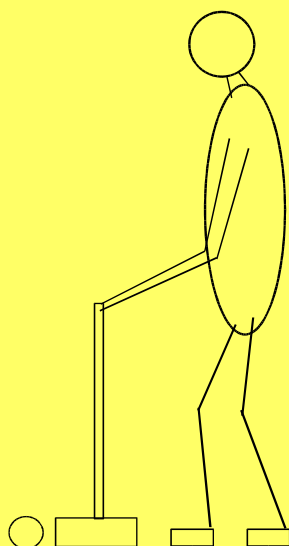


CROQUET

THE

MENTAL

APPROACH



By John Riches

	Page
Introduction	2
section 1: 'Psyching down'	3
section 2: Overcoming nervousness	4
section 3: Confidence building	11
section 4: Rhythm of swing	20
section 5: Rhythm of break	23
section 6: Psychology of tactics	26
section 7: Psychological distractors	31
section 8: Illusions	33
section 9: Psychology of cheating	35
section 10: Psychology of practising	39
section 11: Psychology of coaching	43
section 12: Create your own distraction	45
section 13: Negatives into positives	45
Conclusion	45

NOTE: For ease of comprehension I have used male pronouns throughout this booklet when referring to the croquet player in general. It should be understood that the female gender is in all cases included.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS: I wish to express my thanks to those who assisted with proofreading of this booklet. Carolyn Spooner, Colin Pickering, Tom Armstrong, Rod Brown and Jane Lewis have all given encouragement and advice which I have greatly appreciated.

Digital edition v1.2 2004 by cleinedesign.
email jballant@smartchat.net.au

INTRODUCTION: PSYCHOLOGY IN CROQUET

A leading player recently remarked to me that in his estimation the winning of croquet matches depended about 70% on mental approach, with the other 30% divided more or less equally between technical skill, tactics, and theory.

Perhaps many of us, particularly those who compete at less exalted levels, would estimate the percentages somewhat differently; but most would agree that psychological considerations play a very important part in the game.

It is surprising, therefore, that few croquet textbooks deal with this topic other than by giving it a brief, passing mention; and few coaches make any attempt to pass on knowledge in this area in any planned or organised manner.

My own understanding of psychology is unfortunately limited. Although I did study the subject for three years, the courses concentrated mainly on the psychology of teaching and learning. This is partly transferable to croquet, especially in relation to coaching, but there are many areas where my knowledge is far from comprehensive. Thus in attempting the task of explaining what I believe to be some of the most important ways in which psychology intrudes into our game, I am aware of my limitations and cannot claim to be making any sort of definitive statement. However, I am also aware that if I do not attempt it, it may be a long time before anyone else does. It seems that the passing on of incomplete knowledge in this area to our students of the game may be better than passing on none at all. At least it will be a start which others can develop further.

I have made contact in some detail with professional sports psychologists. They tend to deal, as expected, with established methods of relaxation, maintaining concentration, goal setting and visualisation, risk-taking, etc., as used in the coaching and playing of other sports. However, they readily admit that they are uncertain about the extent to which these things apply in the game of croquet; and they have no knowledge at all of various psychological considerations which are peculiar to our game.

I hope that the reader will use what follows as a suggested starting point in the search for the correct mental approach to the game of croquet.

PSYCHING DOWN

I came to croquet after many years of playing competitive sports such as football, tennis, squash and basketball. It is commonly accepted that maximum performance in these sports depends largely on the ability of coaches to ensure that players are "psyched up" before a game. This involves developing in the player a mind-set of absolute determination, readiness to give 100% effort, continuous concentration, and a competitiveness that borders on desperation.

It did not take me long to discover that such a mind-set is largely counter-productive in the game of croquet. For my first tournament of any consequence I was invited down from the country to play against others who were under consideration for state selection. In talking to the other players at the start of the tournament I was surprised to learn that none of them gave himself any chance of winning the tournament, for various reasons which they explained at length. Furthermore, it did not seem to concern them at all, because they were not interested in getting into the state team anyway! Apparently they had all only entered the tournament to gain experience or in order to make up the numbers.

In view of this, I decided that if I really tried hard and gave it my best effort I should have an excellent chance of winning almost every game. My opponents in several games reaffirmed before we started that they expected me to beat them quite easily.

It will not surprise the experienced croquet player to learn that I hardly won a game in that tournament. My opponents, regardless of what they said, were all hoping to win the tournament. They were not trying to 'con' me with what they told me, but were going through an essential process of 'psyching themselves down'. They were actually trying to convince themselves that there was nothing of importance riding on the games. This was all an attempt to overcome nervousness, reduce tension, and allow themselves to approach the games in a relaxed frame of mind.

In the more active sports mentioned above a player who starts to relax during a game is hardly likely to be successful. If he is on a football field, the coach may quickly remove him from the game. However, there are sports such as golf, darts, snooker, archery, rifle shooting and croquet where a relaxed approach is essential to maximum performance, and the ability to psych yourself down, rather than up, is highly desirable.

It is not certain that this applies to all players. I have heard of a player, for example, whose opponent reportedly made a remark which she thought was deliberately calculated to upset her. She claimed, however, that it actually made her all the more determined to win. She started to grit her teeth and tell herself that there was no way she was going to lose to such an ill-mannered opponent. She played the game of her life and won handsomely. She certainly did not seem to have relaxed in any way, but played better than ever before.

If I knew more about psychology I may be able to explain this. All I can say is that the great majority of players need to be relaxed before they can expect to play well. Perhaps there is a distinction to be made between relaxation and nervelessness. The player was apparently not relaxed, but neither was she nervous. She had great determination, which is a good thing as long as it can be dissociated from nervousness. The determination may have led to greater than normal concentration.

Relaxation can be overdone and taken to a point where it breeds a degree of carelessness which can be just as disastrous for the croquet player as nervous tension. A balance is needed, and relaxation need not entail any lack of concentration. Indeed, it is likely that most players can concentrate better and for longer when relaxed than when tense.

OVERCOMING NERVOUSNESS

The first important thing to understand about nervousness is that there is no sense in getting worried about the fact that you are nervous, as this will only make things worse. All croquet players experience some degree of nervousness before and during important games. With some it has a more severe effect and lasts longer than with others. One comforting thought is that nervousness tends to decrease with experience. As you enter more tournaments and play more important games you tend to be less nervous because you instead begin to feel that you have "been there, done that" so many times before. This allows you more chance of overcoming the nervousness before its effect has been disastrous. However, some nervousness will always be there in most players.

The main effects of nervousness are seen at the start of a game, but many players find that the nerves can return at a later stage of the game after they had seemed to have settled down. This is particularly likely to occur in a tight finish where every shot becomes critical. An attack of nerves can come upon the player all of a sudden. Some players "suddenly freeze" when faced with making, say, a four-foot hoop which could decide the game.

It is evident that nervousness has both physical and mental effects on the player. The muscles are affected so as to lose coordination, and the limbs tend to twitch, shake and move jerkily. In addition, timing is affected so that rhythm is destroyed, and the player is likely to experience a 'mental blank' which may cause him to play the wrong ball, run a wrong hoop, forget that he has given a 'lift', or overlook an essential element of shot technique.

The techniques used by players in attempting to overcome an attack of nerves are many and varied. We can mention here only a few of the most common and more interesting methods.

2.1 Exercises and breathing

Some have found it helpful to go through a warm-up (or psych-down) programme before starting a game. This can involve such things as taking a light jog or a warm shower, silent meditation, imagining yourself in tranquil surroundings, listening to soothing music, walking around the lawn to view it from all angles, sitting or lying absolutely still for a few minutes, physical exercises designed to loosen and stretch muscles, etc. Others have resorted to chewing, smoking, drinking, eating particular foods, fasting, or taking tranquilisers.

2.2 Specific relaxation programmes

Many players go through a specifically designed programme in order to promote relaxation and reduce the effect of nervous tension. Sports psychologists are able (for a fee) to assist players in preparing various types of relaxation programme which may involve mental imaging, concentration

on relaxing particular sets of muscles, etc. For example, the player may be advised to practise at home going through a series of simple relaxation exercises in which groups of muscles are tightened, then relaxed. This may culminate in, say, the clenching and then relaxing of the right fist, by which time a state of near total relaxation has been achieved. The intention is to create in the player's mind an association between total relaxation and the unclenching of the right fist, so that during a game the clenching and unclenching of the fist is sufficient to bring about a similar state of relaxation.

Some players wear headphones attached to a small portable cassette player carried in the pocket. On the tape they have relaxing music or soothing voices. This also serves to minimise distraction from traffic and other noises, but makes it rather difficult for the opponent to forestall a shot in cases where he is entitled or expected to do so. One could question whether this could amount to receiving assistance contrary to the rules of the game, and there is the possibility that a tape could contain specific instruction on points to remember when playing the shots.

The famous violinist Yehudi Menuhin once explained the secret of how he managed to appear so relaxed when performing in public.

"When I walk on stage I simply imagine what everyone in the audience would look like if they were all sitting there in their underwear. The image brought to mind is so amusing that it is impossible to continue to feel nervous, no matter how important the personages in the front row may be."

We will probably never know whether or not such an approach works in croquet, as no-one (including me) is ever likely to admit to having used it.

Apart from tranquilisers and the occasional shot of brandy which some players use in an attempt to steady their nerves, there is the possibility that beneficial effects can be obtained by giving special attention to diet before an important match. Some claim that it helps if they eat, or avoid eating, particular types of food. There is so little agreement on this point that it is difficult to pass on any useful advice. Some say that if they eat anything at all immediately before a game they are likely to feel churned up inside once the game starts; while others share my own theory that the more food there is in your stomach, the less room there is for the 'butterflies' to fly around.

2.3 Dress

Experienced players are aware of the importance of dressing in a way that allows you to feel as comfortable and relaxed as possible. New shoes and tight shirts, belts or skirts should not be worn in important matches. Some wear gloves which keep their hands warmer in cold weather, and hats or eye-shades which enable them to feel more comfortable when out in the hot sun. Women may feel more comfortable in a divided skirt or shorts than in either trousers or a dress. By giving some thought to the matter of what you should wear, it is possible to reduce (or at least not add to) the nervous tension felt during a game. Whenever the National championships are held in Hobart players from the mainland states should consider the advisability of practising wearing gloves beforehand. In past years some have discovered that the biting cold winds can make their hands and fingers quite numb, but gloves worn for the first time in an attempt to overcome the problem are likely to create new and unforeseen problems of their own and thereby increase nervous tension.

When discussing these things at a country tournament some time ago, one attractive young lady said that on one hot day she had gone out to practise with a friend without wearing a bra, and was surprised at how relaxed she felt, and how well she played. While we do not suggest that such drastic measures should be generally adopted, we do re-emphasise the importance of wearing clothing in which one can feel comfortable and relaxed.

2.4 Relaxing activities

During a game, some players are prone to whistle or talk to themselves (or to others) as a means of promoting relaxation. Others may smoke, walk up and down, or go for a short jog.

It was my good friend Tom Armstrong who first pointed out to me the importance of visiting the toilet after making a break under pressure. At the time I wondered whether he was joking, but he most certainly was not.

"You can't play good croquet with a full bladder," he said, "The removal of excess fluid will reduce nervous tension and take at least three bisesques off your handicap". I can testify that for me personally he was correct on both counts. Perhaps there is a case to be made for refraining from drinking too much before or during a game. The cups of tea associated with croquet from time immemorial may be having a detrimental effect on the standard of play!

2.5 Outside influences

Players are often affected by external things which can increase nervous tension. Some claim that they cannot play well when their spouse, or some other person from their club, is watching. The spouse can usually be banished if he/she is causing a problem, but other spectators are less subject to direct control. Anyone has a right to watch any game, so you need to find a way of preventing their presence from affecting your play.

The only real answer to this is to make up your mind that you are not going to LET it affect you. This can certainly be done, and can be possibly the most effective solution to the problem of nervousness in general. A dramatic example occurred recently at our club, with a player who played well in practice games and club matches, but when he played in tournaments or matches at the S.A.C.A. headquarters against players from other clubs, his nerves "went to pieces", and he was constantly missing short roquets and sticking in the easiest of hoops. He would not attempt shots that he could play with ease on our home lawns, for fear that he would mess them up. I had suggested various ways of dealing with the problem, but nothing seemed to work, and I had concluded that he would probably never be able to play well under pressure.

Then, one day, he entered another tournament and told me that he was simply not going to let nerves affect him - he was going to go out and play the shots that ought to be played, and not worry about it, whether they turned out as desired or not.

"I have suddenly realised that if I miss a shot the earth is not going to open up and swallow me," he said, "so from now on I'm just going to go out and enjoy myself."

I was sceptical about whether he could do this, but in fact he played quite well and won the tournament. I am not sure how many players would be able to overcome nervousness as he apparently did, by sheer willpower alone; but for those who can do it, it is certainly the most effective and immediate solution to the problem that I have seen.

Conversation and comments from spectators can also upset and/or distract a player, possibly making him more nervous. For this reason, some officials at important events have attempted to prevent spectators from sitting with players or talking to them at all. However, some players tell me that they welcome conversation with spectators as it tends to help them relax and take their mind off the stupid thing they did in the last turn. Explaining your actions and joking about it with a sympathetic listener does indeed seem a useful way of removing tension in such situations, but it is also important to be able to then dismiss the thing from your thoughts and prepare to concentrate fully on the next turn.

If you tend to be more nervous in unfamiliar surroundings, arrive early at a competition venue with which you are unfamiliar, so you can walk around the lawns and survey them from every possible angle, looking for slopes, rough areas, patches of heavy grass, etc. Even for those not particularly prone to nervousness this seems like good advice; and if you are one of those struggling to cope with nervous tension it is essential that you do everything you can to help yourself feel more comfortable and familiar with the game situation.

2.6 Technique

There is a definite connection between technique and nervousness, and players should be able to modify their shot-making technique so as to lessen the harmful effects of nervous tension.

The nervous player usually finds that during the swing he is involuntarily lifting his head and shoulders ("coming up for a look"), and this is accompanied by shaking or twitching in the hands and possibly knees. This can partly be overcome before starting the swing by ensuring that your stance is comfortable and well balanced, toes are relaxed, and shoulders also relaxed instead of being "hunched up".

The shaking in the hands and wrists is more difficult to overcome, but it is at least possible to take some measures to lessen its effect:

- (1) A heavy mallet is less likely to shake as much as a light one, simply because a greater force is needed to move it off line.
- (2) A lighter than normal grip should be used. Unfortunately, a player who is nervous and tense usually tends to grip the mallet more tightly than ever, thus transmitting the shaking of the hands directly to the mallet head.
- (3) You may find it helpful to move both hands together well down the mallet shaft when nervous, especially for hoop-running. With a long grip a slight movement of the hands can tend to be magnified as it causes a corresponding movement in the mallet head, so that a small sideways movement of, say, half a centimetre in the hands can cause the mallet head to move several centimetres to one side and hit the ball well off centre or miss it completely. The shorter grip tends to lessen this unwanted

effect and also makes it easier to swing directly (and only) from the shoulders. There are certainly disadvantages also associated with shortening the grip, such as loss of power and difficulty of maintaining alignment; but the nervous player may well find that, at least until he "settles down", the advantages outweigh the disadvantages.

2.7 "Desperado" effect

Most players are familiar, in one way or another, with what I call the "desperado" effect.

This occurs when a player is convinced that he has nothing whatever to lose, so he may as well relax and "go for everything". A player in such a frame of mind can be a very dangerous opponent, as the fact that he is completely relaxed makes him tend to play exceptionally well.

In the first round of a country tournament I recently played a game in which this phenomenon was particularly noticeable. It was the first round of the championship singles, with divisions 1 and 2 combined. My opponent was a lady to whom I would have had to give six bisques in a handicap event. She convinced herself before we began that she had no chance of winning, so she may as well relax and enjoy herself.

She started by roqueting everything she went for, and running several ridiculously long hoops from near impossible angles; and continued in such fashion to make three sizeable breaks while I had not managed to hit a roquet. I knew what was happening and was starting to wonder whether she was likely to keep it up for the whole game, when I received some unexpected help from one of her clubmates who came over and asked her how she was doing.

"Oh, I've started quite well", she said, "I'm on four-back and one-back and he hasn't started yet."

"That's great", said the clubmate, "If you are careful you should have a good chance of winning."

This was exactly the advice my opponent did not need. Once she realised that she did indeed have a chance of beating me, she started to play more carefully and did not make another hoop.

The trouble with using the "desperado effect" as a cure for nervousness is that it only works in situations where there genuinely is nothing to lose. However, it is important to understand it, and so avoid becoming nervous yourself when your opponent is playing as mine did.

Other situations where this effect is frequently seen include turns after the bell (which for this very reason I believe are unfair), and games in which one of the players is left with a single ball.

2.8 Role of partner in doubles

In a game of doubles a player may say or do things which can have a dramatic effect on the state of mind of his partner.

It is important to do everything you can to encourage your partner and help him to relax. Some players like to be left alone during their turn to make their own decisions and play their own game.

This is rather foolish of them, as two heads are better than one, and the partner may suggest things which otherwise would have been overlooked. However, the suggestions should always be made in a way that will increase, rather than undermine, the player's confidence in his own game.

In general, it is good psychology to suggest that your partner go for shots that he seems a bit hesitant about attempting, rather than saying, "Well, if you are not confident of getting it, you'd better play safe." This is especially true when there is much to gain if the shot is successful. Similarly, it is poor psychology to attempt to dissuade a partner from taking a risk, unless it is apparent that he has overlooked something such as a 'lift' which the opponents will be entitled to.

Thus in almost any situation it is most likely to increase your partner's confidence if you encourage him to take risks rather than play safe. In many cases this will also prove to be the best move tactically, as 'selective memory' (which will be explained later) causes the great majority of players to avoid taking risks which should be taken, while very few are guilty of taking risks which should not be taken.

For similar reasons it is usually unwise to follow your partner around the lawn during a turn, supervising him in every little detail, unless he is a raw beginner.

2.9 The out player

Another important factor in overcoming nervousness is knowing what to do when you are the "out player". The out player is the one who does not have the innings. In most cases this means that you are watching your opponent make a break, or while he manoeuvres for position. Instead of worrying about the number of hoops he is making and how far behind you are getting, you should use the time to concentrate on noticing and thinking about things such as those listed below, that will be of use to you when you finally manage to gain the innings. The result will be that you have already thought about many of the things that can tend to prevent your shots from turning out as intended. This can have an important effect on your mental approach to the game, as nothing increases nervousness more than shots which go astray for no apparent reason.

Some of the things the out player should concentrate on are:

(1) The speed and slope of the lawn.

By watching the opponent's shots carefully you should be able to see whether they are falling short, going too far, or curving off to one side. This will give you an indication of the speed of the lawn and whether it slopes inward or outward in certain areas.

(2) Playing conditions.

If, for example, there is a strong wind blowing, you should try to gauge its effect on your opponent's shots and work out ways of minimising its effect on your own shots when you get in. If it is raining you should look for parts of the lawn which show signs of becoming waterlogged. You should also take note of whether the lawn surface is hard and firm, or sandy or spongy, as jump shots may be difficult and inadvisable on the softer type of surface.

(3) The ability and style of the opponent.

As he makes his break you should note the accuracy (or lack of it) with which he plays his shots; his willingness to take risks to keep the break going or tendency to avoid risks by playing safe wherever possible; his ability to take off or rush accurately across the lawn and play very sharp stop-shots or long rolls, or cut-rushes, etc. This knowledge can help you decide on the risks you can afford to take when it is your turn to play.

For example, if he has left both of his balls near his hoop you may need to decide whether to shoot at them, knowing that a miss would allow him to attempt a five-yard roquet on your ball and set up a break. Against a player who has shown that he does not like taking risks, and whose roquet action looks a bit suspect, such a shot may be well worth taking. Similarly, if the opponent leaves his two balls together on the border it may be worth shooting at them and giving him three balls together if you know that he cannot play the stop-shot required to send one of them across the lawn to a hoop while staying close enough to turn around and be certain of roqueting the other ball. Without such a shot his chance of setting up a break may be small enough to make the risk worth taking.

(4) Possible leaves.

It can be very helpful to look at the position of your own clips and work out one or more "ideal leaves" which you may be able to use when you get in. In many cases you may manage to make a roquet, but your chance of making a hoop or getting a break going may be extremely remote because the other two balls are on the border in remote parts of the lawn. The best you can hope to do is to go and get them off the border and leave them out in the lawn where you may be able to use them to set up a break next turn, provided your opponent does not roquet.

Unfortunately, many players have little idea of the BEST places to leave the balls in such situations, and realise later that they should have left them differently. The time to work out the best leave is during the opponent's previous turn, since you already know where your clips will be when your turn comes around. This is much better than relying on your ability to think of a good leave on the spur of the moment, or worse still leaving it until you have already played some of your shots and no longer have any chance of controlling the positions of some of the balls. (This topic of 'ideal leaves' is explained in much greater detail in my booklet "Croquet: Next Break Strategy". but is mostly outside the scope of a booklet on psychological aspects of the game.)

In addition to improving your tactics, concentration on such positive thinking will take your thoughts away from things which would increase your nervous tension.

CONFIDENCE BUILDING

One of the main problems with nervousness is that it is associated with lack of confidence. In some situations the nervousness may CAUSE a lack of confidence in your own ability to play shots successfully in a match which you know you can play in practice. At other times it may be the other way around, so that the nervousness may be CAUSED BY a lack of confidence which results from some other factor. In the latter case it may be possible to find ways of overcoming the lack of confidence and thus removing the cause of your nervousness.

For example, you may be about to play an opponent who is recognised as a much stronger player than you, or in conditions with which you are unfamiliar. It may be helpful to "psych yourself down" or adopt the "desperado" approach or remind yourself that your opponent has to cope with the same conditions. Perhaps the best piece of advice comes from a world-class chess player who was noted for his confident, attacking style, although his general manner gave an impression of retiring timidity. When asked how he managed to do it, he explained, "Even when I am not confident, I try to play as if I am!"

This advice seems more relevant to croquet than to chess, since confidence probably plays an even greater part in determining the results of many games. Some players are apparently able to play cautiously at the start of a game and then start to play more adventurously after they have settled down a bit, but this approach is less likely to be successful as your standard of play, and that of your opponents, improves. The danger is that you may never be allowed to settle down against an opponent who takes full advantage of the early opportunities offered by your "cautious" approach, and is able to keep you under pressure from then on.

From a psychological point of view it would seem more advisable to "play as if you are confident" in the early stages of the game when your opponent may not have "settled down" sufficiently to take full advantage of any mistakes. Far more games are lost by failing to take risks which should have been taken than are lost by taking risks that should not have been taken.

3.1 Coping with pressure

An area in which many players can improve their mental approach is their ability to play "pressure" shots with confidence. A longish hoop that HAS to be made, or a five-yard roquet which you SHOULD make, but will give an easy break to your opponent if you miss, are common examples of shots which need to be played confidently. How is it possible to be confident when you know that you are by no means certain to make the hoop; and although you should expect to make the roquet, it is also quite missable?

In such situations you do not need to attempt to hypnotise yourself into believing that you WILL run the hoop or make the roquet. Some players may be able to achieve such a happy (and unrealistic) mental state, but most of us are too experienced to be able to fool ourselves so easily.

It should be possible, however, to at least convince yourself that by attempting the shot you are giving yourself the best possible chance of winning the game. There is no certainty involved - certainties in croquet are as rare as they are in politics, economics or horse-racing - but you know there is nothing else you could do to give yourself any better chance of winning than what you

are doing. Perhaps there is a similarity to the 'desperado' mental approach here, but without the drawback of it being difficult to sustain. Such a mental approach should allow you to play the shot confidently, even though you are well aware that success is not guaranteed.

Your confidence may be further increased by the well-founded belief that against most opponents if you keep on attempting the things that give you the best possible chance of winning, the odds will be weighted enormously in your favour. It is like playing a coin-tossing game with an opponent who, in order to win, must call correctly on seven or eight tosses out of ten. There is no certainty that he won't be able to do it, but there is plenty of reason for you to be quietly confident.

3.2 Coping with frustration

Against some opponents you will find yourself having to cope with tactics designed to frustrate you rather than pressure you into making errors. Instead of placing his balls so that he is ready to take advantage of any slight error you make, this type of opponent will place them so that you have difficulty doing anything with them. In playing most of your shots you will not be under the pressure of knowing that failure will lead to certain disaster; but you will be under a different type of pressure which arises from the frustration of not being able to make much noticeable progress when you feel that you ought to be getting somewhere.

It is usually a bad policy to try making hoops one at a time with your own two balls when your opponent's balls are out of play and well separated. This allows him to keep shooting at your balls, or occasionally at his partner ball. His shots can be taken in a relaxed frame of mind, since in most cases a miss is unlikely to cost him anything more than allowing you to roll to the next hoop. When he does succeed in roqueting he is likely to be able to use your balls to make more hoops than you have been able to make with only two balls. Worse still, the roquet he makes always seems to come at a time when you at last have the balls well placed for a possible break; and this adds to your frustration.

The answer to this problem lies in the realm of tactics. There is no need to allow play to continue for turn after turn in which you can only hope to make one hoop at best. Consider the position shown in diagram 1 where you are playing with the red and yellow balls which are both in the fourth corner. All clips are on hoop 1 and the opponent's balls are together in the second corner. Take off to them but do not simply try to rush one of them out and make your hoop while the other opponent ball and your partner ball are both left near the border out of play.

There is the risk that you will stick in the hoop with the opponent ball handy, or that you will have to return to your partner ball in the fourth corner and allow him the chance of roqueting his partner ball as he goes back to it in the second corner. Even if he fails to roquet, you again have to play a long take-off followed by a roquet which in many

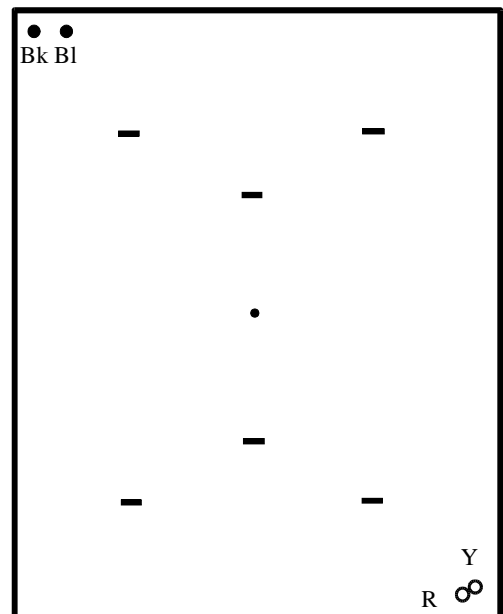


Diagram 1

cases will be far from a certainty. Such risks are simply not worth taking when all that you stand to gain if they come off is one hoop!

Instead, stop-shot one opponent ball out into the lawn, then turn around, roquet the other and send it also out to a place where you will be able to use it. In this case you could place them at hoop 2 and hoop 1. When you return to your partner ball in the fourth corner, be sure that in doing so you leave one of your balls with a useful rush. Your opponent will have one chance to roquet, but he can move only one ball, and if you have placed the balls carefully then a miss should allow you to use his other ball to make several hoops with the three balls in play.

If the opponent's balls are left on the border but well apart, it may still be possible to get them both out into the lawn by taking off to one of them and sending it into the lawn while going to the other. If this is too difficult, then you should at least be able to put the first opponent ball into the lawn and return to your partner ball with a rush set to the other opponent ball. This will make it dangerous for him to join up, and if he again places his balls well apart you can take the rush to one of his balls and then rush it out into the lawn, after which a take-off to the other opponent ball will allow you again to achieve the desired situation. There will often be other and possibly better ways of going about things; but the thing to remember is that if you find that the tactics of your opponent are starting to frustrate you, then you should think of a way to prevent him from continuing them. In the situations described where you have the innings this should not be too difficult to do.

A different type of frustration arises when it is your opponent who has the innings and is content to make one hoop at a time, keeping your balls widely separated but usually out of play in the style of the legendary "Aunt Emma".

The best answer is to keep the opponent under pressure by placing your balls so that you are threatening to take advantage of any error he makes. It is important to retain confidence that when you do at last manage to make a long roquet you can expect to make more hoops than your opponent has been able to make. You must also be prepared to take risks in order to give yourself the best chance of obtaining the innings as early as possible. In many cases you should shoot at his balls rather than returning to your partner ball, especially if they present some sort of double target, but often even if they are both on the border without a useful rush.

In diagram 2, for example, with all clips on the first hoop, suppose that you are playing with the red and yellow balls. Your opponent had roqueted red and taken off unsuccessfully for hoop 1, then hit out near his partner ball on the north border as shown.

Even though he has no rush to his hoop, you should shoot with red at the opponent's balls. This is far better than "finessing" by hitting the red ball out of play into either the first or fourth corner. Note that shooting with red at yellow is too dangerous because a miss would allow your opponent to play black, rushing blue to hoop 2, then taking off to your balls and rushing one of them to hoop 1 to set up a break. A player who adopts the "Aunt Emma" style is unlikely to be

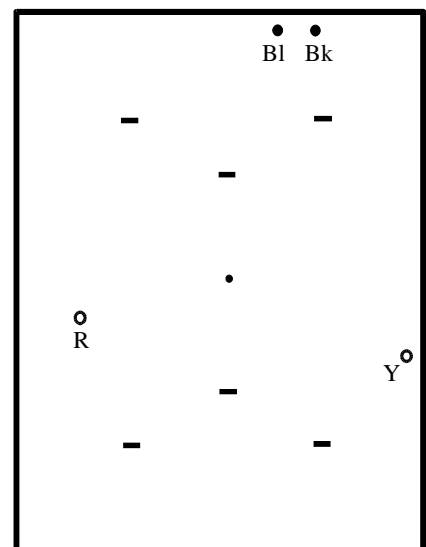


Diagram 2

able to make effective use of the third ball in most situations, so it is usually worth taking the risk of attempting whichever shot you are most likely to roquet.

The positive mental approach involved in your adoption of such tactics will tend to bring its own dividends in other ways as well. Hitting your ball into a corner without making any attempt to roquet takes pressure off the opponent and allows his nerves to become more settled.

3.3 Visualisation

As in many other sports, visualisation can play an important role in the mental approach of the croquet player.

Just as a high jumper prepares to jump by imagining himself sailing over the bar, the croquet player can build confidence by pausing before playing a shot and forming a mental image of the shot being played successfully. This could involve "seeing" in your imagination the striker's ball running straight across the lawn and making a perfect roquet or making a hoop with the greatest of ease. Many players can also "see" the ball as it comes off the mallet face with a particular type of spin, enabling them to better judge the amount of 'pull' or 'roll' that will be imparted to the ball.

Visualisation also provides a means of correcting errors before they become serious. If you form a clear mental picture of how both balls will behave in a split shot, for example, you can then check whether or not the balls do, in fact, behave as expected. If not (e.g. one falls short and the other goes too far) then you should ask yourself why, and work out the adjustment needed the next time you play a similar shot. A player who has no clear mental picture of what he expects the balls to do will have no way of knowing whether or not they did it, so is likely to continue making the same errors in future shots of the same type.

To facilitate visualisation of the type of swing you intend to use, you could practise the swing alongside the ball before playing the shot. For hoop shots in particular many players find this helpful.

3.4 The uncertainty principle

In croquet the "Uncertainty Principle" bears no relation to the similarly named principle in mathematical probability and quantum physics.

It simply says that a shot is less likely to be successful if the player is unsure about whether he should be playing it. Some players are extremely skilful at taking advantage of this principle, and when playing against them you continually find yourself in considerable doubt about which shot you should play and whether or not you should be taking a particular risk.

After missing a shot you keep thinking, "I knew I shouldn't have tried that". Consequently it is difficult to approach any shot with confidence and soon your whole mental approach can become tentative and timid.

Many players cope better if they are left with longer roquets, provided they at least know they are doing the right thing in attempting them. Then they may still miss, but they will not blame themselves for having made a wrong decision, so their future play is not affected.

In order to overcome the problem of uncertainty leading to doubt, self-blame, and increased tension, it is necessary to pause before playing a shot and give yourself time to consider the situation from every angle. You need to assess the chance of the various shots on offer being successful, and the extent to which an unsuccessful shot would be disastrous. Then you must make a definite decision about which shot you will play. If two or more shots seem equally attractive after careful reflection, then choose one of them and be done with it. In general, if there is no other clear way of deciding, it pays to choose the shot which if successful offers the greatest gain.

Do not in any way prepare to play a shot until the decision has been finally made. Then, once the choice is made, DO NOT go back over it. Turn your whole attention to the things (stance, grip, swing, follow-through, etc.) which you need to get right to make the shot you have chosen successful. If you happen to miss, simply tell yourself that the shot had to be attempted in that particular situation. By all means ask yourself what made the shot unsuccessful and try to correct it in future shots, but do not dwell any longer on whether or not you should have done something else. We can certainly learn from our mistakes, but the time to look back and reassess your decisions is after the game is finished, not while it is still in progress.

There are many situations in life when a decision has to be made based on incomplete information and a largely subjective assessment of the likely outcomes of the alternatives. The fact that a decision has resulted in disaster does not prove that it was a wrong decision at the time it was made. If further information had been available then a different decision may have been made, but the decision made was the only reasonable one in view of what was known at the time.

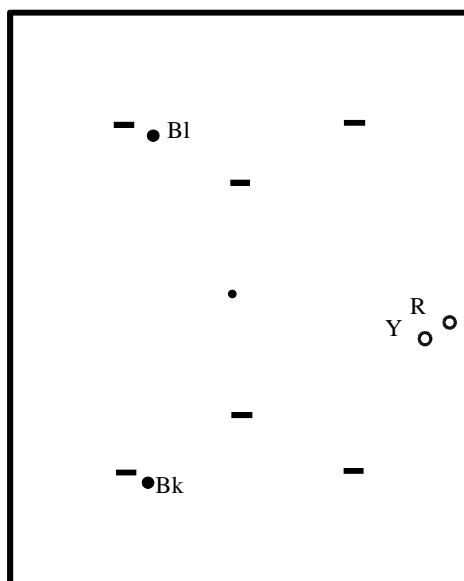
So it is in croquet. You may have assessed the risk involved in playing a particular shot as worth taking, but after missing it you find that your opponent proceeds to make an all-round break which he starts by playing two or three shots that you did not think he was likely to be to play successfully. This does not mean that your decision was wrong, and there is no sense in blaming yourself for having taken the wrong shot. Perhaps in future you may assess risks differently when playing against the same opponent, but in all probability he could not do it again and your decision was, in fact, correct in the sense that by attempting it you were giving yourself the best possible chance of winning. The fact that you in fact lost proves nothing, as no other course of action would have GUARANTEED a win. You could have lost as easily - in fact more easily - if you had made a different choice.

On the other hand, if your opponent takes advantage of your miss by adopting a simple course of action which you had failed to take into consideration, then perhaps it is in order to give yourself a quick mental kick in the pants to ensure that the pain felt is sufficient to encourage you to be more careful in future when making the assessment of which shot to play.

3.5 Destroying confidence

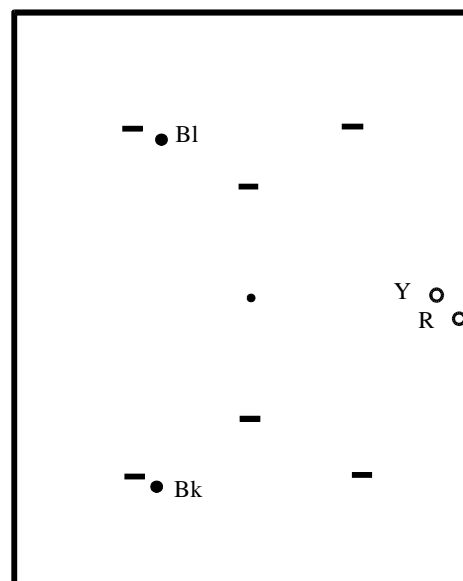
We have already seen that one way of destroying your opponent's confidence is to create uncertainty in his mind about which shot he should be playing. This requires careful planning. For example, suppose that your clips are still on the first hoop and you have made a roquet but have virtually no chance of making an immediate break, so you decide to get the opponent's balls from the border and leave them out in the lawn, hoping to be able to use them in a break next turn.

Diagram 3



STRONG LEAVE Black has only one option: he must shoot at the rush set for red. He can play the shot with confidence that he is doing the right thing.

Diagram 4



PSYCHOLOGICAL LEAVE Black has at least three reasonable options: he can shoot at either blue or yellow, or can "finesse" by hitting out into the fourth corner.

The obvious leave is to send his balls to hoop 1 and hoop 2, and place your own balls somewhere near the east border between hoops 3 and 4, with a rush set to hoop 1 (see diagram 3). Then he is forced to move the ball at hoop 1, and unless he roquets you will be able to play your rush to hoop 1 with at least a three-ball break.

However, there is a danger that such a leave can be TOO good. Your opponent is more or less forced to shoot at your balls, even if your rush is set perfectly and he has only a single-ball target. There is no sense in him playing the ball into a corner to take it out of play, since you have a three-ball break anyway. Therefore he can shoot at your balls with certainty that it is his only chance of preventing your immediate break, and knowing that if he misses he will be giving you little more than you already have. This allows him to approach the shot in a relaxed, nothing-to-lose frame of mind.

By setting your rush for the boundary behind hoop 2 instead of for hoop 1 (diagram 4), you can produce an entirely different situation. Now a shot at your balls by the opponent, if missed, will give you a rush to hoop 1 which you do not already have. He must also consider shooting at his ball near hoop 2 and so must assess your chance, if he misses, of rushing to his ball on the border behind hoop 2, rushing that ball out to hoop 2, and rushing the ball from hoop 2 to hoop 1 to set up a four-ball break. Finally, he has to decide whether it would pay him to hit his ball into, say, the fourth corner, which would allow you to rush to his ball at hoop 2 and then rush that ball to hoop 1. In this case you would still have a three-ball break and he has passed up a chance to roquet.

Most players find it difficult to decide on the correct course of action in such a situation, so the uncertainty principle comes into operation. If they decide to attempt a roquet they are less likely to hit it than in the previous situation when they had virtually nothing to lose. This psychological consideration may well outweigh the fact that if the opponent misses you are committing yourself to playing two good rushes instead of one in order to start your break.

Apart from such legitimate use of tactics to undermine your opponent's confidence, there are numerous more devious and less ethical ways.

One player I knew would always make a point of asking about his opponent's health before starting a game, and would sympathise fervently over every slight condition mentioned. This served to encourage the opponent to believe that he could not hope to play good croquet with his health in such a precarious condition, and would keep him thinking about his aches and pains rather than his playing technique. Perhaps there is a danger that the sympathy could be overdone to the extent that the opponent becomes convinced he has no chance at all, bringing a "desperado" mindset into operation.

On another occasion I heard a player at the start of a game commenting on the "difficult cross-wind which would make good croquet almost impossible". After the game I suggested that he was in danger of talking himself out of any chance of playing well. He assured me, however, that he was not really worried about the wind which was not all that strong anyway. The comment had been entirely for the benefit of his opponent, who was known to be a slow starter.

"He always takes some time to get his shots sorted out", I was told.

"If he thinks that the wind is mainly to blame for his misses he will be less strenuous in his efforts to discover the real problem, which would almost certainly be a minor error in technique."

I am sure that the number of such psychological ploys designed to help destroy an opponent's confidence is limited only by the imagination, and possibly the ethics, of the player using them.

3.6 Psychological effect of wiring, peeling, etc.

Tactics such as wiring, peeling and pegging out the opponent's balls can also have a noticeable psychological effect.

Some years ago I was taught by an older player to wire the opponent's balls at the peg after making a break to 4-back. Later I realised that it would be far easier to simply leave one of the opponent's balls east of the peg and the other ball two or three yards south-west of hoop 2. In practical terms the result was the same, since he would inevitably lift the ball near hoop 2 and shoot with it from baulk.

However, by then I had also come to realise that the wiring seemed to have a psychological effect on many opponents, producing a sense of frustration or defeatism that was not in evidence when they were faced with the simpler but equivalent leave.

I discovered that peeling can also be used psychologically, when on one occasion I was playing a doubles match in which an opponent stuck in the penultimate hoop with my partner's ball present and the other two balls out of play. My partner roqueted the opponent ball gently and then peeled it through penultimate before hitting out near my ball on the border. I asked him why he had chosen to assist the opponent by making a hoop for him which he had been trying unsuccessfully to make, and whether he was intending to try to peel the opponent ball again through rover and peg it out.

"Probably not", he replied, "But I want him to think that I might." And for the rest of the game the opponents went to great lengths to keep the peeled ball out of play. If the opponent himself had succeeded in taking his ball to rover or even the peg, I doubt that they would have been so worried about the possibility of us pegging the ball out; but the peel seemed to convince them that we would be desperately trying to do so. They managed to prevent us from pegging the ball out, but hardly made any further hoops. We won the game far more easily than I imagine we would have done without the psychological penultimate peel.

Most players are aware that the pegging out of an opponent's ball can itself have a pronounced psychological effect. Some players foolishly adopt the attitude that once their ball has been pegged out they no longer have any chance of winning, so they give up trying and stop thinking, merely going through the motions while awaiting the inevitable end of the game. Others decide that they have nothing to lose, so they go for everything in more or less desperado fashion. This is certainly preferable to giving up, but the best approach must surely lie somewhere in between.

3.7 Realistic aims

If they miss two or three longish roquets, there are players who instead of trying to work out why the roquets are missing, say "I just can't roquet today", and resign themselves to accepting the inevitable result. Their confidence has been destroyed because they seem to have set themselves the aim of making every roquet, and are expecting too much of themselves. It is far better to set realistic aims which enable you to maintain a positive approach when things start to go wrong. A preferable attitude is the one used by a player I once partnered in a doubles tournament. After missing two 14-yard roquets he said, "I average one out of three at that distance, so there should be no worries about the next one - I'm due for a roquet!" His reasoning may be mathematically unsound, but from a psychological viewpoint it is commendable. He did not get another chance at such a roquet, so I do not know how he would have reacted if he had missed yet again.

In my early playing days I used to set myself the aim in any match I played of making no more than six "errors". I would count it as an error if I missed a roquet of less than 5 yards, or stuck in a hoop that should have easily been made, or went out on a take-off, or on a take-off finished more than 5 yards from the target ball and missed the subsequent roquet. I did not count a poor take-off if I still managed to roquet the target ball, and I did not count poor hoop approaches or split shots, though perhaps I should have.

This meant that I was accepting the fact that I could expect to make a few errors of the type that one "should not make", and so when an error occurred I was less likely to blame myself and dwell on my stupidity to the extent that it affected future shots. Fortunately, my opponents at that level usually made more than six errors, and by maintaining a more positive approach I was able to win many games even when I made more than my allowance of errors. As I improved I was able to realistically reduce my allowance of errors, until eventually it seemed to be no longer needed. It is worth noting that even at the top level it is considered that a player can reasonably allow himself three errors per game and still expect to win most games.

In addition to the times when we set ourselves aims which are too high and unrealistic, there are also times when the goal we set for ourselves is too vague, and so too easily achievable. Many years ago I used to practise with Robert Bartholomaeus, who moved to New Zealand and became one of their

leading players. When playing a roquet of 2-3 feet or making a hoop from a similar distance directly in front, he was not content to simply hit the ball in the general direction and make the roquet or hoop. He always aimed to roquet the target ball dead centre or make the hoop without touching the sides. If he succeeded in achieving his aim, his confidence increased because he knew he had played the shot well. If he did not, then he was able to start thinking about how to correct the slight error in his swing. Such failure did not adversely affect his confidence because he could tell himself that he had still managed to make the hoop or roquet, so in that sense his shot had been successful.

RHYTHM OF SWING

Perhaps it is not obvious to all that there is a particular rhythm which must be achieved in correctly swinging a croquet mallet. For most shots the correct type of swing is one that resembles (but only approximately) a simple pendulum of fixed length (arm plus mallet-shaft) with the force provided by the weight of the mallet and not by the hands, wrists or elbows. "Let the mallet head do the work" is the standard coaching principle.

The laws of physics tell us that once the length of a pendulum is determined, its period (or rhythm of swing) is also determined. There is a fixed time, measurable in seconds, which the pendulum will take to move from the highest point of its swing to the lowest. If the mallet is moved more quickly or more slowly than this set period, then it is no longer operating as the desired simple pendulum. If a player changes the length of the pendulum by moving his hands up or down the mallet shaft, then he should also change the rhythm of his swing. A longer grip requires a slower swing.

4.1 Physiological influences

Our study of nervousness and the mental approach to croquet would be incomplete if we failed to consider the effect of physiological influences. This is most noticeable in relation to the rhythm of swing.

When a person experiences nervousness his body produces more adrenalin which results in various measurable physiological changes in his body. The most noticeable of these changes is a change in the rhythm of his heartbeat. As everyone knows, when you are nervous your heart beats faster.

The school at which I teach is a special music school, and the music teachers tell me that this change in heart beat rhythm due to nervousness is a major problem for performing musicians. The accepted theory is that we unconsciously take our natural rhythm (whatever that is) from our heartbeat. For this reason a nervous performer tends to play a piece of music much faster than he would if he were relaxed. They are quite unaware that they are playing at a different speed from the one they have been using in rehearsals, and wonder why their fingers get tangled up. To counteract this unconscious reliance on heart rhythm the students are advised to spend a few seconds just before a performance listening to a metronome or the ticking of a watch, and from that derive the correct speed or rhythm of the piece they are about to play. Famous musicians and conductors are also reported to have used such means of establishing rhythm, as well as using an actual pendulum or regularly flashing light, etc.

As a musician myself, and having been involved in many performances, I have long been aware of the tendency to unconsciously play faster when nervous, and the need to counteract this tendency by consciously and deliberately slowing down the "natural" rhythm when nervous. This 'heartbeat theory' is the only explanation I have heard which seems to adequately explain the effect.

It seems likely that in croquet the rhythm of swing will also be affected by a change in heart rhythm, and experience suggests that indeed this is so. When nervous, most players tend to hurry the swing. The backswing is shorter than when they are relaxed, and in order to still achieve the required force they tend to push the mallet handle forward with their hands in a 'jabbing' motion instead of letting it swing forward under its own weight. The reason for the shorter backswing, which necessitates

the disastrous push or jab, seems to be that in practice sessions they have developed the habit of moving the mallet backwards for a fixed period of time which is measured internally and unconsciously in terms of heartbeats.

Let us assume, for example, that the backswing normally takes two heartbeats, after which the mallet pauses momentarily and then begins its forward swing. If the heart is beating faster than normal it is obvious that the backswing will be shortened (unless the mallet is moved back at a much greater speed than normal, which does not seem to happen). This means that on the backswing the mallet will not reach its normal height, so will move forward with less gravitational force than normal. The only way to overcome this loss of force and still move the ball the required distance is to provide additional force by pushing with the hands and wrists. Unfortunately, with the hands necessarily in different positions on the mallet shaft it is difficult to co-ordinate their pushing so that the mallet still swings along the desired line of aim, especially since it is something that has not been practised because it is not normally part of the swing. This also explains why judgement of length, as well as direction, is affected by nervousness.

Now that we are aware of the problem and its cause, what can be done about it? I do not know whether there are drugs available which would slow down the heart beat, but in any case they would be undesirable, unnecessary and probably illegal under the new rules governing the use of performance-enhancing drugs in sport.

For most players the problem can be at least partially overcome by reminding yourself at the start of a game, or at any other time when you are aware of feeling some degree of nervousness, that it is necessary to consciously SLOW DOWN AND LENGTHEN the backswing. This should enable you to re-establish the period of the correct simple pendulum swing, thus rendering pushing and jabbing unnecessary.

4.2 mechanics (length of lever)

I have already mentioned above that the period or "rhythm" of swing is determined by the length of the pendulum. This suggests a second possible advantage of shortening the grip slightly in a nervous situation. If the timing of the swing is taken from a faster beating heart, then the shortened period is likely to be closer to correct for a shorter than normal pendulum. The first advantage was explained earlier when we considered ways of coping with nervousness and saw that with a shorter grip any wobbling or shaking is less likely to be magnified in the mallet head. It should be borne in mind that there will be disadvantages of a shorter grip which must also be taken into account before deciding to use it as a partial answer to problems arising from nervousness.

Some players use a swing which resembles the operation of a double (or "compound") pendulum in which the hands swing in pendulum fashion from the shoulders, but the wrists are bent backward during the early part of the swing so that the mallet lags well behind the arm movement. Then as the hands reach a position above the ball the wrists are rapidly bent forward so that the mallet head moves very fast through the ball, swinging in a separate pendulum movement from the hands. It is possible to generate additional force from this 'dual pendulum' type of swing provided the timing is correct; but the reliable synchronisation of the two pendulums can present considerable difficulty.

A nervous player may tend to hurry the swing of the arms so that the second pendulum (the mallet) whose timing is not altered, will tend to lag further behind the hands than normal. This causes the hands to reach a position directly above the ball while the mallet is still in its downswing, resulting in loss of power and causing the ball to jump because it is hit downward onto the ground. You can miss a rush completely due to mistiming if you use this type of swing.

RHYTHM OF BREAK

When playing a break, another type of rhythm can be established. This is a less regular rhythm, but it is a rhythm nevertheless which a player will do well to understand. It comprises the timing of the various actions that are involved in playing the break, such as the speed at which the player walks between shots, the time taken to line up and stalk the shot, the number of practice swings, the length of pause before the player quits his stance after playing a shot, etc.

When I first started watching croquet players in action, I was fascinated by the way some of them seemed to play their breaks in a trance-like state, with a slow-motion robotic type of movement. Everything was done at the same mechanical, unhurried pace. Players like Neil Spooner, Mavis Giles and the late Joyce Gehan spring immediately to mind, and all of these told me in later years that while playing a break they are almost completely oblivious to things going on round about them. Movement becomes more or less automatic as the shots almost seem to "play themselves". The rhythm of the break was quite obvious to even a very inexperienced observer, although I understood nothing of the reasons for it.

Others have little or no established rhythm when making a break. They hustle from one shot to another, then pause in apparent uncertainty, and give the general impression that the break is made up of a series of somewhat jerky and unrelated stop-start movements. A third group tend to start slowly and gather momentum as they go, so that if the break continues long enough (which becomes less and less likely), they end up almost running from shot to shot. Generally, the best players do have their own rhythm, but some good players do not.

I cannot help believing that a definite break rhythm is desirable and should be carefully developed, even though it is certain to be interrupted at times by actions of spectators, opponents, players and balls from the other set, etc. Contrary to expectations, the players with the definite break rhythm are the ones who apparently are best able to cope with such unwelcome interruptions. They seem able to simply snap out of their trance, wait until the interruption has passed, then resume the break rhythm as if nothing had happened. Perhaps their ability to resume the break so easily arises from the fact that they have a definite, established rhythm to return to.

In determining the correct break rhythm for a player to use, there are several factors to be considered:

5.1 Tension release

With the majority of players there is a build-up of tension during a break, especially if a series of shots is played which involve a certain degree of risk. It is important that the break allows sufficient time between shots for all or most of the tension to drain away, so that it does not accumulate to the point where it seriously affects future shots.

5.2 Mental programming

It is also important that the rhythm contain a particular established mental programme for each type of shot. This will involve thinking one at a time through the various things that are essential to ensure the success of the particular shot being played.

For example, when playing a roquet shot of any distance from six inches to right across the lawn, the player will work through a programme such as:

Prepare to stalk the ball.
Check that the grip is correct.
Walk in steadily with eyes fixed on ball.
Take up a comfortable stance.
Check foot positioning.
Check squareness of mallet face.
Observe distance and determine length of backswing.
Practise backswing and check straightness.
Fix eyes on contact point on ball.
Relax shoulders and keep them still from now on.
Take a long, relaxed, slow backswing.
Ensure that hands move forward in correct line.
Reach forward in long, low follow-through.

This may seem like a ridiculously long checklist, especially for a six-inch roquet. However, it is only necessary to DO these things. It is not necessary to think them through and say all of them to yourself before each stroke. With practice, most of these things become automatic so that the player need think consciously about only a few of the points which he is most likely to get wrong. The programme is very much an individual thing, and will be different for each different player. For a croquet shot the player will have a completely different programme of things to consider, check and do. When things are going well the programme can be run through in just a few seconds, but sometimes the player will need to take more time in order to alter something that seems to be not working well enough, or to take into account additional things such as wind, pools of water, slope of lawn, etc., which are not part of his regular programme.

If anything distracts him during this process, the player should stop, pause, and then begin the programme all over again.

It is also important that the same programme be followed in its entirety for even the simplest of shots, for instance the six-inch roquet already mentioned. Why is this necessary when it is hardly conceivable that such a roquet could be missed, even without such detailed preparation? There are at least three good reasons.

Firstly, it is not impossible for even the best of players to miss a six-inch roquet.
Secondly, it preserves the break rhythm by ensuring that each similar shot is prepared for and played in the same way.
Thirdly, it reinforces the programme in the player's mind so that he is less likely to overlook something on a later shot when it may be more critical.

The player is actually using the six-inch roquet to practise his future shots. If he takes the trouble, for example, to check the squareness of his mallet face before EVERY roquet, then it will become an automatic part of his break rhythm, and he will not forget to do it at times when he could easily be distracted by such things as having given a "lift", or a ball left in a hoop, or a spectator's remark, or the approach of the time limit, etc.

5.3 Correction of errors

Before beginning his mental programme and playing any type of shot, the player should form a clear picture in his mind of exactly what he is expecting the ball(s) to do. Then he should pause after playing the shot and reflect briefly on whether or not the shot turned out as expected. If not, he should consider the likely cause of such deviation, even though it may not have had any serious consequence in that particular shot. In this manner he is able to start correcting any slight errors (e.g. the striker's ball going further than expected on croquet shots) before a disaster occurs. The break rhythm, therefore, should include a brief pause for this purpose after playing each shot and BEFORE moving away to play the next shot. This ensures that the player will not be still thinking about what went wrong with the previous shot while playing the current shot. Many a hoop has been missed because the player was still thinking about the not-quite-perfect approach shot; and many a roquet has been missed because the player is still trying to work out why his take-off fell short.

Such errors must certainly be noted and corrected in future shots, but while you are playing the next shot is definitely NOT the time to be thinking about error correction.

5.4 Bearing

Another aspect of break rhythm worth considering is its psychological effect on an opponent. When watching the way that Joyce Gehan, for example, walked onto the lawn, played her break (or one single shot), and walked off again, I could not help being impressed by her 'regal' bearing. She walked around the lawn as if it were her private domain and invariably gave the impression that she had everything under perfect control. Even when she was many hoops behind and had just missed a four-foot roquet she could manage to walk off the lawn in a manner that suggested it was exactly what she had intended to do. Perhaps a modern psychologist would explain this in terms of 'body language'.

Other players have also succeeded in creating an aura of being in complete command, and the psychological effect on an opponent can at times be devastating. I am sure that break rhythm is an important element of the overall effect, as I have never gained such an impression from a player who hustled or hesitated his way around the lawn without establishing a regular rhythm.

5.5 Distractions

We have already noted with some surprise that players with a well-established break rhythm are better able than others to cope with distractions which can interrupt the rhythm.

Such distractions may be deliberate (for example, the opponent calling out, "Did that ball move?" or "haven't you already used that ball?" or "would you get the referee to watch that hoop shot, please?") or accidental (for example, a player or ball from the other set, a wandering dog, etc.). There is no reason why you should allow such interruptions to upset you in any way. Provided you have established a set rhythm, you should be able to pause and take time out for something else, then return to it later. This is similar to the way in which a musician playing a piece with well-established rhythm can easily return to it after a pause; but if the piece has an obscure, jerky ("syncopated") rhythm he will find it far more difficult to get under way again.

It is important, however, that after any interruption the break is not resumed until the cause of the distraction has been completely dealt with and dismissed from the mind of the player. This is why experienced players often ask a player from the other set to play first once the break has been interrupted, even though they were in a break and according to the rules should have been given priority. It can be quite amusing when two such players are both insisting that the other play first, and their insistence is understandable when it is realised that some players find it harder to dismiss the distraction completely from their mind when there is a player from the other set standing alongside waiting for the shot to be played.

PSYCHOLOGY OF TACTICS

Although most of our attention has so far been given to the effect of mental attitudes on stroke production and the playing of breaks, there is little doubt that for the more advanced player it will be in the realm of tactics that wrong mental attitudes do the greatest harm. This is all the more unfortunate in that it is very rare for a player to have any awareness of what is happening. In the case of nervousness the player is at least aware that he has the problem, even if he has no satisfactory solution to it. When a player is using poor tactics resulting from a poor mental approach it can be very difficult to convince him that there is anything wrong with either.

6.1 Risk taking and selective memory

If one is to learn from experience, it is necessary to correctly assess the success or otherwise of tactics used in the past. It is unfortunate that few players are able to make accurate judgements when attributing blame for failure or credit for success, because we are all prone to suffer from what is known as "selective memory".

I became aware of this years ago when I played in my first important tournament. I had a clip on 2-back and started a break with the other ball, taking it all the way to the peg. Later the opponent managed to get in and go to the peg, then peg out my ball, leaving me with the one ball still on 2-back. I eventually lost the game and walked off the lawn to be immediately set upon by a group of old ladies who sympathised with my loss, but explained that in going right to the peg with the second break I was clearly inviting the opponent to peg my ball out, and the result was only what I should have expected.

They were able to quote examples of their own similar experiences, to impress on me that they also had to "learn the hard way" that such a tactic was rash in the extreme.

I was quite unable to follow their reasoning, since I attributed the loss not to the fact that I had gone to the peg, but rather that I had later made several elementary mistakes when I had relatively easy chances to finish the game.

I have come to believe that in such a situation, where a game is lost after going to the peg and having a ball pegged out by the opponent, there is an almost overwhelming tendency to attribute the loss to the fact that you went too far in the break. This is in complete disregard of numerous other factors (for example, poor approach shots, sticking in hoops, missed short roquets, etc.) to which the loss could equally well - in fact far more reasonably - have been attributed.

The problem seems to be that these other factors are relatively commonplace, so do not stick in the mind. The one memorable feature of the game was the all-round break, so that is selected by the mind as the cause of what happened. It is rather curious that when a player in a similar situation stops at rover or penultimate and subsequently loses the game, he never seems to attribute the loss to the fact that he failed to make the hoops when he could have done so. This is true even when he loses by only the one or two hoops.

I am certain that I am far more likely to lose a game by NOT going to the peg when I could have, than by going to it when I should not have done so. I am also convinced that provided my other clip is past 1-back (so that my opponent will not receive contact and stands to receive only one more 'lift'), I give myself the best possible chance of winning the game by going right to the peg, regardless of the position of my opponent's clips. This may not be true for players in lower divisions, but is certainly true for those who are capable of playing all-round breaks.

There are many other situations where selective memory is in evidence. It is quite common for a player to attempt a slightly angled hoop, stick in it, and later blame this for the loss of the game. This is in spite of the numerous other errors made by both sides. "I knew I shouldn't have attempted it", he will say, and you know that next time he is faced with such a hoop shot he will elect to run away from it. The trouble with this reasoning is that when he in future chooses not to attempt the hoop and still loses, he will not attribute his loss to his failure to try the hoop, and say, as indeed he ought, "I should have tried the hoop when I had the chance."

Thus we always tend to attribute blame to the risks we took (unsuccessfully) rather than to the risks we failed to take. This is no doubt due to the fact that the effect of the failed risk is usually immediate and graphic, whereas the equally serious effect of running away from a risky shot is often only seen in the longer term and is easily attributable to the opponent's good play rather than our own poor tactics. It is also less damaging to the ego to admit that we have been outplayed (or better still, out-fluked) rather than out-thought!

Selective memory plays a part in colouring our assessment of the tactics used by other players as well as our own tactics. When watching a game, we tend to attribute a loss to the poor tactics of the loser, and a win to the good shots of the winner. Thus we say of the loser, "He shouldn't have set up near the opponent's hoop", or "He should have used the other ball"; while we say of the winner, "He was able to hit a couple of long roquets at critical times", or "He ran his hoops extremely well". Even here we are not really commending the winner on his willingness to attempt the roquets and hoops - we are merely commenting on his good fortune that the risks came off.

It is because of these and many other similar ways in which selective memory affects our assessment of risk-taking tactics that most players become more cautious in their play as they gain in experience. Unfortunately such caution is derived from fallacious reasoning and leads to the spurious conclusion that the way to win is to play good shots and avoid taking risks. While the first half of the conclusion is undeniably true, the second half is certainly not. How, then, is the problem of selective memory to be overcome? Perhaps in the future there will be professional players with paid coaches who record in detail every move of a game so that it can later be analysed with complete objectivity. Until then, we must continue to depend on our memories. We should at least realise the dangers involved so that we can try to be more objective and take everything into account before apportioning credit or blame.

To further illustrate these points, let us consider the common type of position shown in diagram 5.

All clips are still on the first hoop, and you are playing with the black and blue balls. Your opponent has just approached the hoop with your blue ball, but did not gain position to run the hoop, so has hit out about three feet from his partner ball on the east border. Your black ball is on the north border roughly in front of the third hoop. What will you do? Even if there is a good double target on offer, few players would seriously entertain the thought of shooting at it with the black ball, because of the obvious risk involved. A miss would present the opponent with an easy nine hoops. Neither would most consider shooting at the opponent's balls with blue, since he does not at present have a rush to his hoop. A missed shot with blue at black would allow the opponent to play red, rushing yellow to the third corner and sending it to hoop 2 before rushing one of your balls to hoop 1, again with nine hoops as the likely outcome.

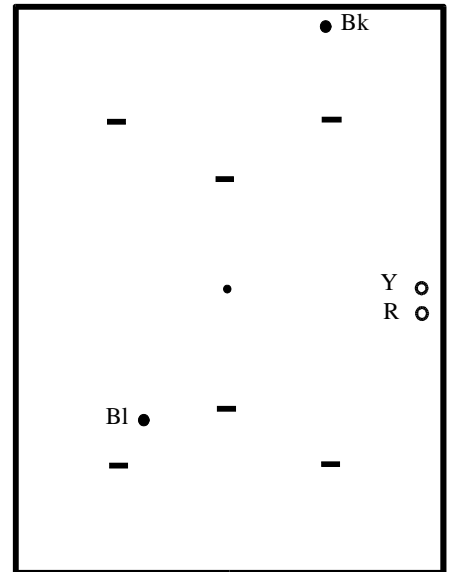


Diagram 5

Most elect to play for "safety" by hitting blue into the first corner. But what is likely to be the outcome of this "safety" play? The opponent will play red and cut-rush yellow to a position on the north border near black. Then he will rush black to hoop 2, being careful to leave yellow about six inches (15cm) in from the yard-line. This will be followed by a take-off to blue in the first corner and a roll for hoop 1. The roll may not be successful, but in this case he can hit back to the north border near yellow with a rush set to black at hoop 2.

(Note that he could have done the same if blue were in the fourth corner, or any other "safe" place, as well as having the option of playing yellow instead of red.) This would leave you in a worse position (diagram 6) than you were in originally. Now the opponent is threatening to make a 3-ball break on his next turn whichever ball you move, and any missed attempt at a roquet will give him the fourth ball as well. There is little sense in again playing blue into a corner and sitting down to watch him make the nine hoops, so you are forced to take a shot and hope for the best.

In retrospect it becomes obvious (to us, but probably not to a player in a game) that you should have taken a shot in the original position instead of playing for so-called "safety". We can now see that there was nothing "safe" about hitting the blue ball into a corner. It merely served to delay the opponent's break by one or two turns, but made it all the more certain, because you are passing up one or more chances to roquet and allowing him to eventually get the break going without having been subject to any risk at all.

If both players are capable of making breaks, then in the original position a roquet should certainly have been attempted. It would be reasonable to shoot with black if you assess your chance

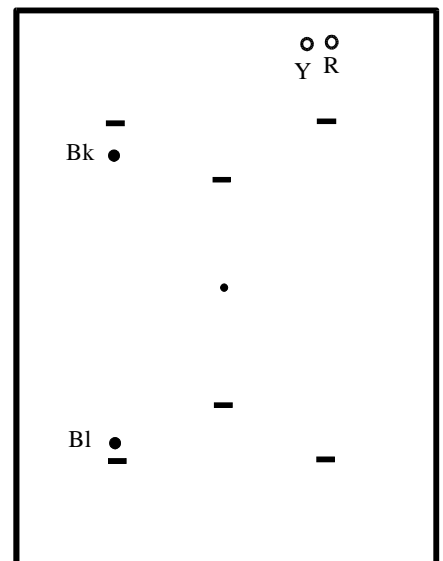


Diagram 6

of hitting the double target at better than 50%. Otherwise you should shoot with blue at yellow. (There is more to be considered than we have covered here, and the reasons for shooting at yellow rather than red belong in a book on tactics rather than one on psychology.)

For our purposes, the position just considered illustrates the fact that many players feel they have achieved something if they have managed to "put off the evil day" when the opponent achieves his break, even if in so doing they have made it more certain.

Suppose that in the position shown in diagram 5 you had played blue into the first corner, after which your opponent had been successful in rolling for the first hoop and making the nine hoops as suggested. Would you recognise your error in failing to shoot with blue at yellow? Probably not. You are far more likely to attribute the nine hoops to the opponent's skill (or good fortune) in gaining position to run hoop 1 on the roll from the corner. This is an excellent example of the type of trick our memory can play on us in assessing the reason for a disaster, as it completely overlooks the fact that he had an excellent chance of making the nine hoops, whether the roll was successful or not.

What, then, should be our attitude to risk-taking? Should we simply go out and take each and every manner of risk regardless of the possible consequences? Not at all. Such an approach in most players would lead to a desperado-type, 'devil-may-care' attitude which results in carelessness and inability to concentrate. We frequently see players taking risks that should definitely NOT be taken. A full consideration of the intricacies of this topic is outside the scope of this booklet, but we can at least state two clear and reliable general principles:

1. When you have the innings, be prepared to take any reasonable risk which if successful will give you a break, but do not take risks from which you stand to gain only one hoop with nothing set up ahead.
2. Conversely, when you do not have the innings, take any risk which could gain you the innings provided that if it is unsuccessful the opponent stands to gain only one hoop, or in order to set up a break he will have to play a series of difficult or very accurate shots.

In the position considered previously (diagram 5), a player who follows the second of these principles would correctly opt to shoot with blue at one of the opponent's balls, without having to reason his way through the long process of justification given above.

Perhaps we should again emphasise that the two principles given above apply only when both players are likely to make large breaks if given a reasonable chance. There is little point in taking a risk to set up a break if you do not have the shots necessary to keep it going, nor to prevent a break which the opponent is unlikely to be able to sustain for long.

6.2 Acceptance of percentage play

Another area of tactics where psychology plays a part is the ability of a player to accept the concept of basing his tactics on percentages. The way in which percentages should be estimated or calculated and used as a basis for developing a tactical approach is explained in detail in my booklet "Next Break Strategy" which deals with advanced tactics. Here we will consider only some interesting facts about the way in which players view, and often reject, the idea of percentage play.

Some years ago The Australian Croquet Gazette published an article by Stan Hall, a leading N.S.W. player and theoretician and a professor of mathematics, in which he proved that when shooting at two balls up to 18 inches apart and 15 or more yards away, you should aim at a point midway between the two balls and actually try to go through the gap. This gives you a better percentage chance of roqueting than if you aim at one or other of the balls.

Although they accept Stan's conclusion, I have found that many players are unable to make themselves do it at a critical stage in an important game. Somehow it does not seem right to be trying as hard as you can to do something that you do not really want to succeed. One player explained, "If I did manage to go through the middle I would be mentally kicking myself for the rest of the game." Being a mathematician myself and able to follow through in detail Stan's argument, I find no such difficulty about deliberately aiming to go through the middle. If I happen to achieve the unwanted success, I tell myself that at least it was an accurate shot, and aiming differently would have given less chance of roqueting.

We have already noted that many players have a mental approach which makes it difficult for them to take risks, even when it can be clearly demonstrated that in taking the risk they are giving themselves the best possible chance of winning the game. It seems impossible to convince them that in fact "playing safe" is more risky than taking a chance in many situations.

On many occasions when playing doubles games I have had difficulty convincing my various partners that in positions such as that shown in diagram 7, with all clips on the first hoop, they should shoot with red at the black ball in the first corner. They insist that the shot is "too risky" and instead want to "play safe" and make the hoop immediately from yellow.

I point out that they could expect to make the 5-yard roquet at least 8 times out of 10, and they usually agree on this point. Then I argue that if they make the hoop immediately they will have virtually no chance of setting up a break before allowing the opponents one or more roquets which we could expect them to make at least 2 times out of 10. Therefore by taking the shot at black we give ourselves, say, an 85% chance of an immediate break, while making the first hoop immediately cannot be expected to give us more than about a 60-70% chance of getting a break going before the opponents do. The logic is irrefutable, but even so my partners are frequently unconvinced that shooting at black is much the safest course of action, in the sense that it minimises our chance of losing the game.

A friend with whom I sometimes practise is also dubious about taking chances such as the one described, but for a different reason. When I explain to him that he could expect to hit the roquet at least eight times out of ten, he says, "Yes, that may be so, but I am not going to get ten chances to hit it. I will only have one chance which I have to hit. I need to be able to make one roquet out of one, which is 100%!" Unless all croquet players are required to pass an examination in the laws and applications of mathematical probability, there will always be players whose psychological makeup leads them to erroneous conclusions like this one.

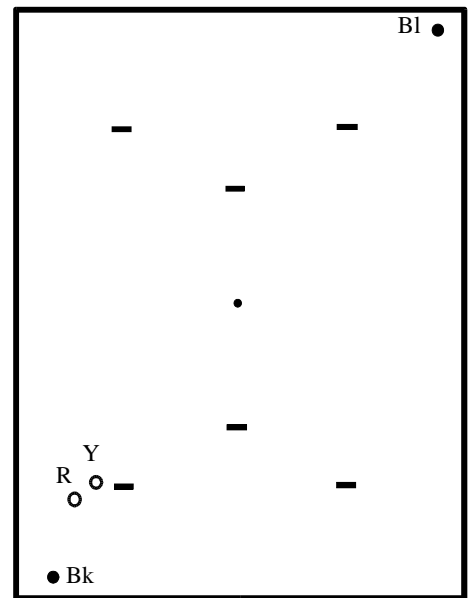


Diagram 7

Betty Roberts, a strong player at the Broadview club where I am a member, has her own unique method of using percentages. When faced with the need to make a somewhat risky roquet she says, "Well, I can either hit or miss, so at least I have a 50% chance!" Her reasoning is fallacious from a mathematical point of view, but psychologically it is of value if it allows her to attempt the shot in a more relaxed frame of mind.

We have noted earlier the fact that a player who uses tactics based on an objective assessment of percentages has a ready-made element of confidence built into his mental approach. I may not have any great confidence in my ability to make correct subjective judgements, nor in my ability to swing a croquet mallet in a straight line, but there is no doubt that my confidence in the laws of mathematical probability is well founded!

PSYCHOLOGICAL DISTRACTORS

There is much scope for research into the effects which certain physical perceptions can have on the brain of a croquet player.

(My wife, who strenuously resists all temptation to play the game, cannot think of anything more futile than attempting research into the brains of croquet players, and suggests that "search" would need to come before "research".)

Here I will suggest two of the many areas in which I believe, in spite of my wife's opinions, that research could prove fruitful and of benefit to players.

7.1 Distraction by a ball

An interesting situation commonly occurs in which a player has sent an opponent ball to hoop 2 and plays an unsuccessful approach shot for hoop 1 with his partner ball. With the partner ball behind the hoop and a little to one side, the first thought is to cover the boundary against the opponent's shot with his ball from hoop 2. If this is not practical, the usual procedure is to sit in front of the hoop so that there is only one ball that the opponent has a chance of roqueting.

However, one player I know prefers to give himself a rush with both balls open to the opponent's shot and 4-5 feet apart as in diagram 8. He claims that the second ball tends to act as a "distractor", so that the opponent is less likely to roquet with two balls to choose from than with only one, provided they are set the right distance apart. I do not know whether or not this theory is true. It does not seem altogether unreasonable, so should not be dismissed out of hand. Perhaps the answer depends to a great extent on the ability and mental approach of the opponent. In any case, it seems that it ought to be possible to conduct tests which may enable some more definite statement to be made on the question of whether or not balls can be useful "distractors" in certain positions.

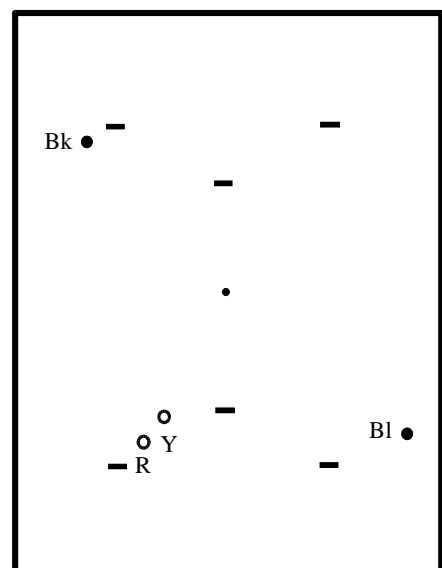


Diagram 8

7.2 Distraction by a line

My friend Tom Armstrong once pointed out to me that in certain situations a line can also act as a distractor. You can test this out yourself by measuring a target ball onto the yard-line on the south border in front of hoop 1 and asking a number of friends to play a roll shot from the same yardline directly behind hoop 4, as shown in diagram 9. They are to send the croqueted ball to hoop 1 and the striker's ball as close as possible to the ball on the border in front of hoop 1. It is amazing how many players will roll the striker's ball out of court. If they were asked to play the same shot in a different part of the lawn they would not experience the same difficulty.

I gained an insight into why this may be so when one day I was playing a tennis match on unfamiliar courts and found that every time I tried to hit a backhand passing shot up the sideline it finished well out of court. Even though I knew it was happening I found it very difficult to correct the error. Then I realised that there was a clubhouse which ran fairly close alongside the court, and it was built so that it ran almost parallel to the court, but not quite. The building was about 3 feet further from the sideline at the far end of the court than at the near end. Somehow, I was unconsciously using the line of the clubhouse in lining up my passing shots, and it was acting as a distractor, tending to drag the balls out of court. It transpired that many visiting players experienced the same problem with backhands from that end of the court.

This suggested to me that the boundary line on the croquet court may be acting as a distractor for the player lining up the roll shot. He needs to take note of the angle between the directions in which the two balls will travel and choose his point of aim (that is, direction of swing) accordingly. However, it is not easy to ignore the boundary line which is fairly close to one of the arms of the required angle. This tends to make the angle look wider than it actually is, and can cause the player to choose a point of aim halfway between the hoop and the boundary, instead of halfway between the hoop and the yard-lined ball. All of this may be merely my imagination, but nevertheless it has made me particularly wary of roll shots in which the striker's ball is to travel parallel to and close to a border. Whether the explanation is correct or not, there is no doubt that the striker's ball has an unnerving tendency to finish out of court unless particular care is taken to ensure that the line of aim is correct.

I have a suspicion that there are many other situations in which balls, lines, hoops or the peg can act as distractors. Most of us are aware that hoops often seem to have a strange magnetic attraction for a ball that is not supposed to go anywhere near them - or is this just another example of selective memory? - and many players find that when they line up an angled hoop shot and concentrate on making sure that the ball misses the near hoop leg, this very concentration seems to affect the line of swing. The hoop leg seems to act as a distractor. For this reason they may need to use a different method of lining up the hoop shot, and avoid fixing any attention on the hoop leg at all.

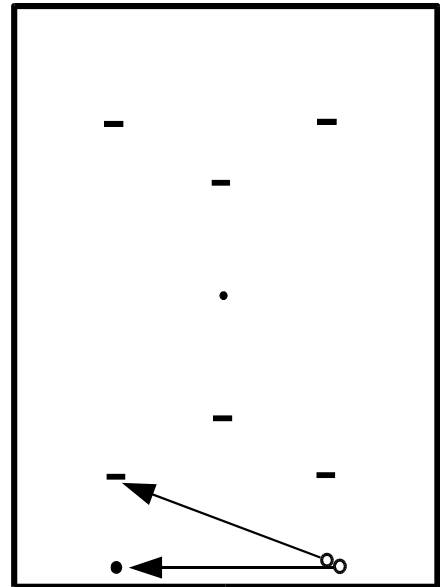


Diagram 9

ILLUSIONS

Another way in which the mind of a croquet player may be misled can perhaps best be described under the heading of 'illusions'.

(a) judgement of distance

There has been controversy since time immemorial concerning the correct method of choosing the point of aim (i.e. direction of swing) in croquet shots. Some insist that you should "halve the angle" between the directions in which the two balls are to travel. Others are equally adamant that you should "halve the distance" between the positions where the two balls will finish. When the balls travel roughly equal distances there is no problem, since both methods yield approximately the same aiming point. For stopshots or pass-rolls, however, as well as for other croquet shots in which one ball travels noticeably further than the other, there is quite a difference, and both cannot be correct.

From the laws of physics "parallelogram of forces" and mathematics "the diagonals of a parallelogram bisect each other" there is no doubt that halving the distance, rather than the angle, is theoretically correct. Why, then, do players still persist in "halving the angle"?

The answer lies in the fact that there is a type of optical illusion which makes it difficult to judge accurately distances along a line which slopes diagonally across our field of vision. To test this, remove the peg from the lawn and while standing at hoop 2 try to pick out a point which is midway between hoop 3 and hoop 4. Even with the peg there to help them most players choose a point much closer to hoop 3 than hoop 4. This is because if the correct mid-point is marked, the nearer half will appear greater than the half which is further away. Everyone realises that although the sun and moon appear about the same size in the sky, the sun appears smaller than it really is because it is so far away, and the moon appears larger than it should in relation to the sun because it is closer. But not everyone is aware that the same illusion affects our judgement of distances on the croquet lawn.

For this reason a player who plays a split shot from hoop 2 to hoops 3 and 4 and SAYS he is choosing his point of aim by halving the distance between the hoops will often actually be aiming at a point which is close to that chosen by someone else who claims to be halving the angle. Thus the illusion causes both players once again to aim at roughly the same point. This turns out reasonably well, since the striker's ball is affected by 'pull' (caused by follow-through) to a greater extent than the croqueted ball. To allow for this 'pull', which the aforementioned laws of physics did not take into account, it is necessary to move the point of aim from the midpoint a little toward the finishing point of the striker's ball.

However, in pass rolls the illusion will work in reverse, causing the player who 'halves the distance' to move his aiming point AWAY from where the striker's ball is going, when the allowance for 'pull' requires that it should be moved TOWARD the finishing point of the striker's ball. If he is not aware of what is happening this could make the player start to lose faith in the laws of physics at least inasmuch as they apply to the behaviour of croquet balls. His only consolation will be that his friend who insists on halving the angle will in this case be even further astray in trying to find the correct aiming point.

(b) double targets

A similar effect, caused by the same type of illusion, is seen when a player takes his ball to a baulk and places it so as to have a double target on two balls, one of which is further away than the other. He will normally try to place the ball so that if it travels in a straight line it will not quite be able to pass between the two target balls without hitting one of them. However, we frequently see that the striker's ball does, in fact, somehow manage to fit through the impossible gap. Players often explain this by claiming that the ball jumped or curved due to irregularities in the lawn; but the true reason is more likely to lie in the fact that when we are placing the striker's ball on the baulk it is much closer to us than either of the two target balls, making it appear larger than the gap between them. Perhaps the player should place his striker's ball alongside the nearer of the two target balls and then view it from the baulk in order to select a suitable position which he could 'mark' by leaving his mallet there while he retrieves his ball. I have never tried this procedure, and am not sure of its legality since it could possibly be construed as using a ball as a "trial" ball. In any case, it may well not turn out to have any noticeable advantages.

(c) cannons

In connection with cannons there are two 'illusions' worthy of mention. The first is in the judgement of the strength required. As with cut-rushes, there is a very strong tendency to underestimate the force required, so that the balls fall far short of their intended finishing places. This may be caused by overlooking the fact that there is a third (striker's) ball which has no desired finishing position, but nevertheless requires force to move it. Most players, at least until they have practised the shot many times, tend to use the same amount of force that would be needed for a split shot in which two balls only are sent to the same places.

The second illusion arises from a method used in teaching players how to arrange the balls for various cannons. It is now common to refer to coin sizes in order to convey an idea of the correct gap between the two non-touching balls, and I think this was another of Tom Armstrong's innovations. However, it is forbidden under the rules of the game to actually use a coin when arranging a cannon, so the size of the coin has to be judged. For some reason which I have not yet been able to adequately explain, players seem to invariably underestimate coin sizes. If you ask a player to arrange the balls so that there is a "ten-cent gap" between them, you will almost certainly find that the gap he produces will not even go close to accommodating a ten-cent piece. This phenomenon need not present a problem, provided the teacher allows for it by naming a coin larger than the gap he actually wants, but if the student then decides to use actual coins when practising the various arrangements, he may find that the balls do not behave as expected.

PSYCHOLOGY OF CHEATING

This may seem a strange topic to deal with, but there is no doubt that cheating can have a marked psychological effect on the opponent, if not on the player who is cheating.

(a) guilt feelings

For most players the knowledge that you have gained an unfair advantage, even inadvertently, leads to feelings of guilt and concern as to whether there may be lasting damage to a hitherto good reputation.

In a semi-final of the 1990 Port Pirie championship singles tournament I was playing against Dean Paterson, a member of the state team, and found myself in such a situation. I had left Dean's balls near hoop 2 and the peg, and had roqueted my red partner ball in the first corner. I decided to set a rush on the south border, wired by hoop 1 from the ball near the peg. I rolled the short distance along the border from the corner, but red went too far and came to rest where it was not wired, so after some deliberation I placed yellow so that red had an exact rush to the ball near the peg, which therefore would have only a single ball target.

Dean, who had been sitting at the far end of the lawn behind hoop 2, came onto the lawn and decided to shoot at my rush, even though there was no double target. He missed, but on measuring his ball in found that my red ball was misplaced. We consulted the referee, who ruled correctly that Dean had played with a ball misplaced, and there is no remedy. This seemed rather hard on Dean, who could hardly have been expected to walk right down and check that I had correctly yard-lined the balls at the end of my turn. The fault was entirely mine and I had gained an unfair advantage, yet under the rules nothing could be done about it.

I then asked the referee whether, with my agreement, he would allow us to replace the balls correctly so that Dean could play the shot again. He readily consented to this and complimented me on my display of good sportsmanship. Dean roqueted on the second attempt, but I still managed to win the game fairly easily.

In actual fact I must confess that my action in requesting that Dean be allowed a replay was prompted by psychological considerations rather than good sportsmanship, although I would like to think that a sense of fair play would have led me to take the same action even without psychology being a factor.

I did not wish to play the remainder of the game with the knowledge that I had gained an unfair advantage which everyone would have been talking and whispering about. In such a situation it would be almost impossible to relax and play well. I preferred to play with the warm feeling that came from having earned everyone's respect (even if not entirely deserved) for my "fairness and good sportsmanship".

The unfortunate incident thus affected Dean more than it affected me; but this would probably not have been so if I had simply accepted the referee's ruling and played on as I was entitled to do. The great majority of experienced croquet players are quick to declare that they have left a still ball

or made a double tap, etc., and would prefer to be placed at a disadvantage rather than have someone think they had gained an unfair advantage even unintentionally. In most cases this preference arises from an appreciation of psychology, and does not necessarily support the contention that croquet players possess any greater sense of honesty than other members of the community.

(b) inadvertent cheating

Another type of inadvertent cheating occurs when a player is completely unaware that he is committing faults by pushing ('shepherding') his rolls, double-tapping on hoop approaches, leaving still balls, etc. Perhaps it should not be termed "cheating" when the player genuinely does not realise he is doing it, but this is little consolation to an opponent who believes that the player in question is gaining an advantage from such actions.

It is quite rare for players at higher levels to complain about opponents committing such faults. This is not because such things do not occur at the higher levels of play, but because the player knows full well that there is little to gain by making a complaint, and there is much to lose psychologically. Some years ago an experienced player commented to me during a game that her opponent was 'shepherding' her ball on most hoop approaches. I watched for a while, and there was no doubt that many of the approaches did involve a rather blatant 'push'. I asked why she had not complained to the opponent about it and asked that all future hoop approaches be watched by the referee.

"There is little point in doing that", she explained, "It is probably due to the fact that this is a much faster lawn than she usually plays on. She is not aware that she is doing it and would probably think I am complaining simply in order to upset her. She is not gaining any advantage from it, anyway. She is quite capable of playing hoop approaches without pushing, and if the referee is called to watch it would only make her take greater care over her shots. She is experienced enough not to be too upset by having a referee standing nearby, and it would probably end up affecting my game more than hers. After the game I will suggest that she consider changing her action slightly in case someone queries her shots."

This attitude is a particularly wise one, and I recommend it as objectively the best way of handling any similar situation. Players who 'double tap' also rarely gain any advantage, since it is hard enough to control one hit in a stroke without introducing a second one to complicate things. Players who leave still balls often find their take-offs going too far and are unlikely to play them with greater control, since they are expecting the croqueted ball to move. If you understand this you will be able to prevent yourself from getting worked up about such faults committed unknowingly by your opponent. When you realise that the opponent is actually putting himself at a disadvantage in most cases, you can see why most experienced players prefer to say nothing and avoid creating tension whose effect on both players may be unpredictable. If the opponent who is leaving still balls is about to play a long diagonal corner takeoff, you can ask him to have a referee watch it because in this case there could be a considerable advantage if the croqueted ball does not move; but all such long corner takeoffs should be watched by a referee anyway.

(c) deliberate cheating

We have seen that in croquet there are good psychological reasons to support the old adage "cheats never prosper". However, it must be acknowledged that there are exceptions to the rule. On rare occasions you can expect to encounter a habitual cheat. Such players are so few that they are well known, and their reputation usually precedes them. They are able to cheat deliberately in a way that has become more or less automatic, so that they apparently no longer experience feelings of guilt about the unfair advantages they are gaining. This can present you with a real problem in how to handle the situation, as they will hotly deny any claim you make about their unfair actions. The resultant unpleasantness is almost certain to affect your game adversely while the cheat has become hardened to such accusations which, of course, he has heard many times before.

If you believe that you are capable of beating such a player in spite of his cheating, then it may be best to say nothing until the game is over, but make sure that the referee and as many influential people as possible are aware of what is happening so that he can be warned not to try the same sort of thing in future games. If you believe the advantage he is gaining is such that it must be stopped, then you face the difficulty of finding a way of dealing with it without creating a situation in which you are likely to become worked up and tense.

In some cases a referee may be available to witness what is going on, and willing to step in and say something, so that you can remain aloof from the situation. On other occasions it may be possible to deal with it in a semi-humorous manner.

I once played a tournament game on a lawn which had many tufts of grass and shallow depressions, particularly along the edges. Every time I took off to my opponent's balls and tried to rush one of them, it would be in a depression so that it was almost impossible to rush properly. I wondered why my opponent did not seem to encounter the same difficulty with his rushes. He was an older gentleman and seemed rather unsteady on his feet as he walked around the lawn, which surprised me since I had not noticed him walking in such a stumbling fashion at other times.

It took some time before I realised what was happening. Whenever he measured one of his balls in, he would make sure that it was placed in a depression. Later, when he himself wanted to rush one of his balls, he would 'accidentally' fall over it or kick it, then have to replace it. The ball would be replaced so that the rush presented no problem. I watched in fascination as this occurred several times. The next time I needed to rush a ball from a depression I 'accidentally' fell over it myself. "I must be getting clumsy in my old age", I remarked, as I replaced the ball where I could rush it to my hoop. He realised that I was aware of his little game, and from then on made sure that his balls were measured in correctly and remained as placed.

On another occasion I was watching a game played by a lady who was a reasonably strong player, well known for her failure to declare still balls and her regular claiming of roquets that in fact missed by several inches. She shot across the lawn at a ball near where her opponent and I were sitting. The ball missed by an inch or so, but as the opponent stood up to begin her turn, the player called out, "That was a roquet. Didn't you see it? It just tickled the blue ball."

"If you say so, dearie", said the opponent as she resumed her seat, "I would never doubt the word of someone with such wonderful eyesight!" The cheat was suitably embarrassed and seemed unable to get her game together from then on.

Unfortunately the right thing to say does not always come to mind. The important thing is that if you do decide to take action about your opponent's deliberate cheating, you must do it in a way that will leave him embarrassed and unable to continue with what he was doing, while avoiding the generation of any heat which could affect your own game.

I have been the victim of deliberate cheating on several other occasions, as have most players. A comprehensive list of such unfair tactics would make interesting and educational reading, but is not within the scope of this booklet. When it is a one-off thing and you have no evidence to support a complaint to the referee, you can do nothing more than put it down to experience.

On one occasion, for example, I carefully wired my opponent's balls at my partner ball's hoop, checked that he had no possible chance of roqueting one with the other, and rushed my partner ball to set up in a far corner. While I was doing this a player from the other set lifted one of the balls I had wired, although the shot she played did not go within yards of the lifted ball. Then she replaced the ball and my opponent, who by coincidence happened to be her husband, walked onto the lawn and roqueted the ball dead centre. I was flabbergasted, and could only stammer, "I thought I wired them". Since that time I have watched the actions of that husband and wife team very closely whenever they were playing on the same lawn.

(d) time wasting

Perhaps this should have been dealt with in the section on 'illusions'. I have frequently heard players complaining that their opponent is wasting time toward the end of a time-limited game, but in at least 90% of such cases I could not see any evidence that the opponent was taking more time than he was entitled to. The normal actions of a player just SEEM to be taking longer when you are behind, the scores are close, and you can almost hear the seconds ticking away. Perhaps the quickened heart rate that we mentioned previously also affects our judgement of time.

It is in fact reasonable in such a situation for the opponent to take more care over his shots than he was doing previously, since any slight error at this stage is likely to decide the result of the game. It is similarly understandable that he should give more thought to his tactics before deciding on a course of action.

Your best chance when you are behind in such a situation is to simply grin and bear it. If there is evidence that the time wasting is blatant and deliberate, then the referee is able to warn the offender and, if necessary, add time on to that allowed for the game. However, a referee should be very wary about taking such action for reasons we have mentioned in the previous two paragraphs.

If you are the player who is ahead, you must not allow yourself to be hustled into error or distracted by your opponent's comments to the effect that time is short. If my opponent does make such a comment, I always make a point of taking longer over the next shot in order to allow any tension to drain away. I usually stop and say, "Please keep your comments to yourself, or make them so that I cannot hear them. I will not be hustled. I will take as much time as I need to work out what I want to do and check through the things I need to take into consideration when playing the shot. I am USING the time, not WASTING it. If you are not happy about it, please call the referee, and if he thinks I am gaining an unfair advantage he is welcome to add extra time on to the game."

It is my personal belief that almost all complaints about time wasting simply display the ignorance of the complainer as to the many things that a player should take into consideration in a tense situation. Those who complain about an opponent 'wasting time' are almost always high-bisquers. Leading players understand the situation and accept it unhappily, but without complaint.

My personal attitude is that the way to prevent your opponent from deliberately wasting time is to be in front. If I am behind and my opponent seems to be taking longer than might be expected over some of his shots, I simply put it down as the well-deserved penalty for my previous bad play. This seems far preferable to allowing the pressure of disappearing time to become uppermost in my mind, so that even if I am given another chance my nerves will not be in any suitable state to cope with it.

Similarly, do not allow yourself to be upset in any way if your opponent, who is behind in the scores, starts to hurry and run between shots. He is quite entitled to do so if he thinks there is more to gain than lose by it. There is no justification for regarding his actions as a display of poor sportsmanship unless he also tries to force you into hurrying your shots.

PSYCHOLOGY OF PRACTISING

When players are questioned about the subject, we find that their psychological approach to practice varies considerably. Some have a psychological makeup which seems to preclude all except the most casual and brief type of practice, while others spend many hours each week alone on the croquet lawn.

While it is tempting to regard a player as lazy when he has the time to practise but seems to lack the inclination, we should bear in mind that if they became serious about practising some players would find it impossible to remain relaxed during matches. They need to adopt a casual type of approach to the game as a whole, which includes and affects their attitude to practising.

It is hardly surprising that players who play the game for social reasons, rather than as a serious competitive sport, usually do not practise at all. There are, however, some points to be made which may be of importance to those who wish to improve their game for whatever reason.

(a) Set definite goals.

Practice should be planned to at least some extent, in order to ensure that real benefit is derived from the time spent. It is an interesting fact that many players are only willing to practise the things they can already do well. One player explained the reason: "By practising the things I am good at I can build up my confidence. If I keep trying to do things I can't manage very well I become frustrated and lose confidence in my game."

We have already seen how important a factor confidence is in any croquet game, but it seems that the confidence developed by adopting this sort of approach to practice will only be in evidence when

the player is playing shots of the type he has practised. Thus it is likely to lead to the development of a style in which the player relies on a very limited range of shots which he can play quite well, and avoids all temptation to play shots of the type he has not practised.

Improvement is far more likely to be evident in the player who is aware of the weaknesses in his game and sets about remedying them; although in order to maintain confidence he should also spend time quickly running through the things he is good at. It is important to enlist the aid of a competent coach to ensure that you are practising things the right way. There are many players who have spent years practising shots with incorrect grip, stance or swing. In this manner they have managed to develop bad habits which are very difficult to eradicate.

Practice sessions should not be too long. Three sessions per week of about 45 minutes each will be far more effective than spending one whole morning per week practising. If the session becomes too long it is impossible to maintain full concentration. Some of the shots will inevitably be played carelessly, and again bad habits can be developed.

I know of a leading player who would spend a whole day practising one shot. He would run a hoop 200 times from one foot directly in front, then 200 more times from two feet, and 200 more from three feet, etc. There was little noticeable improvement in his hoop running under pressure in matches as a result of this. I cannot help but think that such inordinately lengthy practice sessions are likely to be counter-productive. He would have done better to set himself a definite and achievable goal, e.g. to run the hoop ten times out of ten from one foot out, nine out of ten from two feet, eight out of ten from three feet, etc., up to five feet. Even this would involve 50 practice shots at a hoop, which may well be too many for most players in the one practice session. An alternative goal could be to run the hoop five times out of ten from two feet out, without touching the sides. As soon as concentration begins to wane the player should end the session or change to practising a completely different skill. There is little point in practising hoops longer than five feet. The time would be better spent in practising approach shots to ensure that in a match you do not need to attempt hoops longer than five feet.

(b) Practise success, not failure

Colin Pickering, who could lay claim at the time of writing to being the strongest player in Australia, regularly practised roquets. He did this by placing balls a few yards apart and roqueting one with the other dead centre. He concentrated on developing a perfectly straight swing (including backswing and follow-through). He did not practise longer roquets, or shooting at the peg from the edge of the lawn as many players did, as he said that such players were 'practising failure', since they will miss the peg more often than they will hit it. There is much sense in his approach. If you wish to practise longer shots, then you should at least set yourself an achievable target, e.g. of hitting the peg three times in ten shots, so that if you manage to do this there will be a clear sense of having succeeded.

(c) Practise the right things

After a game in which they stuck in several difficult hoops, players will often spend time practising their hoop shots. In actual fact the problem may not lie in their inability to run hoops, but in one

or more of the shots played prior to the attempt at running the hoop. The approach shots may have been unsatisfactory, or the rushes may have been poor, causing the approach to be made from too far out. More importantly still, it may be that the player needs to practise split shots in which he concentrates on accurate placement of the croqueted ball at future hoops, so that when he later comes to make the hoop he will not need to rush a ball to it or play a long approach shot.

One of my favourite practice exercises involves playing a continuous three-ball 'break' in which I make the four corner hoops several times around, without going up the centre of the lawn. I concentrate on placing the croqueted ball accurately at each hoop, instead of concentrating mainly, as most players do, on the striker's ball. When running each hoop I try to get a rush to the next hoop, but I do not take the rush, preferring to roquet the ball gently and practise the split shot from each hoop to the next two. In a match, of course, I would take the rush and regard it as a bonus, which seems to help develop a confident mental approach.

(d) Use repetition to ensure retention of skills

We have already mentioned the need for repetition in order to ensure that the skill being developed becomes firmly fixed in the mind. Many players 'practise' by simply going out and playing a game with themselves, playing all four balls. This seems to be an inefficient use of time, as no particular skill is being developed, other than possibly establishing a 'break rhythm'.

It is surprising that players give so little thought to planning their practice sessions, but complain about having insufficient time available for practice. It would seem that if their available time is as limited as they claim, then they should be taking far more care to ensure that the time they do spend on the lawn is used to the greatest possible advantage. Take-offs are never deliberately practised, stop-shots rarely, and only one or two cannons are practised occasionally. The take-off from a corner to the diagonally opposite corner needs regular practice, as does a stop-shot which sends one of two yard-line balls to a distant hoop while staying close enough to be sure of roqueting the other. A player should run through his whole repertoire of cannons at least once per month.

(e) Use variation to maintain interest

In addition to varying activities during the practice session, it is useful to practise under varying conditions. I make a point of occasionally arranging a practice session on a different type of lawn, and as explained in a previous section, at times I deliberately practise when it is raining or windy or the temperature is around 40 degrees Celsius. This allows me to practise handling strong wind, wet balls and grip, soggy lawns, sweaty hands and extreme heat. Practice sessions can be organised early in the morning, when it may be necessary to find ways of getting the muscles working and coping with dew or frost; or at night under lights, when the shadows of the balls may present a whole new problem in lining up take-offs and peels.

(f) Practise break rhythm

In an earlier section we looked at the importance of developing a regular break rhythm.

The player who has available the shots needed to keep a break going should give some practice time to practising the break rhythm exactly as he intends to use it in matches, taking the same time and care over every shot. Even when you are practising the one shot over and over it is possible to use most of the elements of your break rhythm so that you are practising the shot under conditions which duplicate those in a match.

(g) Practise seriously

In addition to individual practice sessions where you work on particular skills, you should try to arrange regular practice games. It is important to find an opponent who will take the practice games seriously, as these games provide the opportunity to practise your skills under pressure. For this reason you must be playing to win, even though there is nothing hanging on the result. Do not play any shot which you would not play in an important match. Do not tell yourself that "it's only a practice game" so you can afford to take risks which you would not normally take. Do not bend the rules or allow your opponent to bend them. Treat the games seriously and play to win as convincingly as you can. Do not take pity on the opponent and do things designed to 'give him a chance'. If the opponent does not do his utmost to beat you every time, then find another practice partner. The reason for this advice is that both your shot-making technique and your tactics need to be practised UNDER PRESSURE, and if you are not feeling yourself under pressure in the practice games then you would be better off spending the time in some other way.

It is not necessary for this purpose that the opponent be your equal in ability, though it can be helpful from a coaching point of view if he is stronger than you (but not so strong as to destroy your confidence completely) and can offer advice from time to time. Practice against a weaker opponent can still give the pressure you need, provided you play the whole game as you would against a stronger opponent and put yourself under mental pressure to do as well as you possibly can. You can also provide the pressure by offering bisques to your opponent, provided this is agreed upon BEFORE the game commences and NOT after you are well ahead; or by adopting some particular game plan. For example, you could decide to try to win after giving contact in your first break, or after pegging out one of your own balls, or after completing a number of peels you have set yourself. If you use such an artificial means of creating additional pressure on yourself, you must still take the game seriously, and if your opponent has to know about it then make sure that he also knows you are still hoping to win.

On the other hand, if an opponent offers you bisques which you feel you do not need, do not be offended. Take them and beat him. He is unlikely to offer them again. If you cannot beat him then you have no reason to feel slighted. I once asked Tom Armstrong what to do when my opponent went right to the peg and gave me contact. "Say 'thank you very much' under your breath", said Tom, "Then go right to the peg yourself and peg him out. The problem will not arise a second time." If I could not manage to do as Tom suggested then I had no reason to be critical of the opponent's tactics.

PSYCHOLOGY OF COACHING

Here we will briefly consider only a few psychological factors of which a coach should be aware. A more detailed study of this topic belongs more rightfully in a book on coaching.

(a) encouragement and the need for success

Tom would never forgive me if I did not at least mention the fact that almost every new player needs to experience success as early as possible, and should be encouraged at every opportunity.

Experienced players sometimes joke about the way Tom tells every newcomer that they have a "wonderfully straight eye", a "remarkable natural aptitude for the game", and are "certain to be pressing for selection in the state team within a short while". (With me it was the national team, so he must have decided that I needed more than the normal amount of encouragement.) However, it is not a joke to the new player. He realises, of course, that Tom's tongue is firmly in his cheek; but the warm feeling is there all the same. And whether we regard it as a joke or not, there is no doubt that the method works. Monumental evidence of this is provided by the remarkable success rate achieved by Tom and his wife Jean in getting newcomers to move from the stage of vague interest in what the game is about, to the stage of being well and truly 'hooked' on it.

Tom has also pointed out that the game of croquet provides its devotees with far more than mere sporting competition and recreation. Many newcomers have other psychological needs that should be considered. He has made the interesting observation that most people who express interest in taking up the game are unhappy. After all, if they are fully satisfied with what they are currently doing, why would they be interested in taking up something different? If, for example, they appear to be lonely and in need of someone to talk to, then instead of teaching them hoop approaches it may be better to spend time listening to them talk about their problems - or better still, find someone else to do the listening and sympathising.

(b) avoid quantum leaps

The coach must be wary of trying to teach too much too soon. Some players can assimilate more than others due to greater intelligence and longer concentration span, but it is better to leave them eager to hear more next time than to leave them weary and confused. I have long been concerned that the leap from Golf Croquet to Association Croquet is too great for many newcomers to cope with happily, and for this reason I have advocated the use of "Ricochet" as a means of avoiding some of the psychological problems (of befuddlement and defeatism) that can accompany the aforementioned quantum leap and cause some players to simply refuse to make it.

Ricochet is a version of croquet which involves only single-ball shots. All rules of croquet apply, except that when a roquet is made the striker does NOT pick up his ball and place it against the roqueted ball. He has two further shots, but plays the first of these from where his ball finishes after making the roquet. It is normal to rotate turns as in golf croquet, and two or three additional balls can be thrown onto the lawn before starting the game in order to make it easier for the newcomers. If an experienced player is joining in, he can be 'handicapped' by being allowed to use only a few of the balls. The movement from Ricochet to Association Croquet is far less painful than the jump from Golf Croquet to Association Croquet.

(c) acceptance of change

A problem which many coaches encounter is the tendency of players to reject recommended changes in technique (i.e. grip, stance, swing, etc.) unless they are immediately successful. It seems unfair to expect to immediately be as successful with a new correct style as you have been with the incorrect one you have practised for years; but unless they experience such immediate success the great majority of players will return to the incorrect style with which they are more comfortable.

For this reason the coach must give careful thought to the time and manner of introducing the recommended change. In general, a change in technique should only be recommended when the player is thoroughly convinced of the need to change and has a high level of confidence in the coach.

(d) be wary of "principles"

I believe that a coach should be wary of teaching the game by means of general "principles" which tend to become inscribed in the learner's mind alongside the Ten Commandments and other such never-to-be-broken laws. In fact it has been observed that certain croquet players are more prone to break some of the Commandments than they are to break ingrained principles such as "Never set up in the middle of the lawn", or "Always play the border ball first", or "Always keep your balls together at the beginning and end of a game", or "Leave your partner ball near a border so you will always have somewhere safe to come home to", etc.

Even when the player in later years is well aware that such principles have exceptions, he will often find that failure to adhere to them gives rise to feelings of guilt and betrayal of past coaches who passed on the advice.

(e) do not patronise

It is also important to recognise the difference when a newcomer, instead of being interested in the game for mainly social reasons, is of truly competitive instinct. Such newcomers are sufficiently rare in some clubs for their needs to be overlooked.

Such a player must be continually presented with new challenges, or he will rapidly lose interest. As soon as he shows that he has improved to a level where he can beat the players he is regularly playing with, he must be provided with stronger opponents.

When such a player is still in the 'beginner' stage, it is vital that well-meaning club members understand they must NOT allow him to play shots again when he makes mistakes, or overlook faults, or give him additional turns, or deliberately miss so as to give him more play. Members who do such things are no doubt well intentioned and trying to be kind, but they are also being 'patronising' and taking away from the beginner any possible sense of achievement. If he is truly competitive then losing will not discourage him. Instead it will spur him on to improve as quickly as he can. But winning a game in which he was given additional turns or allowed to replay missed shots will not have any appeal or interest for such a player.

CREATE YOUR OWN DISTRACTION

One of the most effective means of overcoming nervousness, especially when running a hoop or playing a short roquet, is to concentrate on examining the milling pattern on the ball in the place where you expect the mallet to contact it.

The mind recognises certain "danger" situations and the body responds by producing an increased adrenalin flow (or a "rush of blood"). In many of life's situations this can be an appropriate response which promotes alertness and gets the muscles "ready for action"; but it tends to result in a mental state which is the opposite of relaxation. It can cause muscles to jerk and twitch involuntarily as the mallet swings forward, destroying the alignment of the mallet head and lessening the chance of the stroke being successful.

The theory is that concentrating on the milling (or for that matter on anything other than the hoop you 'have to run' or the roquet you 'cannot afford to miss') will distract your mind from thinking about the "danger" associated with the stroke you are playing, since although there may be an involuntary nervous reaction to the prospect of running an awkward hoop or hitting a missable roquet, there should be no such involuntary reaction associated with studying the milling on the ball. Note that in order to be effective this requires you to actually study the milling pattern and take an interest in it; not just to look at it.

You should begin to study the pattern as the mallet starts to move forward to hit the ball. There is no need to look at the hoop you are running or the ball you are roqueting once the forward swing has started, as the result of the swing has already been pre-determined by your brain telling the muscles how they are to coordinate; and if you were to see the mallet going off line your reaction time would be too long to allow you any chance of altering things before the mallet reached the ball anyway. In fact, once the forward swing has started you can shut your eyes without affecting the success of the stroke in any way - something most players find hard to believe until they try it for themselves (although we are not recommending that you do it in a game situation). However, there is still time for an involuntary muscular reaction to affect the stroke, as it does not need to pass through the conscious brain in the same way as something you have noticed.

So line everything up, relax your foot muscles (and also those in your wrists and forearms), feel where your shoulders are in space (and feel that they are not going to move during the swing), and then, as the forward swing starts, take your mind off the stroke and simply study the milling pattern on the ball.

TURN NEGATIVES INTO POSITIVES

An important part of psychological preparation for a croquet game is to quickly consider the various things which may possibly affect your play. If they are things which you can control and alter (e.g. muscle stiffness, feeling ill, uncomfortable clothing, cold fingers becoming numb, perspiration fogging up your glasses, etc.), then you can do something about them either before starting the game or as soon as they start to become a problem.

However, there will also be things such as rain, strong wind, patches of different types of grass (or bare earth), very tight and difficult hoops, uneven or sloping lawn, etc., over which you have no control. It is vital to see these things as 'positives' rather than 'negatives'.

Firstly, remember that your opponent will have to cope with exactly the same things, so there is no reason why you should be disadvantaged by them. Secondly, realise that such things can actually be turned to your advantage if you can "outwit" your opponent by correctly assessing their effects and suitably modifying (where necessary) your technique, tactics and strategy.

Perhaps the art of turning 'negatives' into 'positives' is at its most effective in dealing with interruptions and distractions during a break; e.g. a dog running onto the court, interference by the players or balls of a double-banked game, spectator noise and movement, etc. An experienced player will learn to view such an interruption, not as a frustrating annoyance, but as a welcome opportunity to pause, take stock (again) of the conditions and state of the game, relax, and think through things like lifts, intended leave, time remaining and any strokes that have not been turning out quite as intended. Then, when the distraction has passed, he will turn his full concentration back to the next stroke that has to be played and set about re-establishing his regular break rhythm.

Do not let things worry you that are not under your control. Do not blame them for a poor stroke you have just played - instead blame your own failure to cope with the conditions, and note what you will need to do in future to make your strokes successful. Try to devise ways of using the less than ideal playing conditions to help you beat your opponent. In other words, see them as 'positives' rather than 'negatives'.

CONCLUSION

I believe that much could be said about the way psychological considerations affect other areas of the game such as refereeing and administration but these can wait until some other time, and may well prove too hot to handle.

It is my hope that the ramblings, anecdotes, experiences and occasional insights presented above will encourage players to become more aware of psychological influences in the game. I trust that others will use this booklet as a starting point for their own researches and observations, and that the game will become even more fascinating to people as they realise that it contains psychological elements to a far greater extent than is found in any other game.

ADDENDUM

Coping with excitement

Carolyn Spooner has suggested that I should have included a section on what she calls the "fear of winning". There is no doubt that some players seem almost psychologically incapable of defeating a particular opponent, to the extent that one could quite reasonably conclude that they are somehow "afraid" of winning.

At times I have been aware of this in an opponent who has only to complete the final three or four hoops of a simple four-ball break in order to score an unexpected victory. This is something he would do with ease at most other times, yet I have somehow sensed that he was almost certain to break down and let me in again.

This is a quite different psychological phenomenon from that described in section 2 as the "desperado" effect, as the player has quite likely been playing good, sound croquet without taking abnormal risks or adopting any type of devil-may-care attitude.

I believe that the problem can be best described as a type of excitement which comes upon the player when he suddenly realises that he is about to beat an opponent against whom he had given himself little chance of winning.

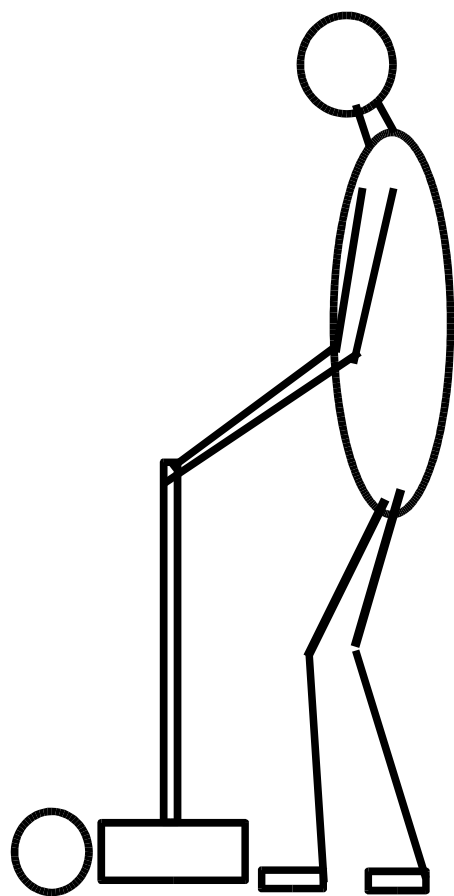
This state of excitement has physiological effects on the player similar to those caused by nervousness. There is a rush of adrenalin, more rapid heart-beat, and jerky muscle movements which result in a lack of muscular co-ordination. Together with these is the psychological effect of confused thinking so that the player becomes more likely than before to play a wrong ball, run a wrong hoop, forget about a 'lift', or commit some other "inexplicable" error.

As with nervousness, the shots most commonly affected are hoop-running, rushes and short roquets; and the answer seems to lie in being aware of the danger and the first warning signs, then deliberately slowing down all movements. This includes walking more slowly between shots in order to give you time to relax, clearly visualising the next shot before playing it, concentrating fully on playing one shot at a time, using a longer, slower backswing, and (perhaps most important of all) ensuring that each stroke is played with the weight of the mallet alone, and without any additional force from the hands.

It may also be possible to develop psychological 'tricks' designed to avoid the onset of such excitement, for example by telling yourself that you have already achieved more than anyone had expected, so any further hoops can be regarded as a bonus; or thinking in terms of percentages, e.g. "From here I must have at least a 90% chance of winning. Nothing is ever a certainty, however, and all I can do is play each separate shot to the best of my ability. If that's not good enough to win this particular game, then at least it should be on the next nine or so times I get myself into a similar situation."

I would be interested to hear from players who have discovered other ways of coping with this difficulty, which is one of the few problems I cannot remember having affected me personally; or indeed about any of the other topics considered in this booklet.

CROQUET: THE MENTAL APPROACH



by John Riches

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