riches*



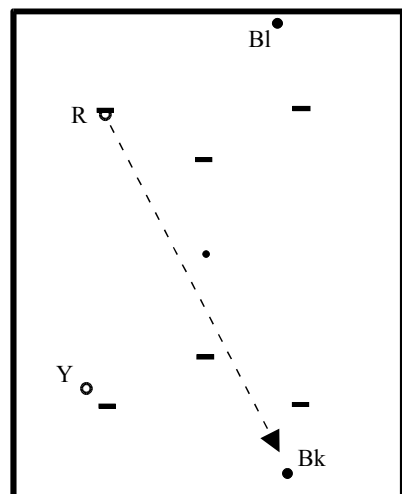
When watching games it can seem to a coach that there are some players who "never miss an opportunity to miss an opportunity".

I am not referring here to the missing of short roquets or failure to make simple hoops, but to the failure to recognise an opportunity that has been presented to the player. Such failure is often due to an inability to think flexibly.

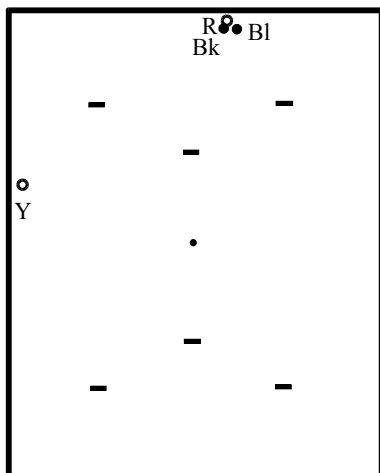
The first diagram shows a situation where red had almost - but not quite - made hoop 5. Blue, from near 2-back, shot at black and missed, finishing on the border in front of hoop 3. Many players would now run hoop 5 by hitting red near to black at hoop 6, failing to realise that they are missing an excellent opportunity to set up a 3-ball break by hitting red immediately to blue as shown by the arrow.

In the second diagram red had stuck in 1-back, and can make it by hitting down to yellow at 2-back, but will then face the problem of getting the opponent's balls away from the baulk-lines. If red had almost made the hoop, it is likely that he can complete the running of the hoop by hitting red through the hoop at an angle, so that it finishes near enough to black to roquet it and use it to load 3-back before making 2-back from yellow.

Such shots need some care - a good coach will be able to give useful advice about the best way to play it - and are well worth practising.



THINK BEFORE YOU HIT *by John Riches*



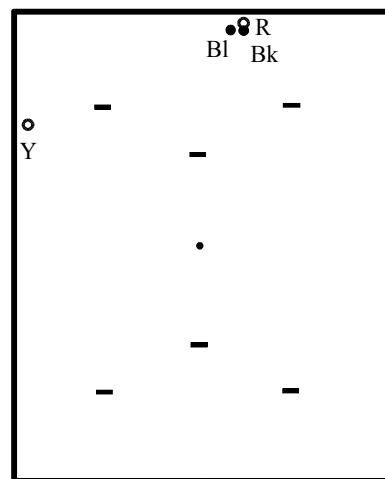
The 1st diagram shows a situation where red, which is for 4-back, has shot from near the peg and roqueted the black ball on the north border. When yardlined, the black ball is about 10cm from the blue ball. Most players would now leave black near the yardline and get a rush on blue to 4-back.

It is clear that they are likely to have difficulty continuing the break after making the one hoop, and they would make it much easier for themselves if they could somehow put the blue ball into the lawn before making 4-back.

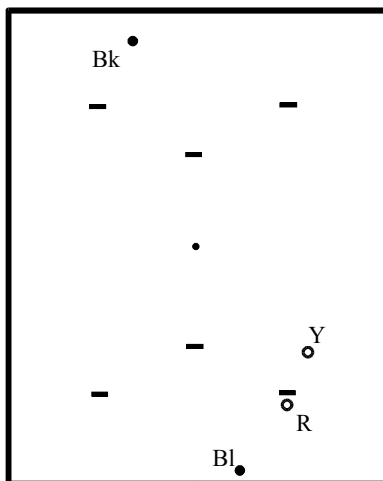
In this situation a little thought should suggest the idea of playing a "disjoint" cannon (or "delayed" or "open" or "pseudo" cannon, depending which book you read). This involves rushing blue to 4-back immediately in the croquet stroke, while also hitting into black sufficiently to send it toward penultimate. It

sounds rather difficult, but after a little practice most players can play this type of shot quite confidently, and give themselves an excellent chance of continuing the break to the peg.

In the second diagram the blue ball is on the other side of black, but a disjoint cannon can still be used to send black to penultimate while rushing blue to yellow, and then yellow to 4-back. You will be surprised at the number of opportunities for disjoint cannons you can find if you start to look for them.

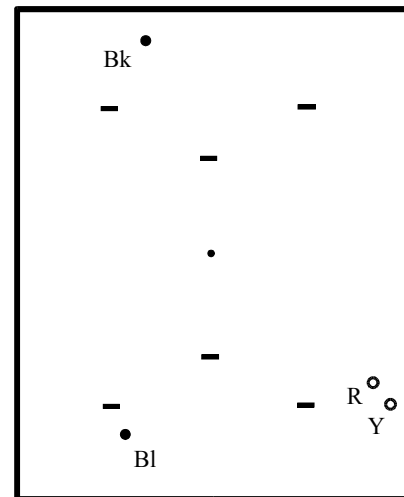


INVESTING IN THE FUTURE *by John Riches*

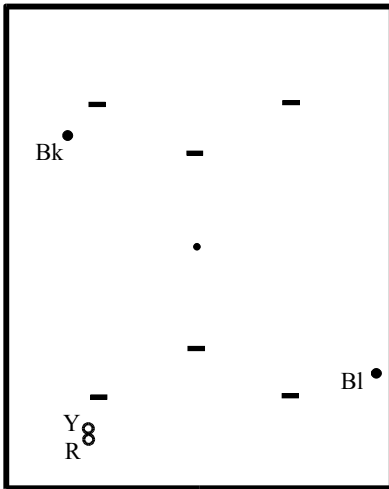


One of the most difficult tactical decisions that has to be made during a game is whether to take a low-percentage chance of continuing or setting up an immediate break; or to instead set up a good leave for your next turn. The correct answer will depend on the skill level of both you and your opponent, but in most cases (at least until you reach international level) the best advice is to set up so that your opponent gets one long shot, after which (provided he misses) you will have an immediate simple break. This policy will not work every time, but it will win you more games than attempting long, low-percentage rolls for your next hoop which usually result in giving the opponent one or more "free" shots after which, if he misses, you still do not have a break set up.

In the 1st diagram red is about to make 3-back, and the yellow clip is on 1-back. Although there would be no "contact" given, it is wrong for red to roll both balls to 4-back in the probably vain hope of making that hoop - and then having to get both opponent balls away from the baulk-lines. Instead he should simply set up the position in the 2nd diagram by putting blue at 2-back and giving yellow a rush to black at 1-back. The principle is: Plan ahead, so as to make your future play as easy as possible.

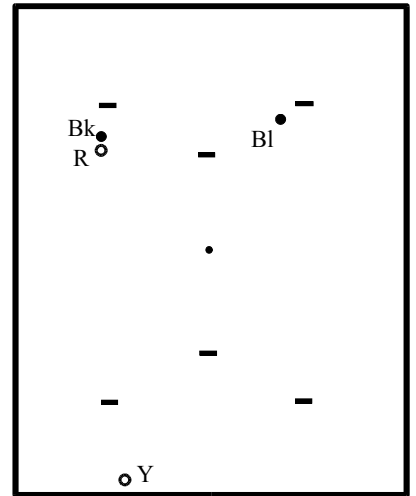


DIFFERENCES BETWEEN STATES (part 1) *by John Riches*



When watching players from different states I have noticed that SA players tend to go to more trouble than others to bring the 4th ball into a break as soon as possible. If playing red and approaching hoop 1 in the situation shown in the 1st diagram they would plan, after making the hoop, to rush yellow somewhere near the 4th corner, then use a stop-shot to load hoop 3 while going to blue, and play a thick take-off from blue to black, thus getting blue a few yards into court.

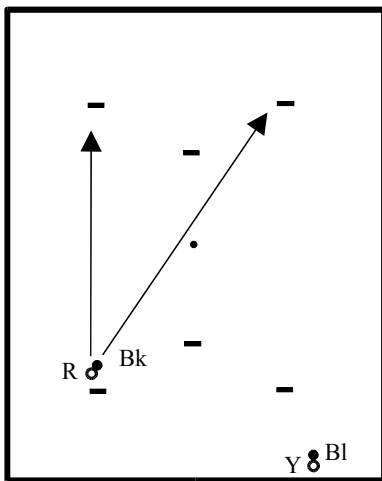
After hoop 2 they would again hope for a rush to blue, so they can immediately set up a 4-ball break. Players from most other states seem to prefer to make hoop 1 with a rush to the border near black, and load hoop 3 with a stop-shot, planning to bring blue into the break at a later stage.



In the second diagram SA players would usually make hoop 2 with a rush to the 1st corner, again with the idea of bringing yellow into play as soon as possible.

The reason for this difference is difficult to establish, but it may be due to the fact that in SA the hoops tend to be set very rigidly in the ground, which contains a lot of clay and dries out like cement (WA also has dry soil for most of the year, but it has less clay and more sand). With rigid hoops the 4th ball is necessary to ensure that you do not need to run any longish hoops.

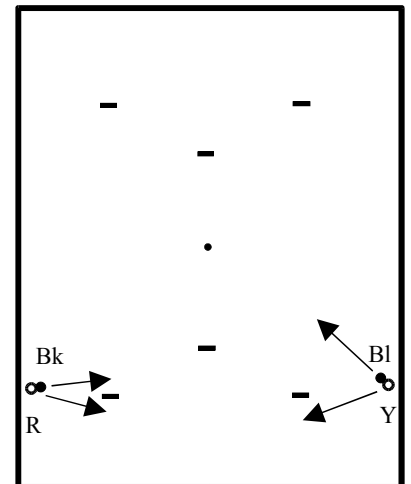
DIFFERENCES BETWEEN STATES (part 2) *by John Riches*



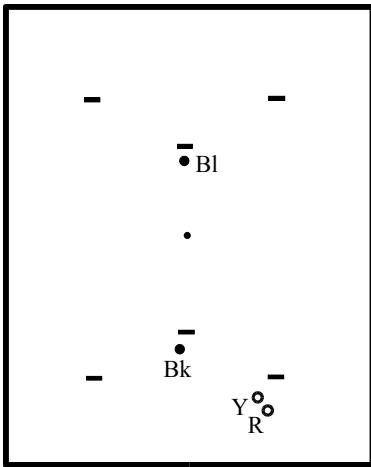
Another noticeable difference between players from various states is that SA players tend to play more shots with their hands at the top of the handle, using a lot of forward slope on the mallet shaft, while others tend more often to move one or both hands down the shaft, using less forward slope, and so make it a more definite "roll". Most of our players keep the hands at the top of the shaft when splitting from hoop 1 to hoops 2 and 3 as shown in the first diagram, and also if they were playing yellow and approaching 3-back from the yardline in front of the hoop as shown.

In the second diagram we would not use a narrow-angled roll to approach hoop 1 with red from the side border, but would keep the hands at the top of the shaft and use a wider-angled split approach, as shown with yellow approaching 3-back. The idea is that the hands

at the top of the shaft allow better control (contrary to the intuitive feeling of many players), and the firmer ground due to our low rainfall allows the striker's ball to be confidently "squeezed" forward (quite legally) instead of needing to be "rolled". A hands-down rolling action can work quite well, but involves acceleration, and so introduces into the swing further variables which need to be accurately controlled.

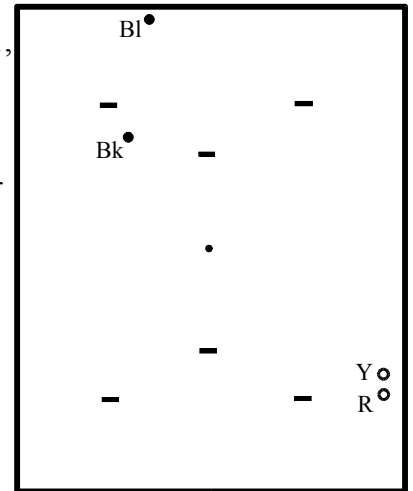


DON'T LOAD TWO AHEAD *by John Riches*



One often sees players loading two hoops ahead, when it would be better to load only one hoop ahead and have the 4th ball as a "pivot ball". In the first diagram red has made hoop 4, with hoops 5 and 6 already well loaded. The tendency of such players is to either roquet yellow gently and send it to 1-back with a stop-shot before making hoop 5, or (worse still) rush yellow to 1-back and take off back to black at hoop 5. It is better to roquet yellow 2-3 yards toward black, then place it either near the peg or between hoop 5 and 2-back.

The second diagram shows a position which can occur early in a game. Red is still for hoop 1, and blue has just shot from near hoop 1 at black and missed. Many players would now cut-rush yellow to hoop 3 and leave it there, taking off to blue, then rolling blue to hoop 2 while trying for a rush on black to hoop 1.

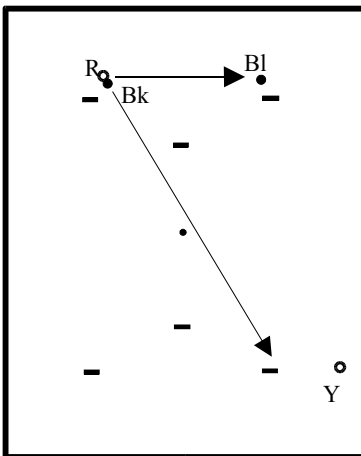


Yellow should have been rushed to the border in front of hoop 3 and left about 20 cm in from the yard-line when taking off to blue.

A third common situation where a hoop is loaded too early is when players load hoop 6 instead of hoop 5 after making hoop 3, and in the position of the first diagram it would actually be better to have blue not at hoop 6, but about one-third of the way from hoop 4 to hoop 6.

However it is OK to load 2-back after hoop 5 - if you are interested in the reasons for all this, ask your club coach to explain it to you.

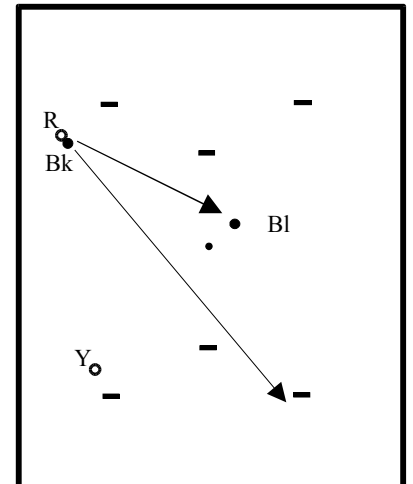
THE PRIORITY BALL *by John Riches*



When using a split shot to load a hoop, in almost all cases you should give priority to the croqueted ball, in order to ensure an accurate load.

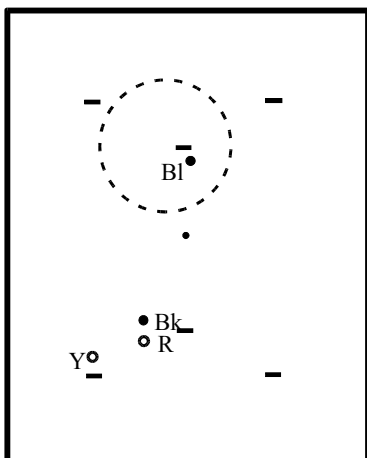
There is a common and understandable tendency to worry mainly about getting the striker's ball near enough to another ball to roquet it, and to merely send the croqueted ball anywhere vaguely in the direction of the hoop you are loading.

In actual fact it is the croqueted ball which needs to be placed more accurately than the striker's ball in order to ensure the continuance of the break. In the 1st diagram red is loading hoop 4 with black while going to make hoop 3 from blue. He will have little difficulty in making hoop 3 provided in the split shot red finishes within 3 yards of blue, but having black



finish 3 yards from hoop 4 is not good enough, and is likely to make things much harder for himself after he has made hoop 3 and wants to bring the yellow ball into the break. In the second diagram red has made 1-back and is splitting black to 3-back while going to the slightly wayward blue "pivot ball". Again it is the black ball, rather than the red ball, which must be positioned accurately in the split. When playing such split shots, learn to concentrate on accurate placement of the croqueted ball.

NO-MAN'S LAND *by John Riches*

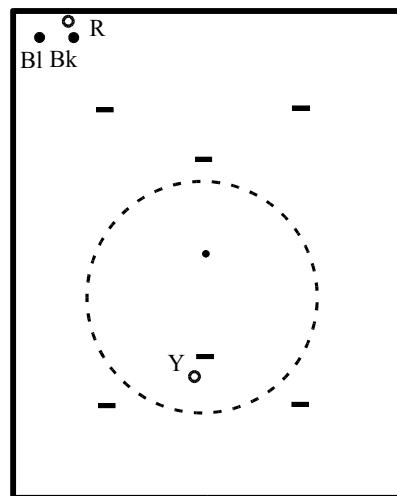


The first diagram shows a common situation where red is for hoop 6 and is about to rush black up the lawn, then use it to load 1-back while going to make hoop 6 from blue. In playing the rush it is important to realise that there are some places from which it will not be possible to accurately load 1-back as desired in the following stroke. In fact there will be a circular area of "no-man's land" as indicated by the dotted circle, and it is helpful to picture this area so that you can avoid rushing the black ball into it and finding too late that you cannot load 1-back as planned.

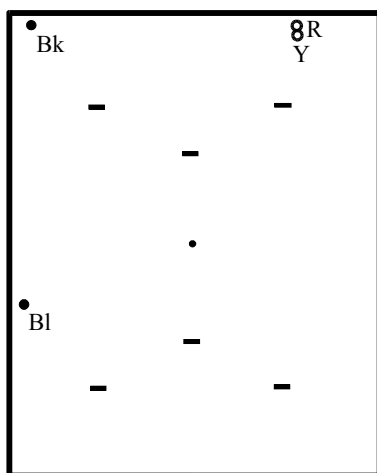
In the 2nd diagram red is for hoop 5 and has obtained a good rush on black into the lawn, but must similarly avoid rushing it into the imaginary circle which is larger this time - be

cause if he does so he will not be able to load hoop 6 accurately while going to yellow to make hoop 5.

For those mathematically inclined, the diameter of the "no-man's land" circle extends approximately from the hoop you want to load to the ball you are going to use next, and then on past that ball for about an additional one-third of the distance. The same would apply if the ball you are going to use next is not at your hoop, and you need to get a rush on it while loading the following hoop; but of course the "no-man's-land" circle will be in a different position.



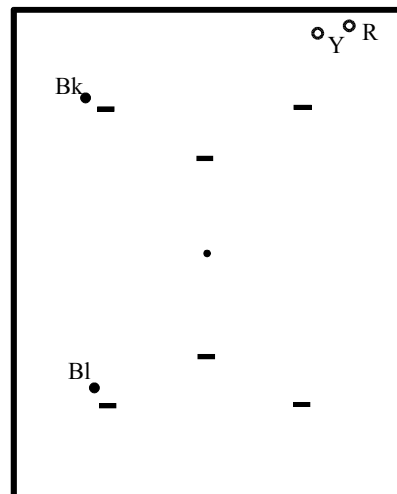
THE BEST PLACES *by John Riches*



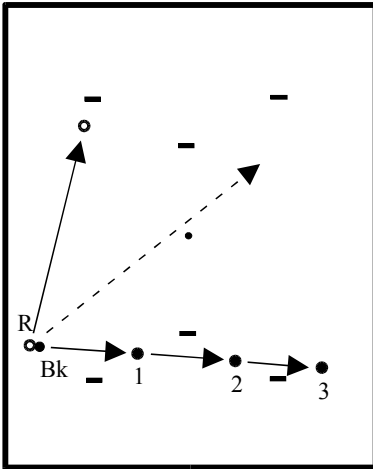
There are many situations in which players place balls incorrectly, often because they are unaware of the best places to put the balls.

In the 1st diagram all clips are still on hoop 1. In taking off from yellow to black, red should not try to send yellow in to hoop 3, but should leave it about 6 inches (15 cm) from the yardline; and when pass-rolling from the 2nd corner to blue I would encourage players, at least until they reach state level, to leave black about one yard behind hoop 2 rather than in front of it. The reasons for leaving the balls as described become apparent only if you think several strokes ahead, and realise that you are far from certain to make hoop 1 from such a situation, and so should give some thought to where the balls will be best placed for your next turn.

If you fail to gain position to run hoop 1, and have to return to yellow, you should aim to set up the position shown in the second diagram. Red has a rush to black, and if blue shoots at black and misses, then with black behind hoop 2 as shown it is easier to go to blue and put it at hoop 2 while getting a "dolly" rush on black to hoop 1 than if black were 1-2 yards in front of the hoop. If you are doubtful about this point, try it both ways and see how often you can do it. If you make hoop 1 at the first attempt, then making hoop 2 from a ball one yard behind it should not be too difficult.

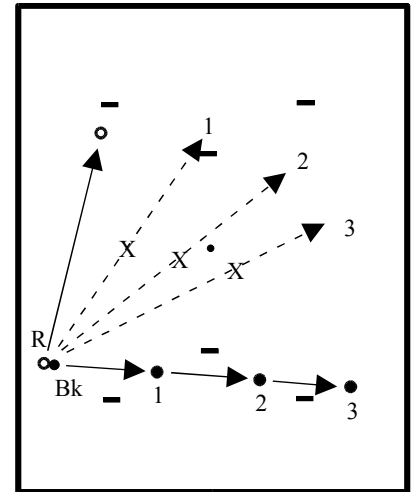


SETTLING AN OLD ARGUMENT *by John Riches*

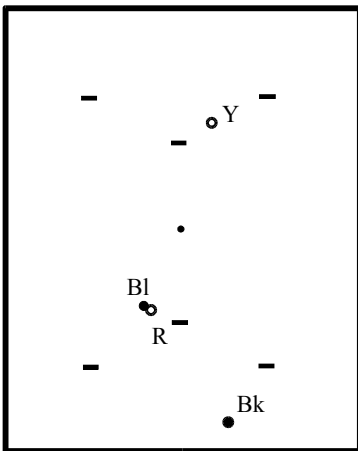


When lining up a split shot, many players still use the old, incorrect method of "halving the angle of split" in order to find the direction in which they need to swing the mallet. This method can work for splits in which the two balls are to travel roughly equal distances, but can be shown to be theoretically incorrect. The 1st diagram illustrates a situation where red is going to hoop 2 and sending black to either of three possible points, all in the same line. Because the angle of split is almost a right-angle, the mallet will have to be swung flat through the ball in each case. How will you determine which of the three points the black ball goes to? If you "halve the angle", you will always swing in the direction of the dotted arrow, since the angle is exactly the same each time.

It is clear that people who claim they are "halving the angle" are in fact not doing so, since they would be able to send the black ball only to position 2. The correct method of finding the line of swing is shown in the 2nd diagram. You must swing at a point halfway between where the two balls are to finish. This point, for the three different shots, is indicated by an 'X', and the three different lines of swing are shown accordingly by the dotted arrows. Only the second dotted line is close to halving the angle of split, as in this case the balls travel almost equal distances.



THE SAME OLD ERROR *by John Riches*

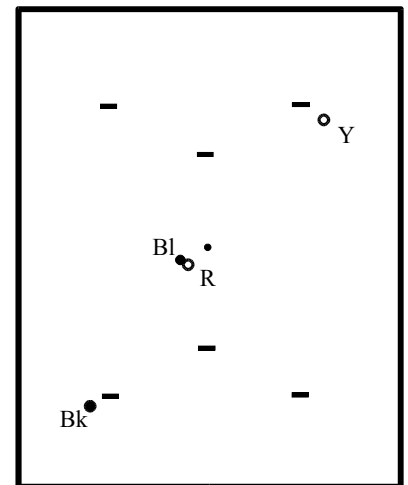


The first diagram shows a situation where red has just roqueted blue near hoop 5. With the red clip on 1-back and the other two balls unused, how would you continue?

In such situations it is common to see players take off from blue to yellow, aiming to rush yellow to 1-back. While this would be a reasonable continuation, it involves making an error which we have seen many times before: failure to load your next hoop before making the current one. It is not difficult in this situation to put blue at 2-back while going to black, and this would be a far better thing to do even if black were on the yardline.

When black is a yard or more in court as shown, there is a good chance of getting a rush on it up the lawn and making it more certain that you will get a good rush on yellow to 1-back. If you have to take off from black to yellow, then getting the rush on yellow should not be much more difficult than if you had taken off from blue, and is a small price to pay for the advantage of having 2-back accurately loaded before you make 1-back.

A similar situation is shown in the second diagram, where red is for hoop 1 and had roqueted blue near the peg. He should not take off to black, but should send blue to hoop 2 while going to yellow, then take off back to black to make hoop 1 with hoop 2 already loaded.



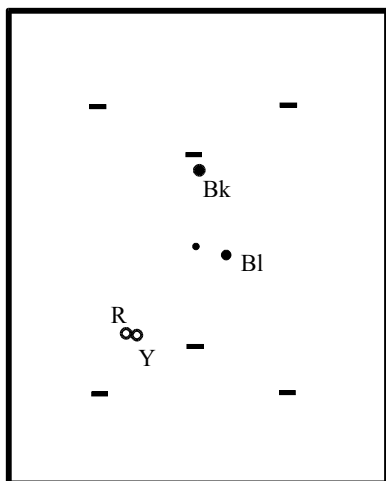
BUT IS IT COACHING? *by John Riches*

From time to time I still hear people express the idea that the main role of a coach is to (a) teach beginners how to play the game; and (b) tell you what you are doing wrong. Recently a player told me: "So-and-so is a good coach. He watched me play for a few minutes and told me exactly what I was doing wrong!"; and he was surprised when I asked: "Did he tell you how to put it right?" A coach who merely tells you what you are doing wrong is no better than a doctor who diagnoses your illness but does not know how to treat it - you would probably have been better off not knowing! Further questioning of the above-mentioned player revealed that the "coach" had told him his backswing was crooked and out of line. This fact was obvious to anyone at all, whether they knew anything about coaching or not; but such a problem can be quite difficult to remedy, and it is unlikely that the player will be able to correct it on his own, as when he stands over the ball and swings the mallet back it will appear to him that his backswing is straight.

The real problem is that there is something in his swing which is causing the ball to go off to one side - possibly tightening the grip during the swing, or incorrect placement of the bottom hand, or cramped stance, or incorrect foot placement, or hurrying of the forward swing, etc.; and the coach needs to be able to sort out not only what the problem is, but what is causing it, and then how to remedy it. In fact, a crooked backswing on its own (which is rare) may not cause any actual problem at all.

The problem in the swing is almost certainly mechanical, and probably one of those listed in the previous paragraph, causing him to miss roquets fairly consistently on the same side. Over time the player has unconsciously learnt to "correct" for it by aiming a little to the other side of the target ball, which enables him to hit the roquets for a while, but in the long run makes the problem worse. After doing this for some time his brain becomes conditioned to accept the incorrect idea that the line he is swinging in is actually the correct line - because it seems to work. His brain needs to be retrained, and that is where the real work of the trained coach begins. Then, of course, there are the various other aspects of coaching - psychology, tactics, training programmes, and so on, all of which need to be tailored to suit the individual player being coached. Be sure that the person from whom you accept advice really does know what coaching actually involves.

BALL SLIP *by John Riches*

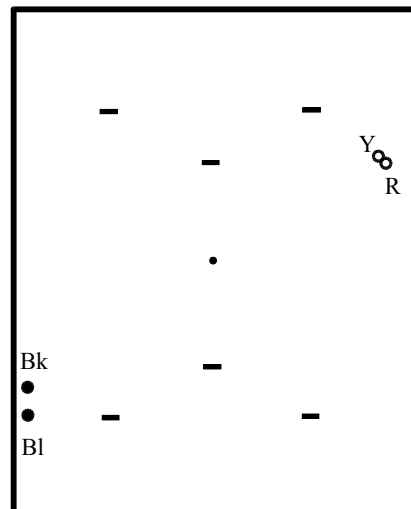


Most players are unaware of "ball slip" which affects the lining up, and consequently the result, of "thick take-offs". In the 1st diagram red wants to send yellow in front of rover while going to make penultimate from black; and in the 2nd diagram he wants to send yellow in to 4-back while going to the opponent's balls to make 2-back. Many players find that in their thick take-offs the croqueted ball falls short of its intended destination, while the striker's ball tends to go too far.

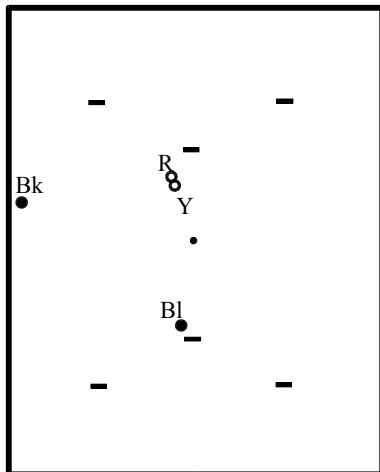
This is due to the fact that in a "thick take-off" or right-angle split the surfaces off the balls tend to slip against each other instead of gripping as they do in other split shots. (Ball slip also occurs in a normal 'fine' take-off, but is not noticed because of the different method of lining up.)

In order to allow for "ball-slip" you will usually need to select the line of swing by

choosing a point halfway between where you want the balls to finish, and then adjusting the line a little more into the croqueted ball, instead of into the striker's ball as you need to do with other splits. This is because in most split shots "mallet drag" on the striker's ball more than counteracts "pull" on the croqueted ball; and significant "ball slip" occurs only when the angle of split approaches a right-angle. The amount of "slip" will depend on the condition of the balls and whether they are wet or dry.



PRINCIPLES OF LEAVES *by John Riches*



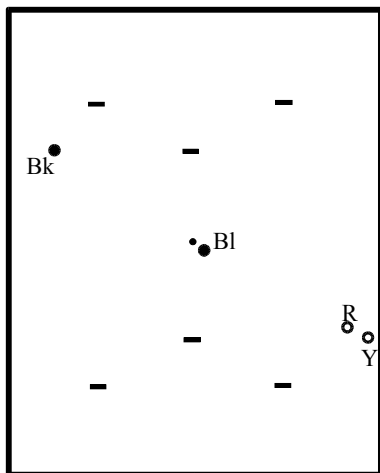
What considerations should be borne in mind when thinking about a good leave? The most important thing is to choose a leave such that if the opponent fails to roquet you will be able to set up an immediate break, before giving him a further chance to roquet and gain the innings. A second consideration is that the leave should be attainable without undue risk. Contrary to popular opinion, both of these things are usually more important than minimising the chance of the opponent roqueting.

One way to explain this is to consider the percentages involved. For example, you may be inclined to think that you could "improve" a leave by placing the balls so that instead of the opponent having (say) a 40% chance of roqueting he will have only a 35% chance.

This would be an improvement if everything else was unchanged, but the change is also likely to make it harder for you, if the opponent fails to roquet, to get a break established before giving him another chance to roquet. For

example, your chance of establishing an immediate break may be reduced from 90% to 80%. To many players it will seem safer to reduce the chance of the opponent roqueting, but in this case the price you would have to pay is too high, and you would be better off allowing him a slightly shorter roquet, but ensuring that if he misses it is less likely that he will get another chance. In terms of percentages, 90% of 60% is better than 80% of 65% (the 60% and 65% are the chances of the opponent failing to roquet after the two alternative leaves). The problem is that many players tend to think only of the immediate future. They play to minimise the chance of the opponent roqueting, and then only after he has failed to do so will they give thought to maximising their own chance of setting up a break. By then it will often be too late. Tactical choices based on one stroke at a time will prove to be inadequate against an opponent who looks further ahead and sees the whole picture.

GETTING THE LEAVE *by John Riches*

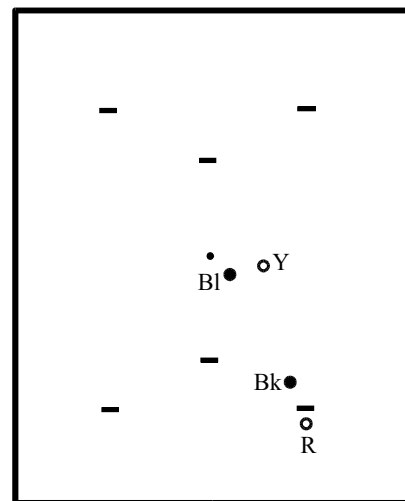


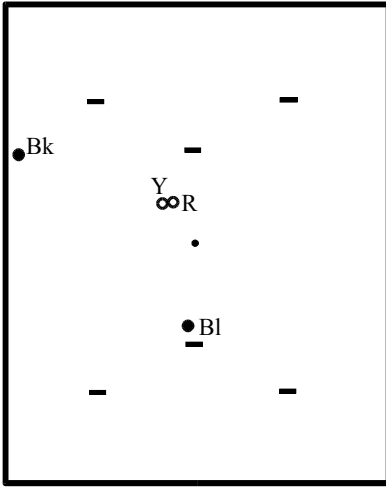
This is an article for more advanced players who can make a break of nine hoops often enough to make it worthwhile for them to also consider the best leave, and how to get it, in order to give the best chance of making another break if the opponent misses the lift roquet.

There are various leaves possible, but in recent years the most frequently used one is the "diagonal leave" illustrated in the first diagram, where red has gone around to 4-back and set for yellow which is still on hoop 1. Black and blue are wired by the peg, which also hampers a shot by blue at red and yellow; and in addition the short lift shot from the eastern end of A-baulk is hampered by hoop 4.

It is obviously a strong leave, but how do you get it? Many players try it, and some succeed, by leaving an opponent ball (black) in position

near hoop 2 after making 1-back. However it is usually better to load hoop 3 with the opponent ball, and after making 2-back send both your partner ball and the other opponent ball just east of the peg as shown in the second diagram, before making 3-back from the same opponent ball you made 1-back from. After making 3-back it is easy to send that ball (black) near enough to the position shown on the first diagram while going to blue near the peg. With yellow also close handy, you can position blue carefully in the wired position before rushing yellow to the east border to set up.





It is not uncommon to see quite good players missing opportunities to obtain the best possible leave at the end of a break because all they are thinking about is making the last one or two hoops.

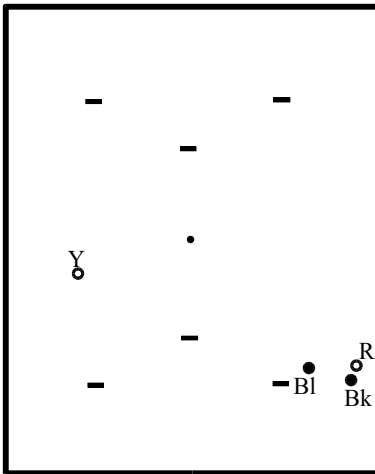
In the diagrammed position red, which was for penultimate at the start of the turn, had roqueted blue and used it to load rover hoop before making penultimate from yellow. After making penultimate he has now roqueted yellow again as shown.

Now, if not even earlier, is the time when he should consider how he is going to leave the balls after making rover. He must check where the yellow clip is (in this case it was on 2-back) and work out the best places to leave the four balls at the end of his break. In order to give himself the maximum chance of finishing the game in his next turn he will need to ensure that both opponent balls are left so that he will be able to set up a 3-ball break using whichever ball the opponent does not move. It is not good enough to leave the black ball

out of play on the west border as it is at present. Therefore he should take off to black and send it to either 2-back or 3-back before making rover, after which the blue ball can be left at the other of these two hoops. This ensures that at the start of his next turn, provided the opponent does not roquet, there will be a ball either at yellow's hoop, or loading the next hoop. All he has to do in addition is rush yellow to (say) the east border near 4-back and set it a rush to either of the opponent balls.

An even stronger leave would be to wire the opponent's balls across the 2-back hoop; but this would also require red to get all balls into play, with black and yellow in this case placed near 2-back, before red makes the rover hoop. Don't leave it until after you have made the last hoop before you start to think about the leave.

SHOT SELECTION *by John Riches*



In the diagrammed situation the player of black and blue had failed to make hoop 4 with black. The player of red has just shot with red from near hoop 5 and roqueted the black ball. The red clip is on hoop 1. He will now play to get a rush on blue - but to where?

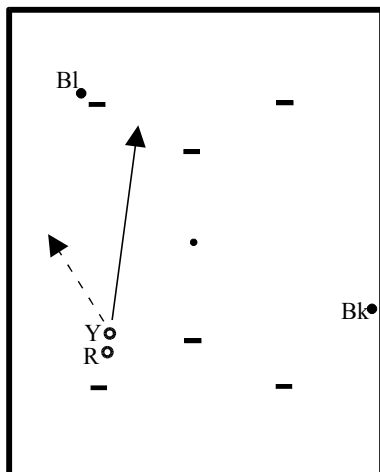
Some players will rush blue to hoop 1 and try to make the hoop without giving any thought to first loading hoop 2. They will usually struggle to make more than one hoop, and that is all they deserve to make.

Others will rush blue close to yellow, then rush yellow to hoop 1 so that they can make the hoop with their partner ball. These players will have similar difficulty making much more than one hoop. Many will rush blue to hoop 2 and then take off for a rush on yellow to hoop 1. At least these people are thinking about the need to set up a break instead of making just one hoop, but they have not selected the best tactical continuation.

The correct way is to rush blue to a position about halfway between hoop 1 and yellow, then use a stop-shot to load hoop 2 while getting a rush on yellow back to hoop 1. Most times you should be able to load hoop 2 with blue more accurately with a stop-shot than you can with a rush, and the stop-shot should also enable you to get a better rush on yellow to hoop 1 than you would have got if you had taken off from near hoop 2.

The principle of loading hoops with croquet shots (preferably stop-shots) rather than rushes is constantly emphasised by coaches and just as constantly overlooked by players in lower grades - if they make any attempt at all to load hoops ahead. Players often blame the loss of a game on missed roquets or failure to run easy hoops, when the real reason they lost was poor shot selection in situations such as the one we have considered here.

THINK BEFORE YOU RUSH *by John Riches*



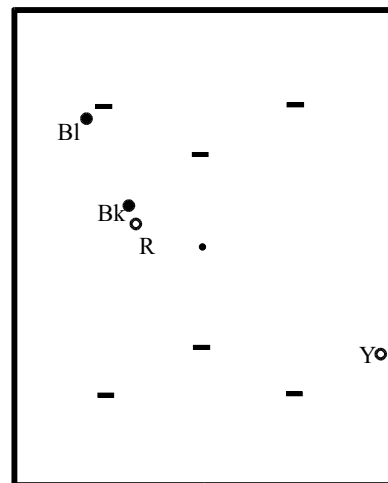
In the first diagram Red has made hoop 1 and has a forward rush on yellow, with black waiting just behind hoop 2. Many players will rush yellow to a position about halfway between hoops 2 and 6 as shown by the unbroken arrow, then find that they have no satisfactory way of loading hoop 3 before making hoop 2.

If you cannot cut yellow right into the 2nd corner, then you should rush yellow only half-way to hoop 2, and preferably cut it a bit toward the west border as shown by the broken arrow, to a position from which you can split yellow accurately to hoop 3 while going to black to make hoop 2.

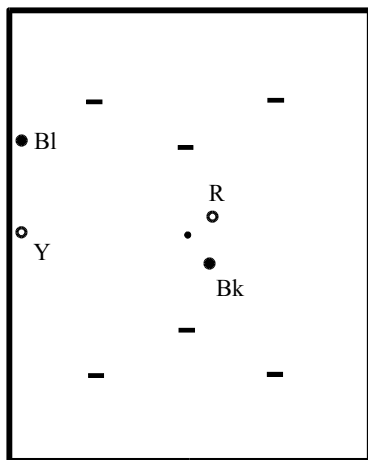
In the position shown on the second diagram red is again for hoop 2 and has taken off from yellow to black. Now it is again important for red to rush black to a position from which black can be sent to load hoop 3 before making hoop 2 from blue. The best place to rush black is as close to the 2nd corner as you can get

it, since from there it will require only a simple stop-shot to achieve the desired result.

A top player, instead of taking off, would have split yellow to hoop 3 while going to black. This long split roll may be seen as risky by some players, but he will want to load the next hoop and bring the fourth (partner) ball into his break as early as possible and would consider that a certain amount of risk is worth taking if it will make it easier for him to continue the break. The moral is: If you are not prepared to load hoops ahead, you must expect to get beaten by opponents who are.



TIME FOR A BREAK *by John Riches*



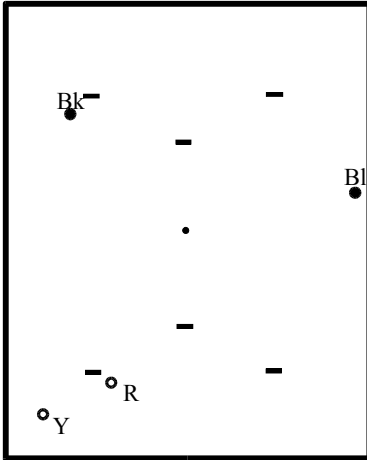
Imagine that you are the player of red and yellow in the diagrammed position, with your red clip on hoop 3 and yellow on hoop 4. (When this occurred in a recent game, blue was for hoop 1 and black was for hoop 5.) Which ball would you play?

Although the roquet is longer and therefore less certain, the only thing that makes sense is to shoot with yellow at blue. Unfortunately, like the player I was watching, many players find it difficult to bring themselves to play such a shot in a serious game, even when they know it is the correct thing to do. They instead take the shorter roquet by shooting with red at black, and say that they did not want to leave the red ball out in the lawn for black to use.

It should be obvious that there *is* a much better chance of setting up a break with yellow than with red, assuming that you roquet, by going to red and using it to load hoop 5 while getting a rush on black to hoop 4. Taking a 50% chance of making a break is much better, and more likely to win you the game, than taking even a 100% chance of keeping the innings but making no progress. There is nothing safe about failing to take the risks necessary to set up breaks when the opportunity is there.

In this situation a player who plays red and roquets black should forget about trying to make hoop 3 in this turn (unless at international level), and simply play to leave an opponent ball at each of his hoops (3 and 4), with his red and yellow balls near the west border and a useful rush for either; but any player who would think of this and have the shots to do it safely would have played yellow rather than red in the first place. It is often not easy to convince yourself in such situations that the less certain roquet is in fact the safer one, because you are actually taking a bigger risk of losing the game if you 'chicken out' and opt for the shorter roquet.

DON'T SET UP TOO CLOSE TO THE BORDER *by John Riches*



In the position shown on the diagram all clips are still on hoop 1. The player of red has rolled from near the peg with his yellow partner ball for hoop 1, but now finds that he will not be able to make the hoop. An almost automatic reaction is to use the one remaining shot to hit red out to border near the first corner, perhaps with the idea of getting it as far as possible from the black ball which the opponent will play in the next turn.

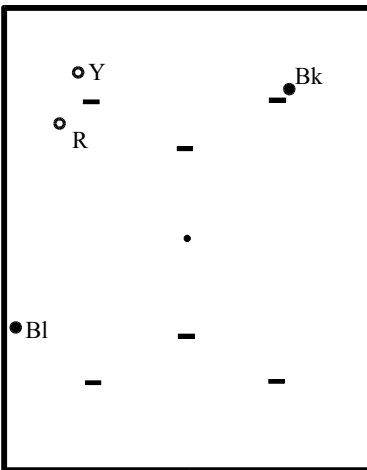
This gives your opponent a relatively "safe" shot with black at your balls in the 1st corner, since if he misses you will have difficulty making more than just the one hoop; and setting up a break will require several accurate and rather difficult shots.

It is far better to hit red gently about 2 yards due west, to a position about 1 yard from hoop 1 toward the 1st corner. (Those who have read my booklets will recognise this as a "trap-line" set-up.) Then, if black shoots at red or yellow and misses, you should be able to set up an easy break by playing yellow, roqueting black, and using a stop-shot to send it back to hoop 2 before making hoop 1 from red.

Note that this is better than trying to hide red from black in front of hoop 1, since in your next turn you will want to make a break with yellow rather than just making hoop 1 with red, and will not want to roquet red away from the hoop. Also, you want to encourage the opponent to shoot at your balls rather than discourage him from doing so. If black shoots at his blue partner ball and misses, you can play yellow, make hoop 1 from red, then hopefully rush red in an easterly direction, to a position from which you can use it to load hoop 3 while going to the opponent's balls on the east border and rushing one of them to hoop 2, with a break set up.

Note that this is better than trying to hide red from black in front of hoop 1, since in your next turn you will want to make a break with yellow rather than just making hoop 1 with red, and will not want to roquet red away from the hoop. Also, you want to encourage the opponent to shoot at your balls rather than discourage him from doing so. If black shoots at his blue partner ball and misses, you can play yellow, make hoop 1 from red, then hopefully rush red in an easterly direction, to a position from which you can use it to load hoop 3 while going to the opponent's balls on the east border and rushing one of them to hoop 2, with a break set up.

SITTING IN FRONT *by John Riches*



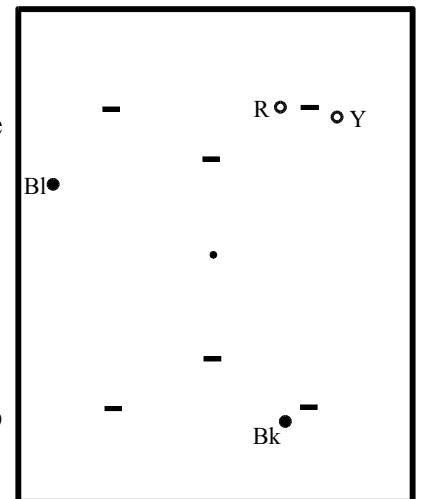
In the diagrammed situation the player of red has rolled with yellow for hoop 2 after loading hoop 3 with black, but unfortunately he has not gained position to run the hoop.

Some players will now make the mistake of sitting red in front of hoop 2 so that if the opponent fails to roquet they will be able to easily make the hoop - and nothing more.

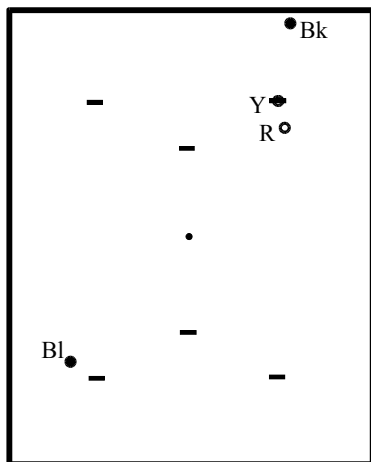
It is much better to place red about halfway between the yellow ball and the 2nd corner, thus making it very dangerous for your opponent to shoot at either of your balls because if he misses you will have an easy break.

Sitting in front of your hoop is rarely a good strategy, and the second diagram, where red is for hoop 3, shows another, rather less obvious,

situation where it is not a good idea. Unless you are prepared, after black shoots at yellow and misses, to immediately roquet black on the north border, you should prefer to hit red a yard or so past yellow to give red a good rush in to its hoop. This allows you in your next turn to organise a rush either to hoop 4 or to black on the north border (if it has shot at yellow and missed), or to the 2nd corner (if black has shot at blue and missed). The main reason why sitting red in front of hoop 3 is wrong is that after making hoop 3 with red in your next turn you will have no useful rush.



A BREAK IS BETTER THAN A HOOP *by John Riches*



There is a strong tendency for people to over-emphasise the importance of technique (being able to roquet and run hoops well), and downplay the importance of two things which in fact play a larger part in determining the results of games: the ability to play split shots, and tactical choices.

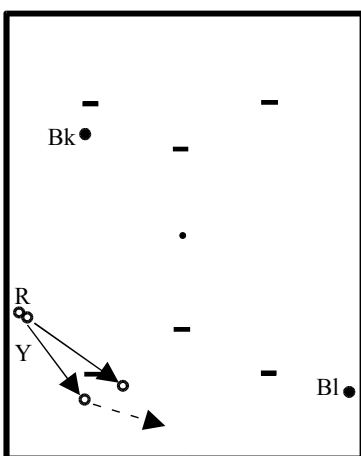
In the diagrammed position the player of yellow had stuck in hoop 3 with the other three clips still on hoop 1, and his opponent had missed the shot with black from near hoop 4. Although he was one of our leading players, he now made the mistake of walking onto the lawn without stopping to think, and making hoop 3 with yellow, obtaining a cut-rush to hoop 4 with some chance of making it (in fact, he failed to do so), but with little chance of setting up a break.

A few seconds' thought would have been enough to convince him that he would have had a much better chance of winning the game by playing red, rushing yellow to the border near black, then rushing black to either hoop 2 or the south border, and thus playing to make a break rather than just one or two hoops. If he had to play yellow, it would also have been better in making hoop 3 to run past red and then rush it back near to black, after which black could be rushed to the west border near blue and used to load hoop 5 with a stop-shot before rushing blue to hoop 4. This at least gives some chance of setting up a break, but with a lower percentage chance of succeeding than if he had played red.

For many players there is a psychological urge to make an easy hoop or take the shortest roquet, then think afterward about how they are going to continue.

Although it seems so obvious as to not need stating, we must emphasise once again that there is nothing safe about passing up opportunities to make breaks - and in fact that is how most games are won and lost.

THE RIGHT ROLL *by John Riches*

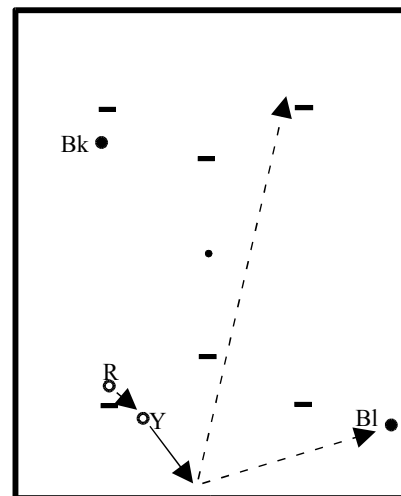


The first diagram shows a fairly common situation shortly after the start of a game, where the player of red has roqueted the 'tice' ball after pass-rolling the black ball to hoop 2 from the 2nd corner, and now is attempting to make hoop 1. Many players would again use a pass roll, placing their yellow partner ball 2-3 yards behind hoop 1 and hoping to get a forward rush after making the hoop.

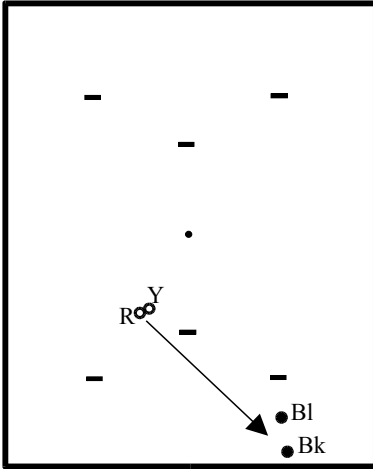
This is good if you make the hoop, but if you find yourself unable to do so, it leaves you in a vulnerable position where you will have to allow the opponent a "free" shot at yellow with black, or else if you cover the south border to stop this, you allow him to shoot at blue with relative safety.

A better method is to roll yellow about a yard past hoop 1 as shown by the unbroken arrows, and then if you cannot make the hoop you can more safely cover the border (see the unbroken arrow) and any shot your opponent takes will now be much riskier for him.

If you succeed in making hoop 1, you can rush yellow to the south border as shown by the unbroken arrows in the second diagram, then send it to hoop 3 while going to blue on the east border (see broken arrows), and from there take off to black with the advantage that blue will now be off the yardline and easier to bring into the break.



WATCH WHERE YOU LEAVE PARTNER *by John Riches*

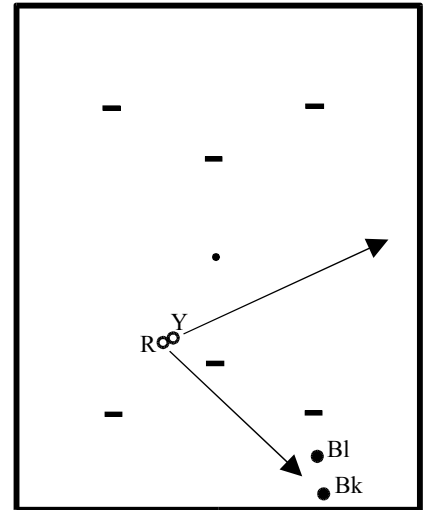


A common tactical mistake is to leave the partner ball near the middle of the lawn when there is only a small chance of getting a break set up. (It is also a common mistake not to bring your partner ball into the lawn when you do have a good chance of setting up a break; but that will have to be the subject of another article.)

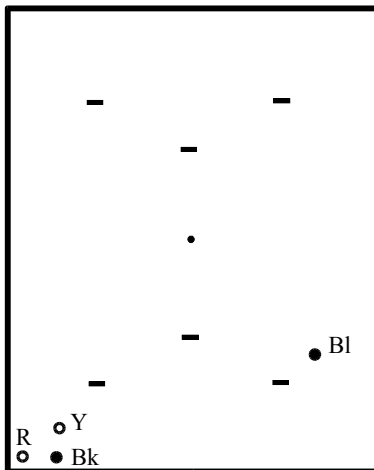
In the first diagram red has made hoop 1 and roqueted yellow toward the peg. The ideal continuation would be to send yellow to hoop 3 while going to the opponent's balls, but here it is not possible. Many players would take off from yellow to the opponent's balls, roquet black, and then rush blue to hoop 2; but if they do not succeed in making the hoop they will have left themselves in a very vulnerable situation,

either with both balls in the middle of the lawn, or with their balls widely separated.

The correct play is shown in the 2nd diagram: Yellow should be rolled to within 2-3 yards of the east border as illustrated by the arrows. If the yellow clip is still on hoop 1 a reasonable alternative would be to send yellow toward the 1st corner, but it is better to put yellow where you may be able to use it to continue your break. In this situation getting your partner ball out of the middle is not "negative" play; it costs nothing, is sound common sense, and shows that you are thinking ahead.



TAKE THOSE BREAKS *by John Riches*

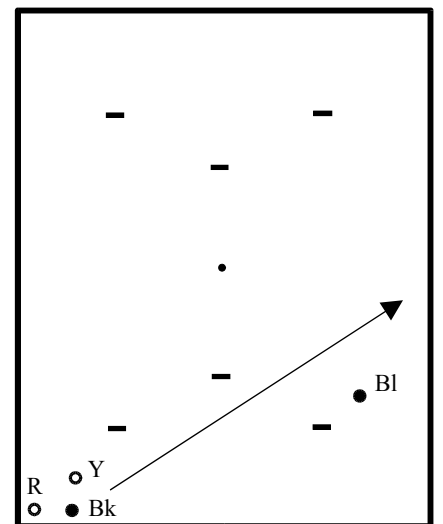


This is yet another article on what is probably my most commonly recurring theme: Do not pass up opportunities to make breaks. Sometimes this involves looking past what is immediately obvious and recognising other possibilities which may give you less certainty of making your next hoop, but a much better chance of setting up a break.

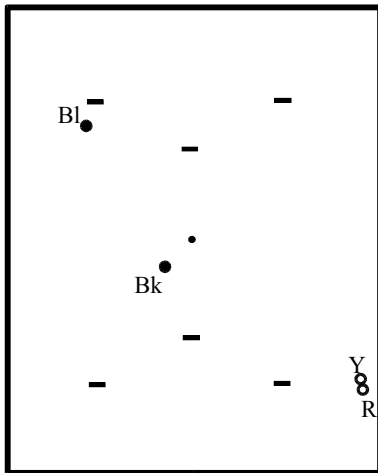
The situation shown in the 1st diagram occurred in a recent game where yellow was for hoop 4 and the other three clips were still on hoop 1. Black had just shot at yellow from near hoop 2 and missed.

Now the player of red roqueted black, then rushed yellow to hoop 1 and made it with little difficulty - but also with only a small chance of continuing the break.

The correct play is to use yellow instead of red, roquet red, then rush black to the east border as shown by the arrow in the 2nd diagram. From there black can be sent accurately to hoop 5 while coming in behind blue for a rush to hoop 4, after which it should be easy enough to also bring red into the break (provided you had not left it right in the 1st corner). Note that rushing black to the east border is preferable to rushing it to hoop 5 and then taking off to blue. If you doubt this, try it several times both ways to convince yourself.



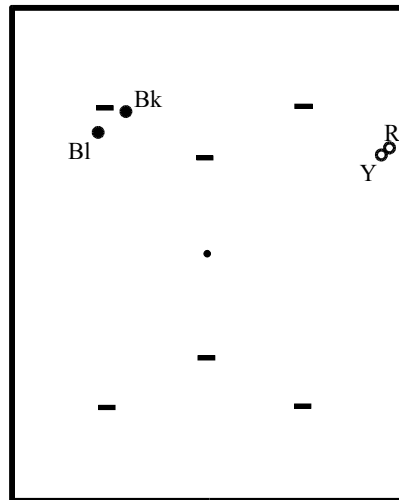
MAKE USE OF YOUR PARTNER *by John Riches*



Many players have been told over the years that it is wise to leave your partner ball near the border so that if something goes wrong you will have "somewhere safe to come home to".

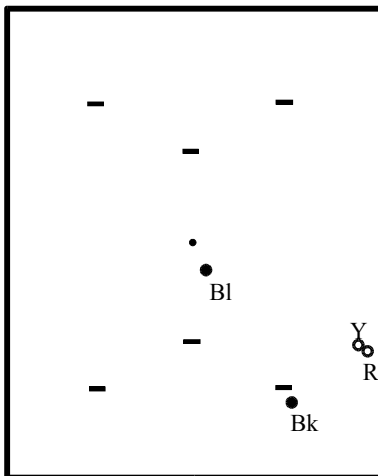
While this advice may be reasonable in some situations, it can often involve passing up valuable opportunities to set up breaks.

The first diagram shows a position in which the red clip is on hoop 2 and red has roqueted yellow on the east border. Many players as red would take off from yellow to black and hope to set up a break by loading hoop 3 with black before making hoop 2 from blue. A more experienced player will split yellow immediately to hoop 3 while going to black, with a 4-ball break fully set up. With the blue ball waiting at hoop 2 you should have no



doubts about making that hoop, so putting yellow at hoop 3 involves very little risk and makes it much easier for you to continue the break. It also gives you a second chance of loading the hoop accurately with black if the first loading attempt with yellow goes astray. In the 2nd diagram red is for hoop 4, and sending yellow to hoop 5 while going to the opponents balls at hoop 2 before rushing one of them to hoop 4 is a bit riskier, but it is again a risk well worth taking for most players because it is the only good way to set up a break.

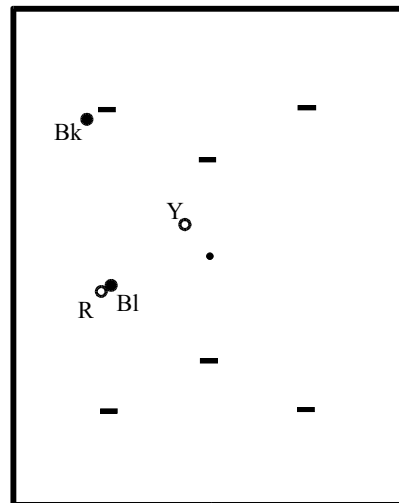
FINDING THE BEST PLACE *by John Riches*



The two situations diagrammed here illustrate a tactic which is often overlooked by players because they have an aversion to putting balls close together, since it will make it easy for the opponent if you happen to break down. Unfortunately they fail to realise that with balls close together you should be less likely to break down, so putting them close to each other may actually be the safest thing to do.

In the first diagram red is for 3-back and after using blue has rushed yellow to the east border, instead of to the 4th corner as intended. He now cannot load 4-back with yellow as planned, so what should he do with it in the croquet stroke?

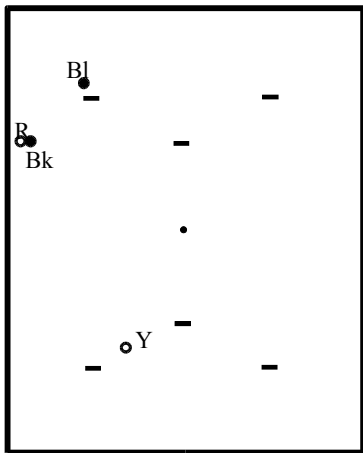
There will be no difficulty in making 3-back from black, so the best place for yellow is as close to the blue ball as you can get it.



Then after making 3-back you can load penultimate with black while going to the two balls you have carefully placed near the peg, and use one of them to get an easy rush on the other to 4-back.

In the 2nd diagram red is for 1-back and has used yellow but failed to get a useful rush on blue, so roqueted it about halfway between 1-back and 2-back. He cannot load 2-back, but should send blue as close to yellow as he can while going to make 1-back from black. This may seem rather obvious when it is pointed out to you, but would you have thought of it in a tense game situation?

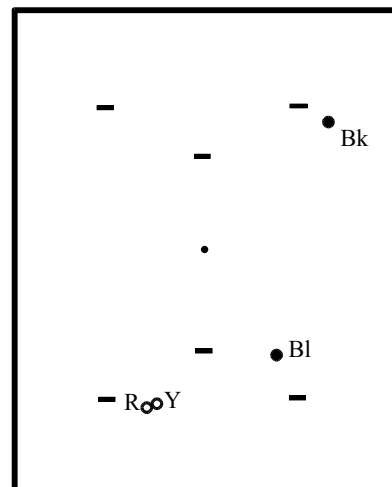
A PIVOTAL CHOICE *by John Riches*



In the first diagram red has just shot from near hoop 3 and roqueted black which was in front of hoop 2. The player of red now used a stop-shot to send black to hoop 3 while going to blue, roqueted blue, and took off to yellow to make hoop 1, with the next two hoops 'loaded'.

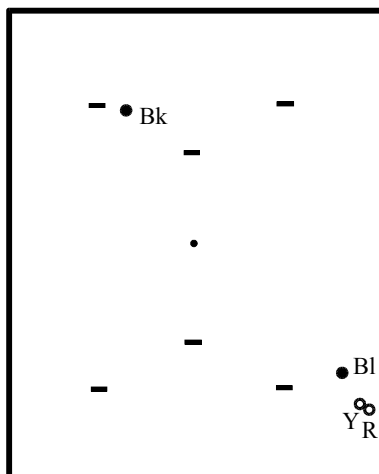
It seems like a good way to set up a break, but it would have been better to roll black in front of hoop 2 while going behind blue for a rush down the lawn to somewhere near or past hoop 5. Then the blue ball can be sent to an ideal "pivot" position between hoop 1 and the peg while getting an easy rush on yellow to hoop 1.

This will allow you to load hoops 2 and 3 more accurately, rush yellow closer to hoop 1, and avoid having to play a difficult shot (or else leave a ball behind) if you fail to get a forward rush on yellow after making hoop 1.



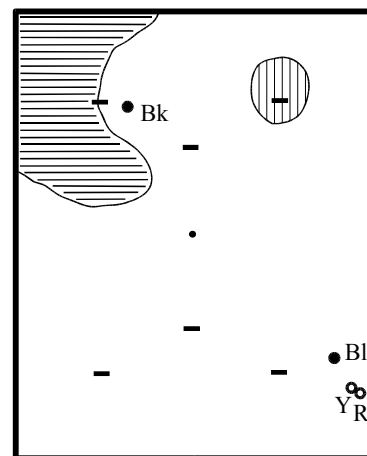
Similarly, in the 2nd diagram where red is for hoop 3, yellow should be rolled to hoop 4 and then blue rushed nearer black, preferably to the border near black, from where it can be sent in toward the peg while getting a good rush on black to hoop 3. It is not good enough to simply take-off from yellow to black, or take-off to blue and then from blue to black, or to send yellow into the middle of the lawn while going to blue, as although each of these options is quite playable, they involve having to play harder and less accurate shots than if you do it the recommended way.

MARGIN FOR ERROR *by John Riches*



In the position shown on the first diagram the player of red has made hoop 1 from yellow and rushed it to the border near blue alongside hoop 4. He will now place yellow at hoop 4 and use blue to load hoop 3 before making hoop 2 from black.

The most common way of doing this is to rush blue to hoop 3 and take off to black, but it is better to play for a rush on blue not to hoop 3 but to the second corner, planning to load hoop 3 in the croquet stroke and also get a rush on black to bring it closer to hoop 2. The accurate loading of hoop 3 and rush into hoop 2 should be achieved easily enough if you can rush blue to anywhere in the large shaded area shown on the second diagram. This allows a much greater

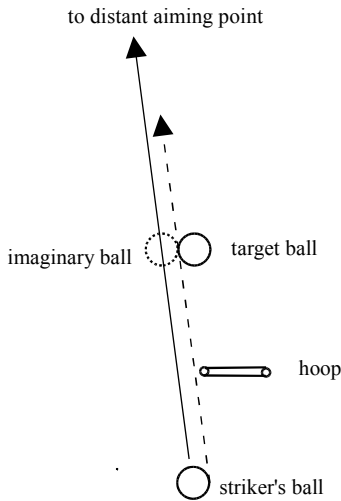


margin for error than if you rush blue to hoop 3, as there is a much smaller area (also shaded) into which you would need to rush blue.

It is perhaps somewhat paradoxical that although top players can play shots more accurately than the average player, whenever possible they choose the option which does not require them to play accurate shots, whereas a less experienced player will more often choose the option which requires more accurate shot-making. If you try to picture in your mind the area into which you will need to rush the ball when deciding where to rush it (or earlier, where you want to get the rush to), you will be more likely to choose the best option.

AIMING HINTS - HAMPERED SHOTS *(by John Riches)*

In my early days of playing croquet I was fascinated by the way some of the top players were able to roquet without fail a tiny fraction of a ball which was almost completely hidden behind a hoop as indicated by the dotted line on the diagram. I later discovered that there are some secrets you need to know, especially in selecting your line of aim.



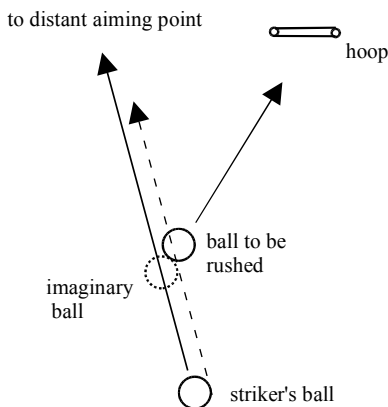
Firstly, it is important when starting the swing not to look at either the hoop or the target ball! Looking at either of these will make you almost certain to hit the hoop. Some players instead imagine a ball alongside the target ball, as illustrated by the dotted ball in the diagram, and try to roquet this imaginary ball almost dead centre.

An even better idea is to walk back a few yards and carefully select a point in the distance, off the far side of the court, so that if you hit your ball to that particular "aiming point", it will miss the hoop leg and just hit the target ball.

Then stalk the aiming point to get your body and mallet face square to the desired line of swing (i.e. the unbroken line on the diagram). If the target ball is an opponent ball you should hit the shot firmly enough to reach the far border, and this will also keep your ball in the correct line, as gentle shots can tend to wobble off line, and seem to always wobble away from hoops which are often on slight mounds due to the frequent filling in of old hoop holes.

Using this method you will probably be surprised at the confidence with which you can play the stroke and hit an eighth of an inch (3 mm) or less of the target ball. Remember that during the swing you must concentrate on "roqueting" the aiming point, while ignoring completely the hoop and target ball.

AIMING HINTS - RUSHES *(by John Riches)*



The ability to play cut-rushes accurately is an essential for all top players. There are several important factors, one of which is the ability to select the correct line of aim and then swing the mallet straight in that direction with a square mallet face.

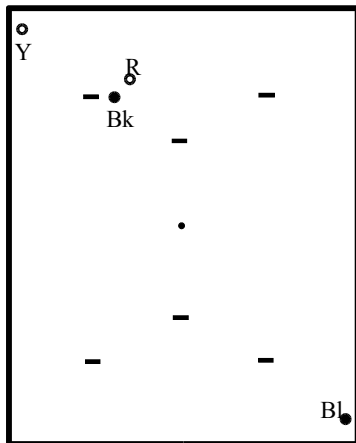
As for severely hampered roquets which we examined in the previous article, some players imagine a third ball in contact with the ball they are going to rush, and exactly on the opposite side from the direction of the desired rush. This is illustrated by the dotted ball in the diagram, and they aim so as to "roquet" this imaginary ball dead centre.

Most players will find it easier to select an aiming point in the distance behind the imaginary ball, or else forget about imagining a ball there and just choose a distant point so that your ball is "wired" from it by a particular amount of the ball you are intending to rush, as illustrated by the dotted line.

The less the rushed ball overlaps the dotted line, the finer will be the rush.

It is also important to remember, especially for a fine cut, that you must avoid causing your ball to jump, because even a slight jump may be sufficient to cause it to completely miss the ball you are rushing by jumping over its edge. For this reason you should try to use a swing with a long, flat bottom, which will be easier if your mallet and grip (and arms) are longer rather than shorter. A further point worth remembering is that almost all cut-rushes which are cut at the desired angle are under-hit. In fact even straight rushes are far more often under-hit than over-hit, so it is a good idea to allow for this by hitting noticeably harder than may at first seem necessary. However, this must not be achieved by hurrying the mallet through with the bottom hand. Instead, take a longer backswing and let the mallet swing confidently forward under its own weight.

PLAY TO MAKE BREAKS, NOT JUST HOOPS *by John Riches*



In the diagram, the player of black, after taking off from blue in the 4th corner to the opponent's balls in the 2nd corner, has attempted to make hoop 2 from red, but failed.

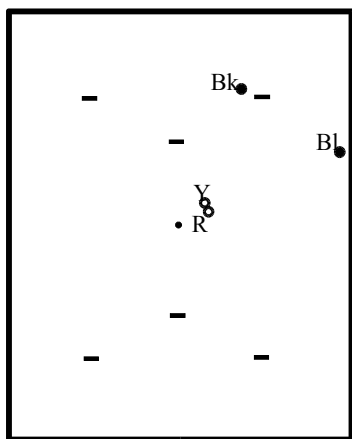
If you are the player of red and yellow, and red is also for hoop 2, what will you now do? It is safe to say that at least 9 players out of 10 - probably 10 out of 10 - would play red, roquet black and make hoop 2, probably trying to get a rush to hoop 3 after making hoop 2. Even if they succeed in getting the rush to hoop 3, the chance of being able to continue the break is not good. If you doubt this, set up the position and see how many times out of 10 you can get an immediate break established by playing red and making hoop 2 immediately.

The correct thing to do, for any player capable of making even limited breaks, is to shoot with red at yellow in the 2nd corner. If you hit the roquet you can send yellow to hoop 3 while going to black, with an immediate break set up;

and you should be able to establish an immediate break this way more often than you can by roqueting black instead of yellow. Notice that if you miss the shot at yellow, black could attempt to roquet one of your balls; but if he succeeds he still will not have a break to follow, whereas if he misses you should have a good chance of creating a cannon with another easy chance to establish an immediate break.

Another method would be to roquet black, then take off to yellow and attempt a load-and-hold shot which sends yellow to hoop 3 while making position to run hoop 2. This, if successful, would also give you an immediate break, but it is riskier since you will have to make the hoop with the black ball present, and it is also black's hoop. In any case, few players could succeed with the load-and-hold shot as often as they could roquet yellow, so the immediate shot at yellow is your best chance of establishing a break before the opponent does.

DON'T BE AFRAID OF TOGETHERNESS *by John Riches*



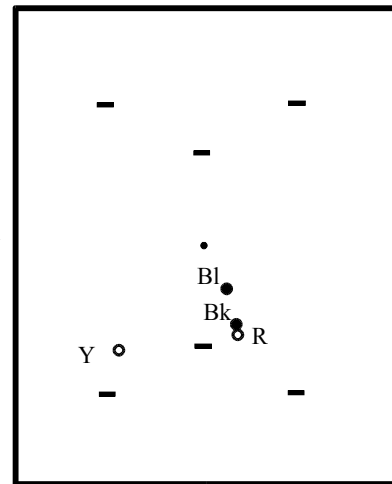
How should the player of red continue the break in the first diagram, where he is for hoop 3 and has roqueted yellow near the peg? He will take off to blue, and it would make things easy if he could rush blue to either the 3rd corner or to the 4th hoop; but more than likely he will have to be satisfied with roqueting blue more or less where it is.

What then? I hope that most readers will immediately see the best way of ensuring the continuance of the break: send blue as close to yellow as you can get it while going to make hoop 3 from black!

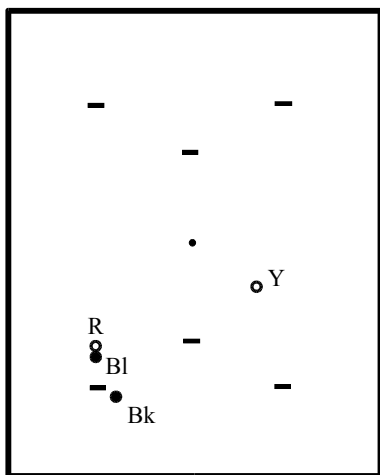
Then, after making hoop 3, you can send black to load hoop 5 while going to the two balls you have placed together near the peg, and it should be a simple matter to use one of them to get a rush on the other to hoop 4.

It is so easy when you think of it, but many players have been conditioned in their thinking to keep balls apart "in case you break down", instead of putting them together to ensure that you will not break down. Nothing other than placing the balls together gives as good a chance of continuing the break.

In the second diagram red is for 2-back, and had taken off from blue intending to use black to load 3-back, but has accidentally roqueted black in the take-off and now finds that he cannot get black to 3-back while going to make 2-back from yellow. He should simply take off from black, leaving the blue and black balls close together.



TUNNEL VISION? *by John Riches*



In the diagram all clips are still on hoop 1. Black had failed to make hoop 1, then red has just shot from hoop 2 and roqueted blue.

Most players, even when they fully appreciate the importance of loading the next hoop before making the current one, suffer from a sort of "tunnel" vision. All they can see is an easy chance to make hoop 1 from black, so that is what they do - only to then discover that continuing the break will not be easy.

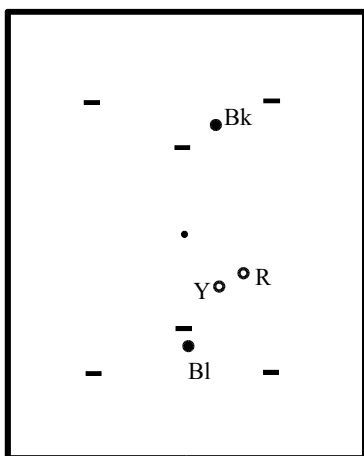
Can you see a way to load hoop 2 before making hoop 1? How many of the following ways did you consider?:

1. Stop-shot blue to hoop 2, then turn around and roquet black.
2. Leave blue where it is, rush black to A-baulk, and use a stop-shot to send it to hoop 2 while making position to run hoop 1.
3. Split blue to hoop 2 going to yellow, then take off back to black.
4. Roll both red and blue near to yellow, then roquet yellow and play a 'split' shot which sends yellow to hoop 2 while going to make hoop 1 from black.
5. Take off to the right side of yellow, rush it to hoop 2, then take off to black.

6. Take off to the left side of yellow, rush it to A-baulk, and then send it to hoop 2 in a croquet stroke while going to black to make hoop 1.

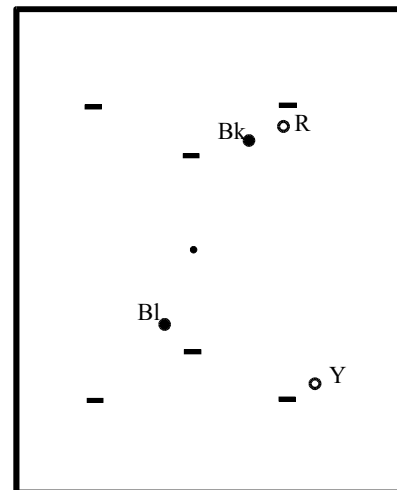
In the diagrammed position option 3 would be the best for most players, followed by option 6; but if the yellow ball is in a different place one of the other options could be preferable. The important thing is to consider them all and select the one that best suits the position and your own skills. For example, if yellow is in the 4th corner, then options 2 and 4 (starting with a take-off rather than a roll) are likely to be the most attractive ways to load hoop 2 before making hoop 1; and if yellow is at hoop 3 then it is OK to immediately make hoop 1 without hoop 2 loaded - can you see why?

DOUBLE LOADING *by John Riches*



The first diagram shows a situation where red has made hoop 4 and attempted to load hoop 6 with black while going to yellow. However, the black ball did not go where it was intended, and is a rather poor "load" for hoop 6.

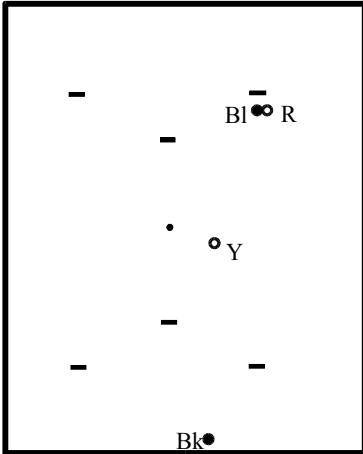
Instead of being satisfied with this, red should now rush yellow somewhere near hoop 1 and then not leave it there, but use an angled stop-shop to place it in front of hoop 6 while going to black to make hoop 5. If you want to play "tight" breaks and reduce your chance of breaking down, the principle to follow is "If at first you don't succeed ..."; or in other words, be prepared to double-load hoops when the first attempt has not been as accurate as you would have wanted.



One often sees players playing "messy" breaks with hoops poorly loaded, hoping that they will somehow manage to keep going. Often they will - perhaps often enough for them to think that what they are doing is OK so they keep on doing it - without realising the importance of making sure they can easily continue the break by double-loading any inaccurately loaded hoop.

In the second diagram red has just made hoop 3. He should not rush black to hoop 6 and leave it there, but should use it to load hoop 5 while going to blue, so that if the first loading attempt is inaccurate, he can try again with blue.

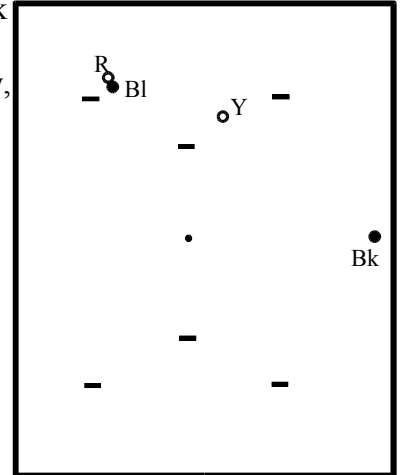
A DIFFICULT JUDGEMENT *by John Riches*



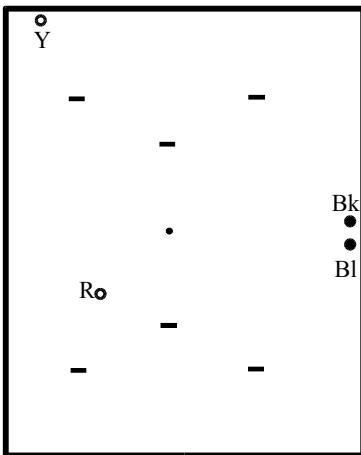
A difficult decision in setting up breaks is at what stage to bring your partner ball into the break. If you have an excellent chance of succeeding in getting the break established you should not hesitate to bring your partner ball out into the lawn; but until then it may be wiser to keep the option of a sound "leave" if you should fail to establish an immediate break. In the first diagram red is still for hoop 1. He will use blue to load hoop 2 while going to his yellow partner ball, but instead of trying for a rush on yellow to hoop 1, he should prefer to rush it near black on the south border, and then rush black to hoop 1. This not only gives a slightly better chance of establishing the break; more importantly, if you cannot make hoop 1 it allows you to return to yellow with a good leave so that your opponent gets only one chance at a long

roquet, and if he misses you will have a break set up for your next turn. Many players miss such opportunities because they have the misguided idea that it is "safer" to make hoops from their partner ball than from the opponent's balls.

In the second diagram red is for hoop 5, and has roqueted blue near hoop 2. He should now use blue to load hoop 6 while trying for a rush on yellow not to hoop 5, but to the black ball which he will then rush to hoop 5. Until you have the break established, bring your opponent's balls out into the lawn, rather than your own balls.



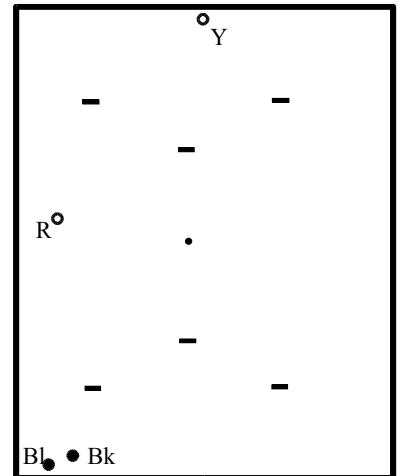
IT IS SAFER TO ATTACK *by John Riches*



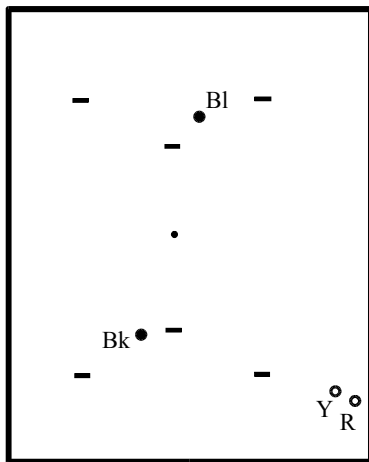
In the position shown on the first diagram, black is for hoop 3 and blue is for hoop 2. What would now do if you were playing red? A missed shot at yellow would allow blue to rush black to hoop 3 and take off to your balls to easily set up a break, so the only sensible thing to do is to shoot at blue. Some players would avoid this because they would not want to "give the opponent an extra ball", particularly when he does not already have a rush to either of his hoops. However a missed shot at blue would not make it all that easy for black to establish a break, although he should at least make hoop 3. The important question to ask yourself is not "would a miss allow my opponent to make his hoop?", but "would it allow him to load the next hoop before making his current hoop?", because that is the only way he will have

a good chance of setting up a break.

Hitting red into a corner or returning wide of your partner in such situations is not only "negative" play; it reduces your winning chances by passing up a reasonably safe chance to roquet and gain the innings. The same applies in the second diagram where black is for 2-back and blue is for hoop 3. Rather than shooting at yellow, which would give blue an excellent chance of establishing a break if the shot is missed, red should shoot at blue, and for the chance of roqueting be willing to concede black one hoop.

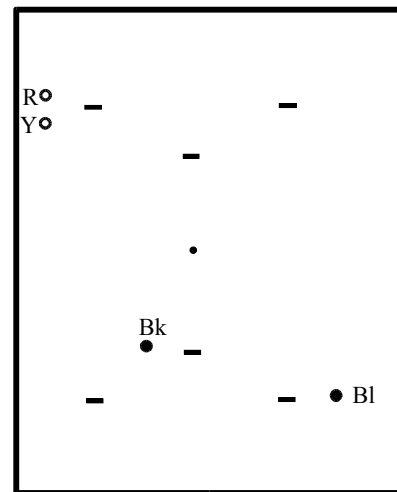


WHEN FURTHER AWAY IS BETTER *by John Riches*



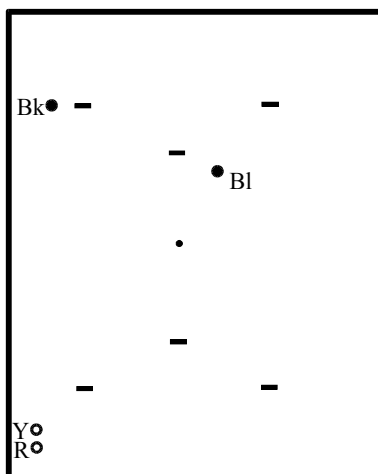
You have roqueted with your yellow ball which is for 4-back, so instead of making hoops with yellow you want to set up for red, which is for hoop 4.

Where would you leave the four balls? It is surprising to me as a coach that many players, even at state level, have never worked out the best leaves for each hoop that their partner ball's clip may be on, so they tend to make a 'leave' such as the one shown in the first diagram. This is not too bad, but if black shoots at blue and misses, you will have to play some accurate shots with red before you have a break fully set up. A better 'leave' is the one shown in the second diagram where your balls are set in the opposite corner of the lawn from hoop 4. If blue shoots at black and misses, you can rush yellow to blue, then blue to black and black to



hoop 4. Only the 3rd rush, which is not such a long one, requires some degree of accuracy. If blue does not shoot, and instead retires into the 3rd corner, you can rush yellow near black and put yellow near hoop 5 while getting a rush on black to hoop 4. There is also a reasonable chance that your opponent's balls will be wired with two hoops between them. You should be able to establish a break more easily and more often from this leave than from the one in the first diagram. The rule for good leaves is: Don't set up near your hoop - it is better to put an opponent ball there.

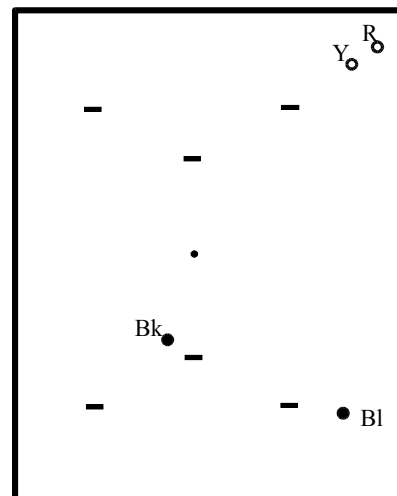
SHORTENING THE RUSH TO YOUR HOOP *by John Riches*



In the first diagram the player of yellow has set up for red to make hoop 6.

Notice that the rush is set to the black ball, not to hoop 6. There are two good reasons for this:

1. it can discourage blue from shooting at black if the opponent's balls turn out not to be wired; and
2. wherever blue goes (provided it does not roquet), you are threatening to rush yellow to black, load 1-back with yellow and rush black to hoop 6. This will mean that the final rush to hoop 6 is much shorter than if you were rushing yellow from the 1st corner, so you can expect to get closer to the hoop and make it more easily. This idea of rushing to a ball rather than directly to your hoop, so that the rush to the hoop will be a shorter one



which you can control more accurately, is an important one that players often overlook. Later they will probably blame a poor hoop approach to hoop 6 from 3 yards out for the loss of the game, when the real fault was their failure to set the correct rush.

In the second diagram red is for hoop 4, and again the rush has been correctly set to the black ball, whereas many would set it to hoop 4.

However in this case you must first check that black can be rushed past hoop 5 to hoop 4 without undue difficulty. There is also the advantage that blue is less likely to want to shoot at your balls when you do not have a rush set directly to your hoop.

THE NEW BALLS by John Riches

All ACA events will now be played with the new Dawson International balls, and within the next year or two most clubs are expected to make the change. Some people will say things like "a ball is a ball" and "a good player should be able to play with any sort of ball". But just as a top tennis player will not play a tournament on a different surface without wanting time to get used to it, a good croquet player would be foolish to agree to play with balls that he has not practised with and is not familiar with. So how do the new balls differ from the old Dawson Mark 2 balls? The answer is that there are many differences, e.g.

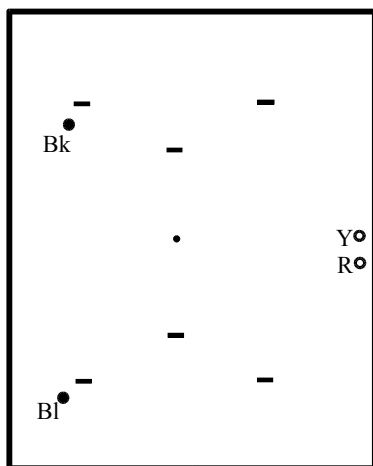
SHOTS: The new balls are much more elastic (lively) than the old balls. Roqueting, rushing (especially cut-rushes) and hoop running are all easier with the new balls, and much better stop-shot ratios can be achieved. There is less 'pull', and in most split shots the angle of split is wider. The 'pull' is also more consistent. A ball sent ahead to load a hoop is likely to go too far, and in a hoop approach the striker's ball will tend to fall short. Peeling is noticeably easier. On the whole the new balls are more satisfying to play with, and we should see more triple and sextuple peels being completed by the top players.

MALLETS: The better stop-shot ratio with the new balls can help remove a problem associated with the new heavier, lower-balanced mallets; but the additional weight may no longer be as great an advantage for most shots, so the trend toward heavier mallets may possibly be reversed when the new balls are more widely accepted. Do not change to a heavier mallet until you have checked whether your current mallet may be heavy enough with the new balls.

TACTICS: Some players suggest that the new balls will result in more aggressive play because it is easier to set up breaks and keep them going; but others think they may favour negative play because it will be easier to get breaks going from 'nothing'. Some say that accurate loading of hoops will no longer be so important, and that the emphasis will swing back to rushes and stop-shots rather than accurate split-shots. Openings and leaves may also be affected. It is too early yet to say with certainty anything about the effect the new balls will have on tactics and coaching.

ADVICE: If you can, make the changeover at one definite time, and from then on refuse to play with the old balls. You cannot expect to play good croquet if you are swapping back and forth between new and old balls.

AN OLD THEME by John Riches

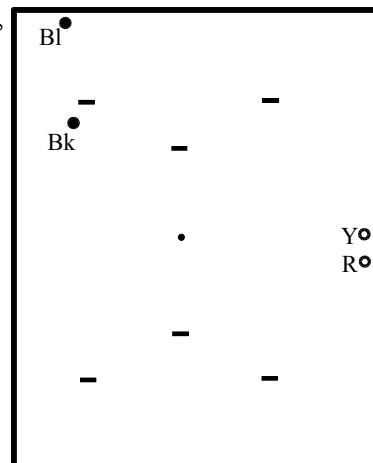


In the first diagram all clips are still on hoop 1. The player of red and yellow has set up on the east border. What should black and blue do?

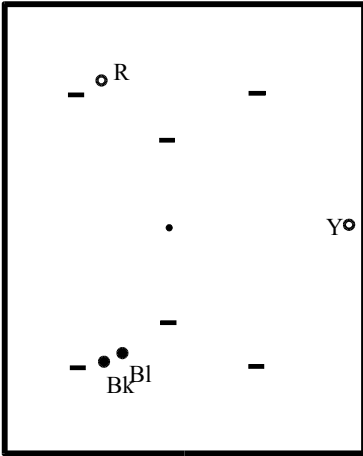
Shooting at his balls, if you miss, will give him an easy break by enabling him to use your ball get a rush to hoop 1. Shooting with blue at black is the best option available, even though if you miss (as shown in the second diagram) he may be able to take off to blue on the north border, roll it in to hoop 2, and rush black to hoop 1 to set up a break.

The only reasonable alternative to shooting would be to hit the blue ball into the 1st corner (since if you hit it into the 3rd or 4th corner he will have a rush to it), but this is a poor and negative thing to do because he can still take off to it, play a roll approach to hoop 1, and if he

cannot make the hoop he can return to his partner and start all over again. In fact he would probably be more likely to set up a break this way than if you had shot at black and missed; and you would have denied yourself a possible chance to roquet and obtain the innings. The moral is a theme I have returned to many times: There are very few situations where hitting away into a corner gives you a better chance of winning the game than shooting at a ball. If you do it more than three or four times a year you are doing it too often and you are almost certainly losing games you could have won.

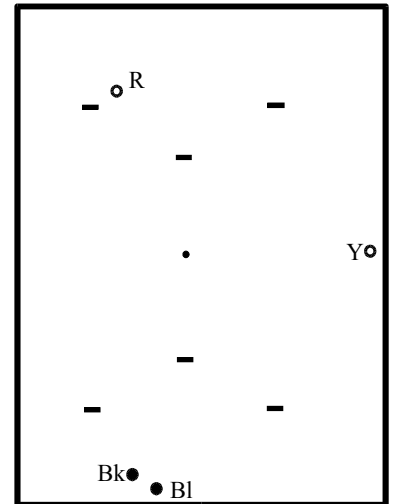


JOINING UP IS DANGEROUS *by John Riches*



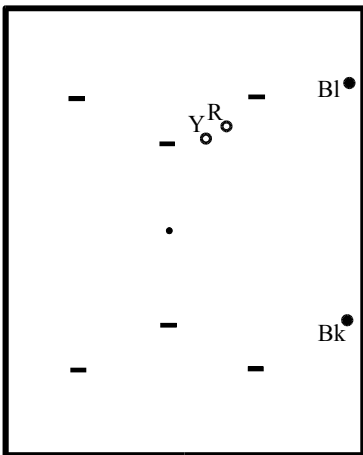
In the first diagram blue has set to make hoop 1. As red, many players would now shoot at (or "join up with") their yellow partner ball on the east border. However, if your opponent is capable of playing a break, then this is likely to make things far too easy for him, as unless you hit the roquet he will be able to set up a break by making hoop 1 with a rush to anywhere up the court or anywhere on the east border, and send the black ball to hoop 3 while going to your two balls on the east border and rushing one of them to hoop 2. A much better option is to shoot at blue, even if you suspect that if you miss he may turn around and roquet your red ball on the south border. In fact, if he had set his rush back on the south border as shown in the second diagram, the correct thing for red to do

would still be to shoot at the opponent's balls, as it is far more difficult for him to set up a break with three balls together on the south border than if you had joined up with yellow on the east border. Joining up in the hope that he will fail to make the hoop, of course, is nothing more than wishful thinking against an opponent who is anything other than a beginner; and if he cannot make hoop 1 you may still be just as well off with your red ball on the south border sitting over him anyway.



The moral is: Always think ahead before joining up.

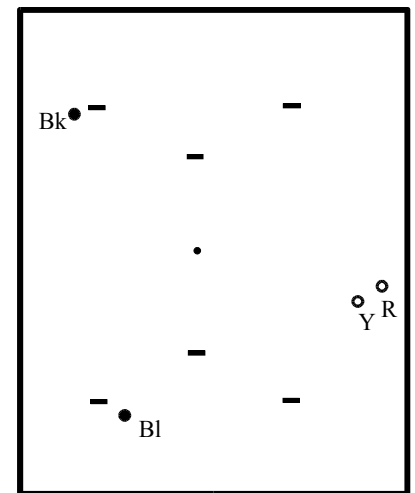
POSTPONING THE EVIL DAY *by John Riches*



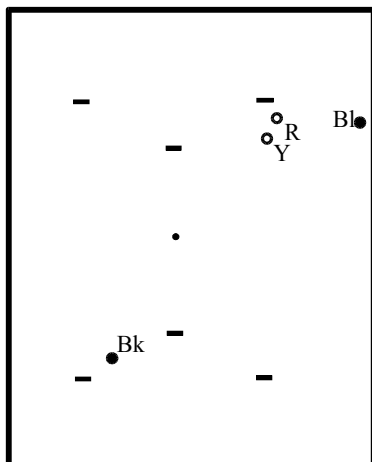
In the first diagrammed position red is for hoop 6 and yellow is for 4-back. The most common continuation would be to rush yellow to hoop 6 and make it, hoping then to make 1-back, and if you are lucky 2-back as well. That is, you play a 2-ball break with your partner ball, make as many hoops as you can, and then reluctantly allow your opponent a chance to roquet. The trouble with this is that you are unlikely to have a break set up if he misses the roquet, so you will probably have to do the same sort of thing again, and allow the opponent another chance to roquet.

Unless you are playing at international level, it would be better to make hoop 6 with a rush to somewhere on the east border and then set up as shown in the second diagram. This allows the opponent one chance to hit a long roquet, but gives you an excellent chance of a break if he misses it. Note that if you had made 1-back you would have been unable to set as good a leave because you would then be for 2-back and you could not afford to leave a ball near that hoop, while any ball you leave near the 3-back hoop is not likely to remain there, so you would face a difficult task to get a break going.

Instead of trying to "postpone the evil day" by making another hoop or two before you give the opponent a chance to roquet, it is often better to ensure that he will get only the one chance, rather than two or more.



TAKE A BREAK, MATE! by *John Riches*

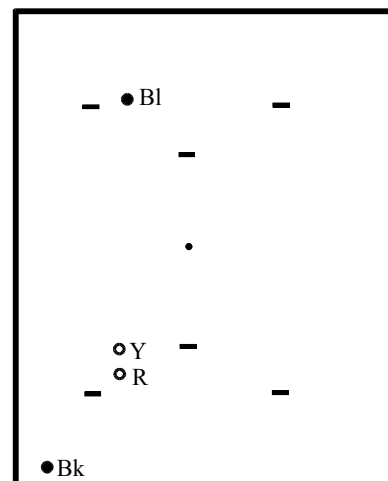


A mistake, which one sees far too often, is the failure to take a break when one is on offer. The first diagram shows a position which occurred in a recent game. Yellow is for hoop 3 and red is for hoop 1. The player easily made hoop 3 with yellow, but then found that continuing the break would require having to play some accurate and rather low-percentage shots - e.g. take-off to blue on the border trying to get a rush on it to hoop 4, with hoop 5 not properly loaded. He apparently did not consider the better alternative of playing red, rushing yellow down to the south border, and using a stop-shot to send it to hoop 2 before making hoop 1 from black with a break set up.

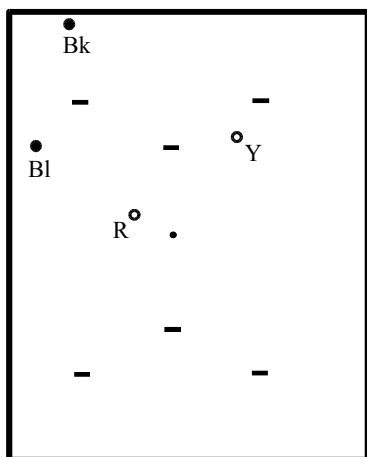
A similar situation is shown in the second diagram, where yellow is for 2-back and red is for hoop 6. Again, instead of making 2-back with yellow (the player ran through the hoop and

roqueted black, but did not manage to make any more hoops), the correct procedure is to play red, rush yellow to blue (better than cutting it to hoop 6), and then rush blue to hoop 6.

After losing games, players can tend to say the opponent did not give them many chances, when in fact they did not take the chances they were given, because they were too intent on making one easy hoop instead of 'taking a break'. It is often worth taking a small risk to make a break rather than one certain hoop.



SETTING UP IN THE MIDDLE by *John Riches*



In the diagrammed position red and blue were both for hoop 2 while black was for hoop 3 and yellow for 4-back. The player of red shot at yellow, but only hard enough to go 2-3 yards past it, instead of going right through to border near the 3rd corner.

Then the opponent shot with blue at yellow and roqueted. After the game the player of red was criticised by observers for leaving both of his balls out in the court and thus giving blue a relatively safe shot at them. He was taking a risk, but was his play incorrect?

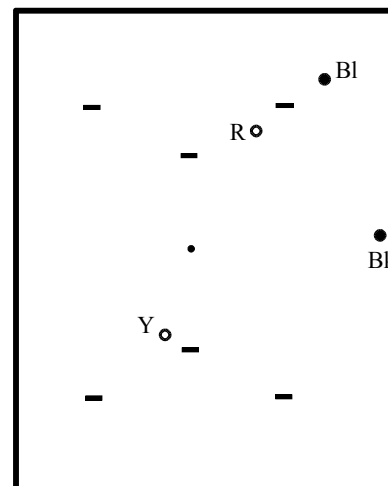
Usually one would not want to leave both balls out in the court, but in this case it caused blue to take a longer shot than the one he would probably have taken at black if red had gone through to border, since shooting with blue at

black is rather risky when red and yellow are within easy roqueting distance and red is for hoop 2.

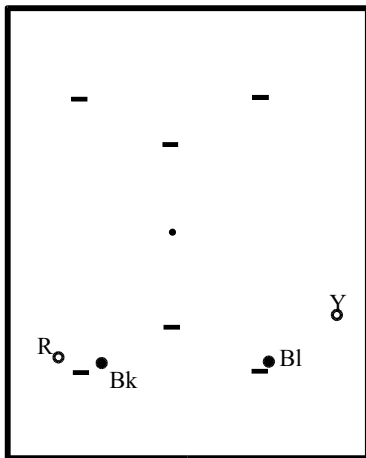
In this case it did not work, but if he had gone to border and blue had missed black, he would have faced the problem of what to do with yellow, as shooting at red would risk leaving two balls near black's hoop.

In fact, leaving both balls out in the court in this sort of situation would be a good percentage tactic for players at most levels.

In the second diagram red is for hoop 3 and wired from blue. Once again it is a good idea to stay near yellow instead of going to border.



A TEST OF NERVE *by John Riches*



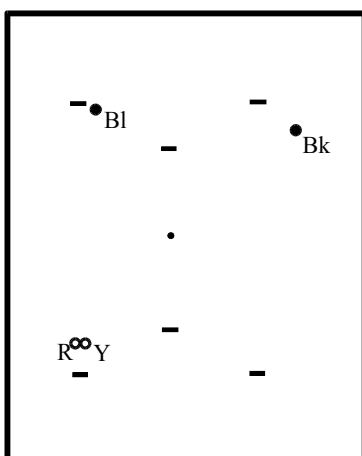
In a recent doubles tournament game I was playing the red ball and reached the unfortunate position shown on the first diagram. Black was for the peg, and yellow was for rover, while red and blue were both for 2-back. I had just played a poor approach shot for 2-back, with my red ball finishing where it had no chance of making the hoop.

What could I do now? I had used both blue and yellow, had given a lift, and a 'saving' shot on black was only likely to make things worse. I could envisage the opponents picking up blue (which had no backswing for a shot at yellow), taking it to A-baulk, roqueting black and going to the peg to end the game.

After some thought I decided on a gamble designed to test the nerve of the opponents, and hit red gently in front of the 2-back hoop open to black which was only about a yard away. When I returned to my seat my partner politely asked if I had taken leave of my senses, and asked why I had not hit my ball into, say, the second corner.

However I had assessed the psychology of the opponents correctly. After some rather agonised discussion they decided that it would be too dangerous to pick up blue, since if it missed the 6-yard roquet I was likely to finish the game (they apparently had more confidence in my ability than I had myself!), so black took the turn and roqueted red. This gave me another chance at a roquet before blue could get in. Thankfully I hit it, and we won the game. I cannot claim that what I did was objectively correct, but it did serve to put the opponents under pressure, presenting them with a severe test of their nerve. It is this sort of tactical possibility that makes croquet such a fascinating game, even though by doing it I could well lose more games than I win. If you would never have considered such an idea, perhaps you could give it a thought in future - depending on how much of a gambler you are.

TIDYING UP *by John Riches*

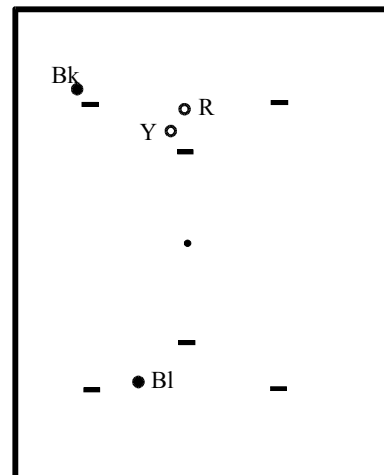


In the position shown on the first diagram red has just made hoop 1 and roqueted yellow. Blue is well placed at hoop 2, and black is about 3 yards from hoop 3 as shown. It is very common to see players in such positions take off to blue to make hoop 2, when their first thought should be that hoop 3 is not well enough loaded, and they should be looking for an easy way to improve the load.

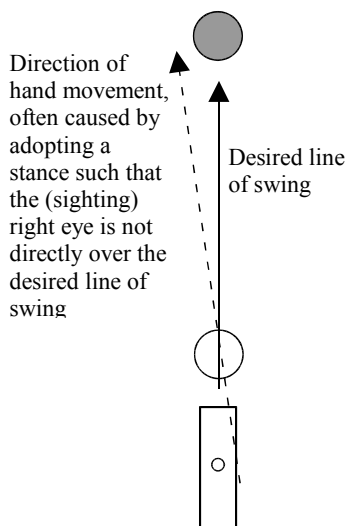
This can be done by using a split shot to send yellow right to hoop 3 as you go to blue at hoop 2 (this is called "double loading"), or if you are not confident about playing this big split shot, then you should at least take off to black rather

than blue, with the idea of using the roquet and take-off shots to get black closer to hoop 3 before making hoop 2 from blue.

The second diagram shows a similar situation where red has just made hoop 6 and instead of just roqueting yellow a few yards forward as many would do, the player of red should rush yellow to hoop 1 or just past it, in order to improve the load of 2-back before rushing blue back up the court for use as a pivot ball. Note that this "tidying up" costs you nothing. It involves no noticeable risk and you will be no worse off even if you do not manage to improve the loading of your next-but-one hoop. It is interesting to see people who insist on everything being kept tidy around the clubhouse, and no doubt also at home, yet who show no interest at all in keeping their breaks tidy.



WATCH THOSE HANDS *by John Riches* Players are often told of the importance of watching the ball, or watching to see that the backswing is straight; but coaches often fail to stress the importance of watching to see that during the swing the hands move back and forth exactly in the desired line of swing.



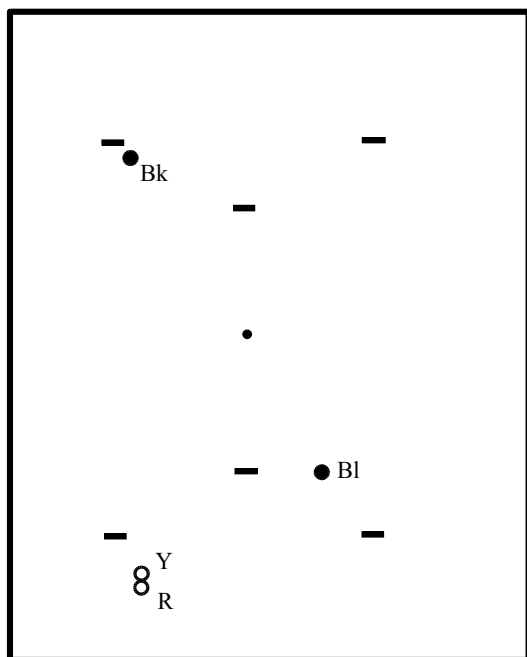
Illustrating a common error of technique

The player may start with his hands noticeably to one side of the line, and swing around a slight curve which attempts to bring the mallet head into line as it approaches the ball. That can work, but it is better to start with everything in line, so that all you have to do is keep it all in line as you swing - which is quite hard enough!

The suggested method is to line up the mallet with the mallet face square as best you can while standing over it then see to it that you move your hands back and forth exactly in the desired line of swing. If you do that, and allow the mallet to hang vertically below your hands (i.e. do not tighten your grip suddenly as the mallet approaches the ball), there is little chance for the mallet to get off line; but if you think about it you will realise that it will be almost impossible to swing the mallet in line if your hands are moving in a different line, and the only way you can hit your roquets that way would be to turn the mallet face so as to "correct" for the fact that the hands and mallet are moving in the wrong direction. There are players who manage to swing across the line and still roquet well, but it must be easier to achieve real consistency if you try to ensure that your hands, and therefore also your mallet, are always in line through the entire swing - during the follow-through as well as the backswing.

You may have other things to think about during a game, but when practising you can give at least some thought to your hand movement.

TOO MANY OPTIONS *by John Riches* The diagram shows a situation where the player of red is about to make hoop 1. He is faced with a choice between several reasonable options after he makes the hoop, e.g.



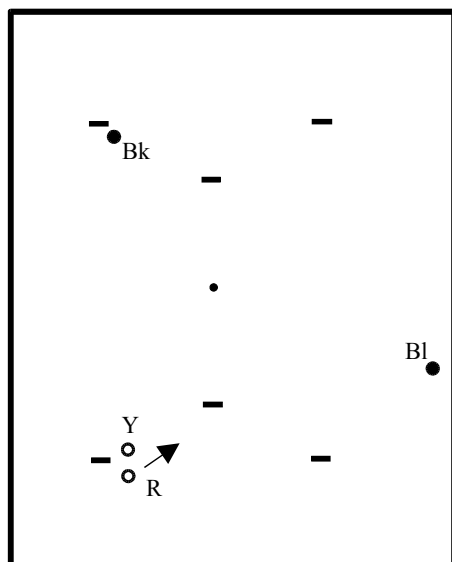
- (1) Try to get a forward rush on yellow to the border alongside hoop 2, then send yellow to load hoop 3 while going to make hoop 2 from black.
- (2) Make hoop 1 with the aim of sending yellow to hoop 3 while going to blue, hoping to be able to rush blue past the peg and use it as a 'pivot' ball.
- (3) After making hoop 1, rush or roll yellow to hoop 4 while getting a rush up the lawn on blue, then rush blue to hoop 3 and take-off to black to make hoop 2.

There are other possibilities, and the choice will depend on the shots you are comfortable about playing. Most players would say there is not much to choose between the options, but if an option provides only a slightly better percentage chance of success, that is reason to adopt it.

Here the preferred option is number (2), as it will make the continuation of your break easiest and allows you a second chance to load hoop 3 accurately if your first attempt goes somewhat astray. Option (1) leaves the 'pivot' ball rather misplaced, which is not usually a big problem, but why not take the chance to position it in the best possible place to facilitate the continuance of the break? Option (3)

involves loading two hoops ahead which is seldom advisable. Note that in order to continue your break easily, both option (1) and option (3) require you to get a useful rush after making hoop 2, but option (2) does not depend on getting a rush and allows you to concentrate on simply making the hoop. **The moral is: choose the option which will make things easiest in future.**

USING A DISTRACTOR by *John Riches*



Imagine that you are playing red, and have just approached hoop 1 with your yellow partner ball, but failed to get position to run the hoop, as shown in the diagram. You have one stroke left. Where will you place the red ball?

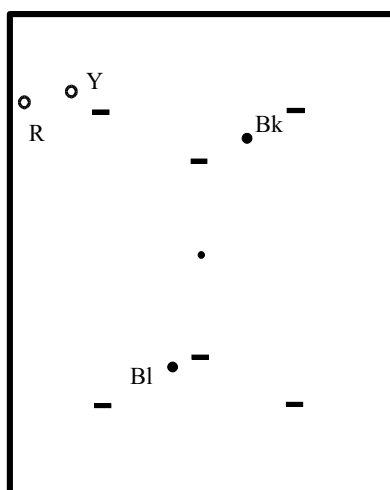
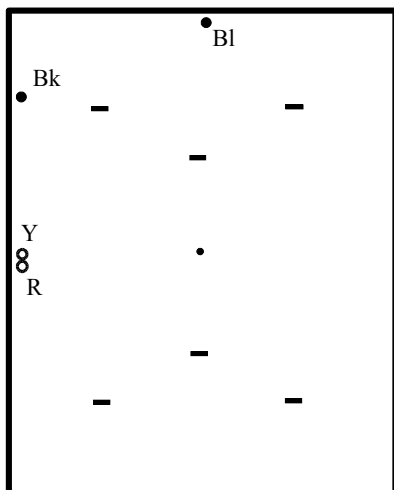
Most players would consider that yellow is a bit far in-lawn to allow 'covering the border' against a shot by black to be a useful tactic, so they would hit the red ball in front of the hoop so that it will be wired from black and can easily make the hoop in the next turn.

It has been suggested that it is better to give red a rush to hoop 1 by placing it about one yard from yellow as shown by the arrow. The idea is that black would be more likely to roquet if he has only one ball to shoot at. If there are two balls, and they are too far apart to provide a useful double target, then the second ball can act as a 'distractor', inducing the black ball to go between the two balls. I cannot claim to have any evidence that this idea will in fact lessen the likelihood of black roqueting, but it does at least give red a better chance to organise a rush in any desired direction after making hoop 1, and also allows you the option of playing yellow with what may turn out to be a useful rush on red.

However, sitting red in front of the hoop may be the best option if black is for hoop 2 or hoop 6, or maybe even hoop 3, and it could deny him the chance of

rushing red to his hoop if he should happen to roquet yellow. It may not seem like a big deal as to which option you choose, but over the course of a game there can be a number of such choices, and the player who thinks through the options carefully, rather than unthinkingly doing the obvious thing that first comes into his head, will give himself a distinct advantage and increase his chance of winning the game.

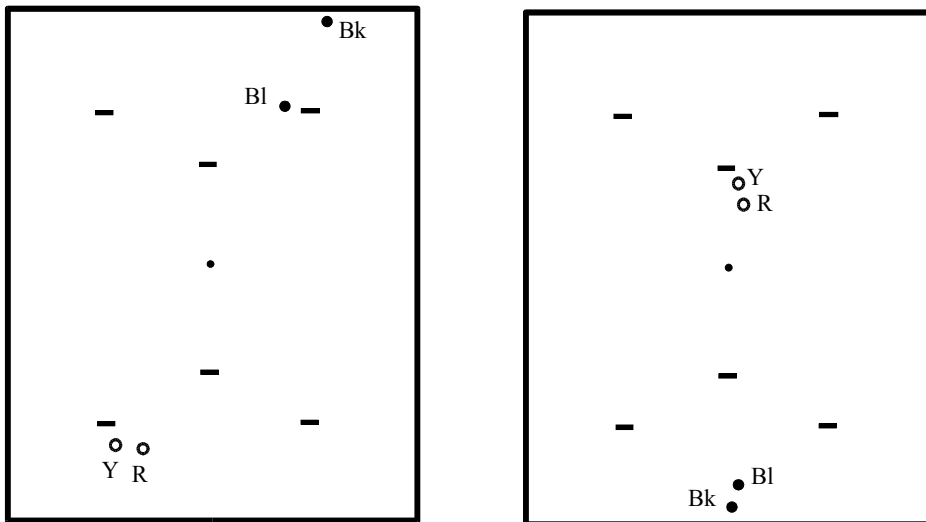
NO 'FREE' SHOTS by *John Riches*



You are playing red, which is for hoop 5, and have started your turn by roqueting yellow on the border as shown. How do you proceed? Many players would see nothing better than rolling out to hoop 5 with yellow. The problem with this is that the chance of making hoop 5 with such a roll from the border is not good and you are likely to leave the opponent a 'free' shot at your balls with either black or blue. [A 'free' shot is one which has little risk because if he misses you will still not have a break set up.] Even if you make the hoop you will have no easy way of continuing the turn.

A far better approach is to forget about making your hoop in this turn, and instead set up the lawn so that any shot your opponent takes and misses will allow you a good chance of establishing a break. To achieve this, roll both red and yellow near to black, and put black into the lawn past hoop 6 while going to blue. Then send blue between hoop 5 and hoop 1 while returning to yellow, setting a rush to the north border as shown in the second diagram. Now you have an excellent chance of establishing a break in your next turn.

TAKE OFF THE BLINKERS *by John Riches*



In the first diagram, red was for hoop 1 and yellow for hoop 3. The player walked onto the lawn, played red, made hoop 1, roqueted yellow, and then saw that he faced a long take-off to the opponent's balls with the peg and a hoop in the way, and only a slight chance of making hoop 2.

It would 'obviously' (but not to him) have been far better to play yellow, rush red to hoop 4, and take off to black with a 4-ball break easily set up. When I ask people why they did such things, they usually say either that they did not stop to consider playing the yellow ball, or that they did not want to have to play the long take-off from hoop 4 to black, with the possibility of falling short or going out. This, of course, overlooks the fact that after making hoop 1 they may well have to play an even longer and more difficult take-off. People who use such a 'blinkered' approach and fail to consider all the tactical possibilities will be losing games they could have won.

As red and yellow, which ball would you play in the second diagram, where red is for hoop 6 and yellow is for hoop 4?

DEFEATING THE "YIPS" *by John Riches*

Most croquet players will have experienced the "yips". It is a sudden involuntary jerking and jabbing action which causes you to miss a short roquet or fail to run a hoop that you should easily have made. Most realise that it is caused by nervousness which results in a tightening of the muscles, but many have no idea of even one way to combat and overcome it. There are many different things you can do when afflicted by this "illness". What works for one player may not work for anyone else. Here is one possible "cure" which often proves to be effective:

First make sure that you have a well-balanced and stable stance. Address the ball with your hands about one foot out in front of your body so that your hands (not just the mallet head pivoting from the wrists) can move backward during the backswing. During the swing try to avoid moving any part of the body apart from the arms which should swing comfortably from the shoulders. Slow down the swing, and once the mallet head has started to move forward, study the milling on the ball in the area where the mallet will contact it.

Forget everything else and take a genuine interest in the milling. Don't just look at it; **study** it. The idea of this is that when you start to think "I must hit this roquet" or "I cannot afford to stick in this hoop", your mind senses a danger situation and triggers an involuntary defence mechanism which causes a sudden flow of adrenalin and a consequent tensing of the muscles. This is designed to help you avoid the danger, but in croquet it is counterproductive. Studying the milling serves to remove from your mind any thought that you are performing an action which the brain connects with danger. Since there will be no danger associated with studying the milling, there should be no involuntary jerking or jabbing reaction. There are many other ways of overcoming nervousness, and a number of them are aimed at either relaxing the muscles or modifying the psychological reactions which occur in the mind and cause the muscles to tighten.

Some other ideas from a long list which may be worth trying are:

1. As you start the forward swing, smile (to yourself).
2. Relax your foot muscles to flatten the soles onto the ground.

3. Try to convince yourself (and anyone else who will listen) that it is only a game; the result does not matter, and you are simply here to enjoy yourself.

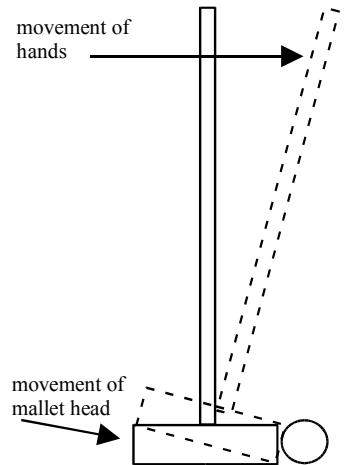
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TIMING THE SWING *by John Riches*

Many people fail to appreciate the importance of correct timing. This is the ability to swing the mallet so that when it contacts the ball the mallet is in an exactly vertical position. This does not apply to all croquet shots, of course, but it is highly desirable for most roquets and rushes. Some players have naturally good timing, but many of us are not so fortunate. We tend to either hurry the forward movement of the hands or use the wrists to give added force to the forward movement of the mallet, and in most cases this will cause the mallet face to be tilted slightly forward when it contacts the ball as illustrated by the dotted lines in the diagram.

For most players wanting to improve their timing the first thing to do is eliminate all movement of the knees, trunk, elbows and wrists. The more moving parts you have to control, the harder it is to co-ordinate them all consistently and successfully so as to achieve the well-timed result that is desired. A few gifted players are able to play well with such body movement, and from a coaching viewpoint they should not be criticised if they can cope with it all successfully, as there can also be advantages; but for most of us the unnecessary additional moving parts will often result in strokes being mis-timed.

This will mean that some of the energy from the mallet does not go into moving the ball, and can cause the ball to jump when we do not want it to, which will often completely ruin a rush stroke, or will require us to use more effort in playing the stroke than we should be using. The best way to develop correct timing is to practise short roquets using only the top hand on the mallet; or if you want to also use the bottom hand, then you should make sure that its grip on the mallet shaft is very light and does not tighten during the swing. [During a game use both hands of course, but try to achieve the same timing.] Getting the timing right will not automatically mean that you are contacting the ball when the mallet is in the desired vertical position, but once you are timing the swing more consistently you will have a better chance of correcting your stance and body position (if necessary) in order to achieve the desired result.



HANDICAP PLAY (Part 1) *by John Riches*

This is the first of a series of articles on handicap play. There are some important ideas which can easily be overlooked:

(1) Bisques should be used aggressively rather than defensively. Only use a bisque when you can see that it will enable you to set up and play a break. Do not use a bisque to prevent your opponent from playing a break unless it will also give you a break. If you believe that your opponent will peg out if you do not take the bisque, then take it; but unless it enables you to establish a break your chance of winning - other than perhaps on time - will be very small. Bisques are given to enable you to make hoops. Using them merely to stop your opponent from making hoops can make the game last longer, but makes the loss more certain.

(2) Plan to use your bisques early. Do not start the game as if it were a level game and only think about using the bisques later on when you start to get into trouble - as you inevitably will. Look for the first opportunity to set up a break by taking a bisque.

(3) Know the rules relating to handicap play: e.g. when you can take a bisque; when you can peg out a ball; when you can change your mind about taking a bisque; the difference between a half-bisque and a full bisque; and also the rules governing the replacement of balls after a fault, playing a wrong ball in the first stroke of a bisque turn, the restoration of bisques following a fault or interference, and so on.

(4) If you win the toss at the start of a handicap game, always elect to play second. This applies whether you are receiving bisques or giving them. By ensuring that you play the 4th turn you can give yourself either one additional chance to start using your bisques with all four balls in play before your opponent gets a chance to roquet; or the chance to roquet and play a break before your opponent can start using his bisques. It would seldom pay to start using bisques before all four balls are in play, as it would be too difficult to set up and continue a break.

(5) In handicap doubles play it may be better for the stronger of two partners to use some or all of the bisques, as he is likely to make more out of them. He should be able to make some hoops for himself and also set up for his partner in the next turn.

(6) The giver of bisques should not hesitate to go right to the peg in a break if he gets the chance. Conversely, it is usually unwise for the receiver of bisques to peg out his opponent's ball, as the opponent is a stronger player and more likely to win a 3-ball game; whereas the receiver of bisques will need all four balls in his breaks.

HANDICAP PLAY (Part 2) by John Riches

Some further points on handicap play:

(1) Some players believe that it is a good idea to hang on to at least one bisque for as long as possible, as it will mean that your opponent cannot set up for himself by leaving balls near your hoops, and has to keep on modifying his tactics to allow for the possibility that you may take the final bisque. I have found it quite difficult to convince them that this is a rather pointless strategy unless your opponent is very naive.

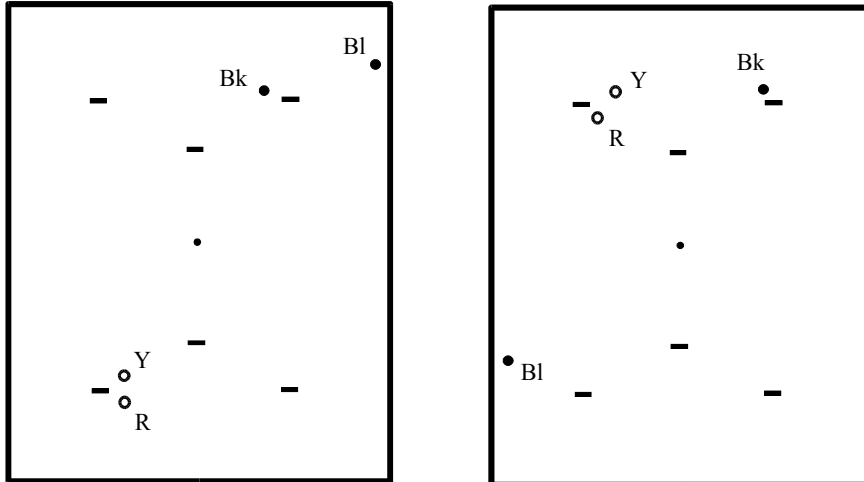
Suppose you have a good chance to set up a break, or keep one going, by using the last bisque, but you refuse to take it. Your opponent will notice this and from then on he will be able to trade on the fact that no matter where he leaves the balls you will be wanting to hang on to the bisque. You may never again get as good a chance to use the bisque and set up an easy break for yourself, which is all you are going to be able to do with it whenever you use it. You will usually do better to use it, make the break, get ahead and put more pressure on the opponent.

(2) When giving a number of bisques, some players try to "bleed" the bisques out of the opponent. Instead of trying to make a break themselves they do this by setting up in a way that encourages or forces the opponent to use a bisque. This sort of policy can easily backfire, so needs to be carefully considered in the light of the number of hoops already made and the amount of time remaining. A better strategy is usually to take every opportunity to make breaks yourself and try to finish the game before the opponent has had much of a chance to use his bisques.

(3) When you have a considerable number of bisques, take the first reasonable chance to start using them to take your first ball around, and plan to use at least half of them to take it as far as possible before you come off the lawn. If you break down and still have the break set up ahead, take another bisque and continue the break. Do not let the opponent have a turn in the hope that he will miss, because even if he does he will have moved the ball most likely to be of use to you in your next turn, and your chance of continuing the break will have been substantially reduced.

(4) Do not keep a half-bisque until the end of the game. Remember that you cannot use it to peg your balls out, as no point can be scored for any ball in a half-bisque turn. Also do not use the half-bisque to 'get out of trouble' by separating the opponent's balls. Instead, use the half-bisque early in the game to set up a break for your next turn.

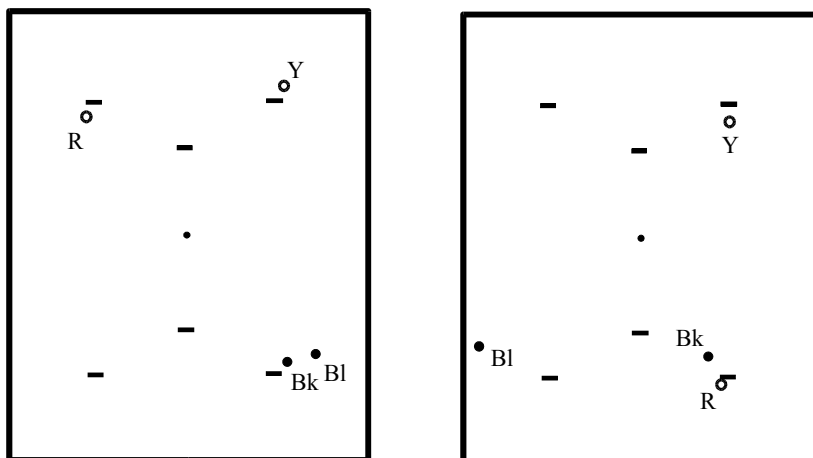
HANDICAP PLAY (part 3) by John Riches



Many players make two serious mistakes in handicap play: (1) they use bisques to get out of trouble, instead of to set up breaks; and (2) they fail to get full value from the bisques when they do take them.

In the first diagram all clips are on hoop 1. The player of red had approached hoop 1 but was unable to make it. He decided that he could not allow the opponent the chance to roquet with two balls at hoop 1, so he used his continuation stroke to hit red gently in front of the hoop and then took a bisque. He wasted the bisque in making only the one hoop with it. A bisque allows you to use all of the balls again before you make a hoop, so even if he had already used the opponent's balls he could have used the continuation shot to shoot at blue, then take a bisque and send blue to load hoop 2 while going to black, and then take off back to yellow with a break set up. In the second diagram red is in a similar situation at hoop 2, where he has approached the hoop and cannot make it. He should use his last stroke to shoot at blue, then take a bisque and rush blue up the lawn to set up a 4-ball break.

HANDICAP PLAY (part 4) by John Riches

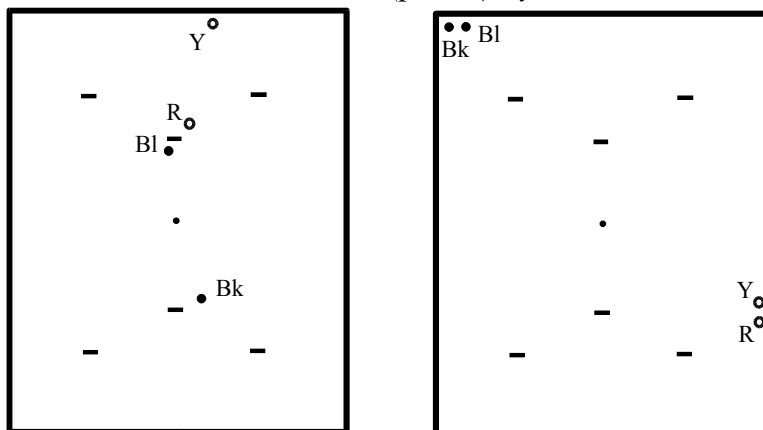


In the first diagram you are playing red and yellow and have several bisques. The opponent has left the balls as shown, with one of your balls at each of his hoops [B1 is for H2 and Bk is for H3; while R is for H 1 and Y is for H5].

There are various ways of using a bisque here, and it would not be easy to decide between taking one, and waiting for an opportunity where you will be more certain to be able to set up a break. If you do decide to use a bisque, then the best way is to shoot at yellow just hard enough to go about one yard past it if you miss it. Then take the bisque, rush yellow back toward hoop 2, take off to the opponent's balls and rush one of them to hoop 1.

In the second diagram Black is for hoop 3. Red has failed to run 3-back and has one bisque left. Red cannot roquet black, but black can roquet red. This is an example of where NOT to take a bisque, as all you would be doing is stopping the opponent from making hoops, without having much chance of making any yourself in the bisque turn. You would have a better chance of winning if you do not take the bisque at this stage.

HANDICAP PLAY (part 5) by John Riches

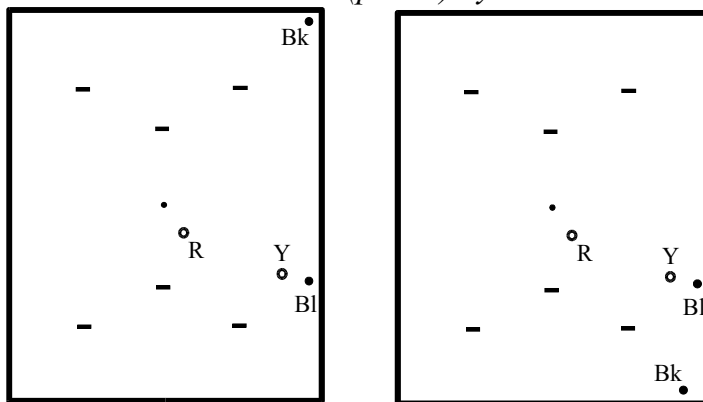


In the first diagram the player of black and blue had one and a half bisques left. Blue was on the peg and black was for 4-back. He saw a chance to finish the game immediately and shot with black at yellow, then took the bisque. This was a mistake as he should have taken the half-bisque and sent yellow to rover while going to red or blue. Then he could roquet one of those balls, rush or roll the other to 4-back, and set up right in front of the hoop, after which he could take the whole bisque, make the last three hoops and peg out. There was little point in retaining the half-bisque, as if he broke down he would not be able to use it to continue his break anyway. He should have used it to reduce the chance of breaking down.

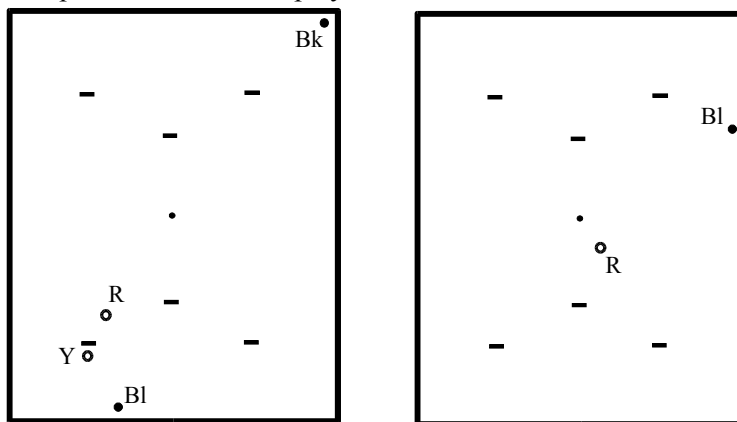
In the second diagram all clips are still on hoop 1 and the player of red is receiving bisques. He should rush yellow near to hoop 3, take off to the opponent's balls, roquet blue, stop-shot it out to hoop 2, then roquet black, send it to hoop 1, hit his red ball also to hoop 1, and take a bisque with a break set up. This is better than rushing one opponent

ball to hoop 1 without having first loaded hoop 2.

HANDICAP PLAY (part 6) by John Riches



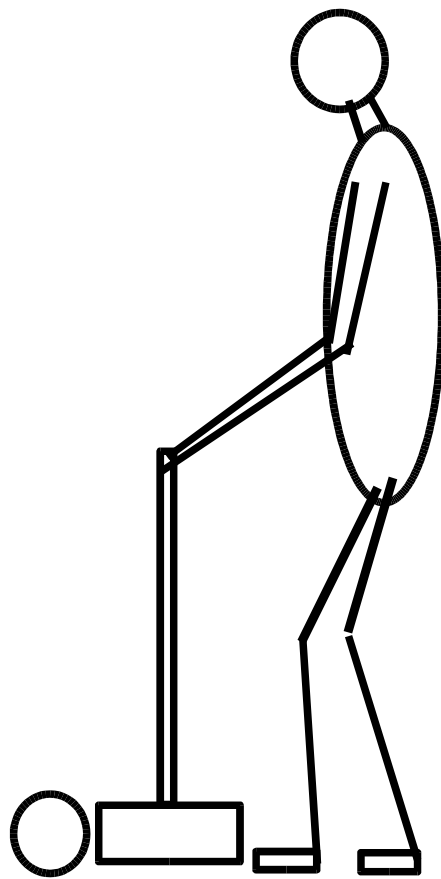
In a recent handicap game the player of black and blue won the toss and wisely chose to hit in second. His opponent, who had three bisques, started by hitting the red ball in near the peg. This involved a hopeful attempt to create a situation where he could use just one bisque to set up a 4-ball break as soon as the four balls were all in play, without allowing the bisque-giver any further chance to roquet. The blue ball was played to the east border about level with the rover hoop, whereupon yellow followed it, being careful not to allow a double target from either baulk. Then black can either shoot from A-baulk at red, or from B-baulk at yellow (or blue), and if it misses the results will be as shown in the two diagrams above. Now the bisque-receiver can play yellow, roquet blue, send it to hoop 2 going to red, roquet red, take-off to black, send black to hoop 1, and hit yellow back near red. Then he can take a bisque with a 4-ball break fully set up. This is an excellent strategy: **plan to use a bisque to set up a 4-ball break at the first reasonable opportunity**. Many players would have sent blue to hoop 2 and tried to rush or roll red to hoop 1 in the hope of 'saving' the bisque, but it is more likely that they will have to give the opponent further chances to roquet before they succeed in getting the break set up with all 4 balls in play.



In fact the likely result is shown in the third diagram, where yellow has failed to make position to run hoop 1 and has had to set up in front of the hoop, after which blue has missed the shot at red (a shot he should not have been allowed). Note that yellow could have taken a bisque after sitting in front of the hoop, but he would still have work to do in getting the black ball out of the 3rd corner. The fact that he is receiving bisques suggests that it is likely he will not have a very good chance of being able to play a 3-ball break and bring the 4th ball into the break without breaking down at some stage.

In the third diagram yellow can again try to 'save' the bisque by shooting at blue, but even if he succeeds he will again have only a 3-ball break. A player giving bisques will usually be delighted to see his opponent trying to 'save' bisques by allowing additional chances to roquet, or by taking risky shots which even if successful do not fully set up a break. One further point: How should the bisque-giving second player have answered the unusual tactic of hitting the first ball near the peg? Answer: He should have set a tice from B-baulk as shown in the fourth diagram. The only reason the second player does not always set his tice from B-baulk is that in a standard opening it would allow his opponent to shoot at the tice and finish near partner ball if he misses; but it is a good reply anytime the first ball does not go near the 4th corner.

CROQUET: COLLECTED ARTICLES



by John Riches

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