CROQUET:

LESSONS IN

TACTICS

by John Riches

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INTRODUCTION

This booklet was written in an attempt to help players realise the importance of tactics in the game of Croquet, and encourage them to improve the tactics they use regularly in competitive play. It was first written as a series of magazine articles, most of which have been published in either the Australian Croquet Gazette or the Queensland Croquet Newsletter.

Most of the explanations are aimed at players well below the top levels of play, though some of the topics dealt with later in the booklet will apply mainly to those who are capable of making sizeable breaks.

The justification for all tactical moves lies in the consideration of percentages. This is alluded to in various places, but for a fuller treatment the reader is referred to my booklet on "Next Break Strategy".

In this booklet I have concentrated on those tactical points which are not clearly explained in most other treatises on the game. Nor are they to be found in most coaching manuals. Here you will not find any mention of standard leaves or triple peels. The correct ways of playing 3-ball and 4-ball breaks can be found in many other books. The tactics of openings, endings and pegged-out games (i.e. one ball against two, or one against one) are outside the scope of this booklet, and may possibly provide material for a later booklet aimed at more advanced players.

Cannons, promotion shots, and other 'trick' shots belong in a booklet on advanced technique rather than one on tactics.
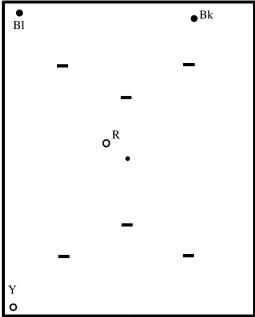
Despite these omissions which may cause disappointment to some, I am confident that even the strongest of players will find in this booklet much of interest, and many things that will help him to improve his own game.

If you believe that I have made omissions, oversights or errors in the material I have attempted to cover, please let me know. I am always looking for better ways of helping to raise the standard of Australian Croquet, and have been greatly encouraged in the pursuit of this aim by the expressed appreciation of many who claim to have learned from my previous four booklets.

Note: I have used the term "finesse" as meaning a shot in which at the start of a turn a ball is played (usually into a corner) without making any attempt to roquet another ball. The term is in common use by British writers, but has the disadvantage of carrying with it the suggestion that some degree of subtlety is involved, which is seldom the case. In most situations its use amounts to nothing more than plain foolishness.

.....John Riches.

THINKING AHEAD - Part 1

Bl

Bk

R

Y

The diagram shows a position where blue has just missed a rush on red to hoop 2 (it occurred in a major South Australian tournament - I'm not sure whether such things ever happen elsewhere!). The red and black clips were on 4-back and yellow was on hoop 3.

Red shot at yellow in the 1st corner, as 99 out of 100 players would have done. He missed, and in his next turn was faced with the need to play a long left-side take-off to the opponent's balls with little chance of getting a break going. When I later replaced the balls in the diagrammed position and asked him why he shot at yellow with red, he expressed surprise, saying that surely there was no sensible alternative.

I asked him what he would have done if he had succeeded in roqueting yellow with red, and he said that he would probably have set a rush for yellow. Where to? "Oh, probably to its hoop (hoop 3)", he replied.
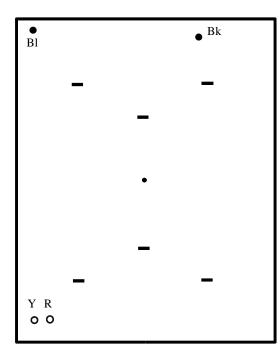
It took me some time to convince him that a rush for yellow to hoop 4 would be better than one to hoop 3, and that there was no point in trying to roquet yellow at all - he should have simply hit red out on the south boundary a foot or two from yellow so that yellow would have a rush (slightly cut) to hoop 4.

This will help explain why I strongly oppose any move to introduce a time limit of 45 seconds (or any other length of time) on each shot. Most players put far too little thought into the game as it is.

Players often blame the loss of a game on the fact that they "stuck in hoops which they should have made", or they missed a couple of short roquets, forgetting that the opponent made similar errors. It seldom occurs to them that the real reason they lost was failure to think ahead.

The player mentioned above would certainly not have realised his error if it had not been pointed out to him. If these few articles can encourage someone to think longer before hitting a ball, the time taken to write them will have been well spent.

The position shown in the diagram immediately follows the one considered in part 1.

The yellow clip is on hoop 3; the blue clip is on hoop 2; red and black are both on 4-back. Red, from near the peg, has correctly played to give Yellow a cut-rush to hoop 4 rather than trying to roquet yellow.

Here we consider how to best continue if the opponent shoots with one of his balls at the other and misses.
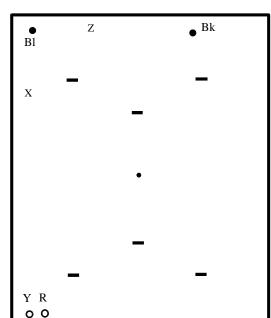
If he shoots with black at blue then yellow should simply rush red to hoop 4, take off to the opponent's balls in the 2nd corner, rush one of them to hoop 3 and set up a 3-ball break, planning to bring the 4th ball into the break later on.

If blue shoots at black and misses, yellow may similarly rush red to hoop 4 and take off to blue in the 3rd corner, though he will be less certain of getting a rush on black (6 yards away on the border) to hoop 3 and will not want to leave black too close to blue if the hoop cannot be attempted.

In this case, it is usually better to rush red not to hoop 4, but to a position somewhere behind hoop 4 and 1-2 yards in from the boundary. Then you can take off to blue in the 3rd corner and roll it out to hoop 3 (preferably alongside it rather than behind it) while going to the black ball without needing to try for a rush on it. After roqueting black you use a stop-shot to send it about three-quarters of the way to hoop 4 while trying to gain position for yellow to run hoop 3.

If the hoop cannot be run, then yellow can be hit back to the south boundary near red. This leaves the opponent with the chance of a 14-yard roquet, but it would be one he could not afford to miss.

It is well worth taking the time to set up the balls in the position of the diagram and play through these moves on the lawn in order to fix them in your mind and gain an appreciation of how the second method is superior because even if the hoop cannot be attempted it keeps the opponent under pressure.

THINKING AHEAD - Part 3

The diagram is the same as in part 2. The yellow clip is on hoop 3; blue is on hoop 2; and red and black are both on 4-back.

In part 2 we looked at the correct way for yellow to continue if one of the opponent balls shoots at the other and misses. Here we consider what to do if black goes wide of blue.

If black is hit out on the side (west) boundary at point x on the diagram, then red should take the turn rather than yellow. After roqueting yellow, red should take off to black at point x, and use an angled stop-shot to send black toward hoop 3 while going to blue in the 2nd corner. Then blue can be hit through to hoop 4 and red hit out again on the south boundary so that yellow again has a cut-rush to hoop 4 (and now also to the blue ball). Black then must move from hoop 3, and wherever it goes (unless it roquets) yellow has a good chance of a break on the next turn. If the wide-angle stop-shot of black to hoop 3 seems too difficult, then red could have gone to blue first and sent it to either hoop 3 or hoop 4 before placing black at the other hoop.
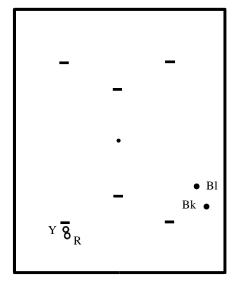
If black is played instead to point z on the north boundary, then yellow can rush red to hoop 4, take off to blue in the 2nd corner, and from there have a good chance of getting a rush on black to hoop 3 with an immediate break.
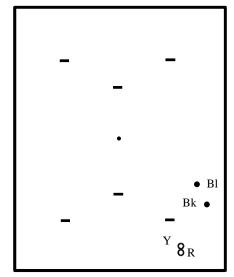
Note that there is no safer place for the black ball. In the 4th corner yellow would have a rush to it, and in the 3rd corner yellow could roll with it for hoop 3 after rushing red to hoop 4. Nor does it make sense to play blue without shooting.

We have seen that yellow has an excellent chance of quickly getting a break under way whatever the opponent does, which would not be true if the rush for yellow were (wrongly) set for its hoop. If the player of red and yellow is capable of taking off with reasonable accuracy, then black should shoot at red and yellow.

Unfortunately most players do not think far enough ahead to realise that this is the best option available, even though yellow does not yet have a rush to its hoop.

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MAKING A DOUBLE

In the first diagram red and yellow are both for hoop 1. Red has rushed or roqueted yellow about a foot in front of the hoop and has an opportunity to "make a double" by peeling yellow through the hoop and then making the hoop with red.
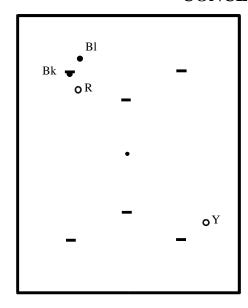
Players in lower divisions often take great pride and pleasure in doing this, but stronger players tend to do it only when they are more or less forced to because yellow is partly in the hoop.
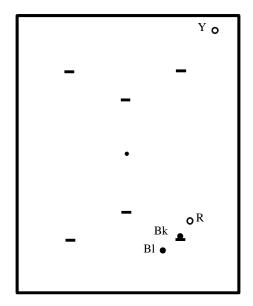
"Making the double" involves taking the risk that yellow will not go cleanly through the hoop, or red will run too far and slightly off line so that it cannot easily make the hoop. Red is not even likely to succeed in getting a forward rush without the hoop impeding the backswing. Good players are not willing to take even a slight risk for the sake of only one hoop.

Red should resist the temptation to peel yellow and instead try to make the hoop with a rush toward the 4th corner, achieving the position shown in the second diagram. From here it is relatively easy to send yellow to hoop 3 and then rush one of the opponent's balls to hoop 2; whereas after "making a double" it would have been far more difficult to get a break going.

Another reason for not "making a double" is that it puts both of your clips on the same hoop, making it much harder to get a good leave if you cannot continue the break. The rule on "making doubles" is: In general, forget it; unless the peel will save a 'lift', or (at rover hoop) enable you to peg out, or you have only a few seconds left in the game.
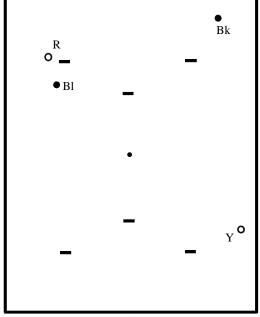
CONCEDING A HOOP

This simple idea will be further considered in a later article on "Balls in Hoops", but it is so often overlooked by players that it deserves an article of its own, with different examples. The first diagram shows a position from a tournament game in which red was quite a strong player. The red clip is on hoop 3 and red has taken off from yellow to the opponent's balls after black had stuck in hoop 2.

The obvious way for red to continue is to roquet the black ball, sending it just through the hoop, and then use it to get a simple rush on blue to hoop 3 with a break to follow. However, the player of red was unwilling to concede the hoop to the opponent, and roqueted blue first, giving himself little chance of making even one hoop for himself.

The second diagram shows a similar situation in which red is for 4-back while yellow is still for hoop 1. After roqueting yellow, red has taken off to the black ball which had stuck in hoop 4. If he roquets blue he will not be able to do anything useful with black, but by conceding hoop 4 and rushing black through the hoop to the border he can then stop-shot it toward hoop 1 while going to blue, then send blue to hoop 2 and finish by hitting red out to the north boundary just left of yellow.

This gives yellow a cut-rush to the blue ball at hoop 2 after black moves from hoop 1, and allows an excellent chance of a break on the next turn. In addition, the black clip will now be on a centre hoop, making it more difficult for the opponent to find a good leave.

RETURNING TO PARTNER BALL - Part 1

In a previous article we mentioned the need to think carefully before playing even the most obvious shot.

The diagram shows a position in which red is for 1-back and his yellow partner ball is for hoop 2.
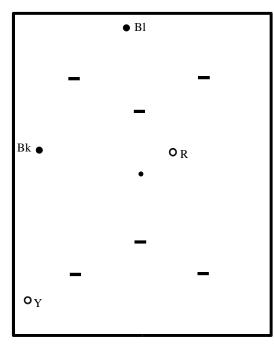
The player of red has roqueted black, taken off to blue, and rolled with blue for 1-back, but did not gain position to run the hoop. The obvious thing to do now is to return to the yellow partner ball on the east boundary near hoop 4. Since the yellow ball has not yet been used, most players in such situations would shoot at it, perhaps intending if the roquet is made to take off back to 1-back, hoping this time to gain position to run the hoop.

A few moments' reflection will suggest that the chance of this coming off is very small indeed. It is far better to hit red out to the left (north side) of yellow, ensuring that as a result yellow will be left with a cut-rush to a point on the north boundary just to the right of the black ball. This places the opponent in an awkward position and gives an excellent chance of a break in the next turn unless he roquets, since wherever the blue ball goes you will be threatening to play yellow, rushing red to the 3rd corner and using it to load hoop 3 before rushing the black ball to hoop 2 with at least a 3-ball break set up.

Many players who complain about an inability to get breaks going are frequently missing such little tactical moves, because they have not developed the habit of thinking ahead to their next turn.

It seems elementary once it is pointed out, but if you watch you will be surprised how many players shoot at the partner without thinking, and in doing so forfeit any real possibility of giving a rush to the partner ball on the next turn. The principle to follow is that whenever you are forced to allow your opponent a chance to roquet you should try to ensure that if he misses (or 'finesses') you will have an easy break on the next turn. Thus he has only the one chance to roquet and is under pressure. This is worth doing in most situations even if it means that the opponent's roquet will be a shorter one.

RETURNING TO PARTNER BALL - Part 2

In the diagrammed position the red clip is on hoop 4 and yellow still on hoop 1. As red, you would no doubt decide to return to your yellow partner ball, but would you stop and think for a moment before doing so?

Most players would shoot at yellow, without any clear idea of what they would do if they roquet. In fact, there is little chance of getting a break going with red; and if the shot is missed black can then shoot at blue with reasonable safety, since it would be risky for yellow to roll for hoop 1 with the opponent's balls together on the north border. Therefore if black misses the roquet on blue, yellow would probably have to play a long take-off and rush one of the opponent's balls back to hoop 1, still without having loaded hoop 2.
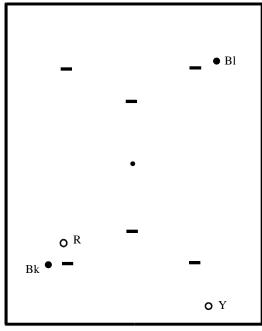
Now consider the difference if red does not attempt to roquet yellow, but simply plays to stop just short of yellow so that yellow has a rush to hoop 1. This makes any shot by the opponent extremely risky, especially the shot with black at blue which could leave yellow with two balls in forward play and an excellent chance of setting up a break.

If the opponent decides to shoot at one of your balls with black then a miss would allow yellow to roquet black on the south border and use a stop-shot to send it toward hoop 2 while holding a rush on red to hoop 1. It is obvious that if the opponent shoots at any ball with blue he would be taking an even greater risk.

Thinking ahead like this is far more likely to affect the result of the game than missed roquets or sticking in hoops. It is an unfortunate fact that errors in shot-making seem to stick in our minds and receive the blame for many lost games when the losses are more correctly attributable to tactical errors that we were not even aware of.

A coach usually faces a difficult problem in persuading his students, especially if they have been playing for some years, that they need to spend time improving the tactical side of their game.

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RETURNING TO PARTNER BALL - Part 3

The diagram shows a position where black has just failed in an attempt to run hoop 1. The red and yellow clips are both on hoop 2.

What should red do?

He could roquet black and roll for hoop 2, but if unsuccessful he will then have to hit back to yellow on the south border, with little chance of obtaining an accurate rush.

For many players a better option would be to rush black out to the first corner and then play a big wide-angle split shot in which the black ball is sent to hoop 2 while the red ball goes over toward its yellow partner ball on the border behind hoop 4.
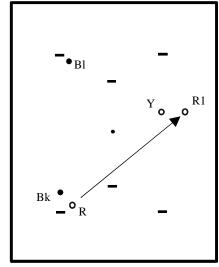
Little accuracy is required with this split shot as you do not need to roquet yellow on the next shot. You only need to set yellow a rush up the lawn to either hoop 2 or (preferably) hoop 3.
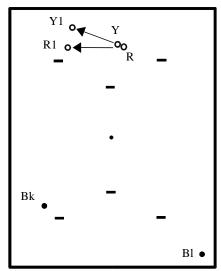
As a general rule, the best rush to set for a ball is not a rush to its current hoop, but to the following hoop. This is often true regardless of where the opponent's balls are, as it makes it dangerous for the opponent balls to go together, since you can use the rush to load your next hoop, then take off to the opponent balls and rush one of them to make your current hoop.

Very few players seem to realise this, and most will set the rush for their current hoop without thinking. In many cases by setting a rush for the following hoop you can prevent your opponent from shooting at all, since he will realise that if you are capable of playing breaks then he would be taking a considerable risk in returning to his partner ball; and if you have set your rush the correct distance out from the border then a shot at your balls is also likely to give you an excellent chance of an immediate 4-ball break.

If you are capable of playing breaks but have difficulty getting them, try this in your next game and notice the difference. Players commonly complain that they were unable to get breaks going; or that the opponent roqueted "every time they had a break set up". In most cases closer analysis will show that they have been setting up poorly, allowing the opponent shots which he would have been unable to risk if the balls had been set properly.

COVERING THE BOUNDARY

Most players are familiar with the idea of "covering the boundary" in order to discourage a shot by the opponent, yet it is not uncommon to see experienced players failing to do it, or doing it very carelessly.
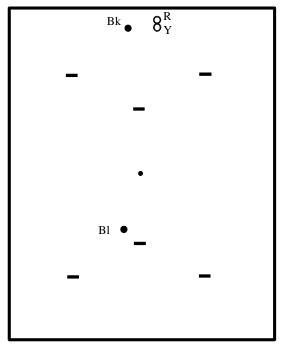
In the first diagram all clips are still on hoop 1 and red has unsuccessfully approached hoop 1. In returning to the yellow partner ball red should be placed about halfway between yellow and the east boundary at point R1.

Many players would hit red right out to the boundary opposite yellow, but this is incorrect as (if the opponent fails to roquet) red would have no controllable rush and with the balls 6 yards apart even the roquet would not be a certainty.

In the second diagram red is on 4-back and has roqueted yellow which is still for hoop 1. Red should set for yellow as shown, by rolling to positions Y1 and R1. Even if the balls are not hidden from black behind hoop 2 a shot at them by the opponent would be too risky with the border correctly covered in this manner.

The red and yellow balls should be set about 3 yards and 2 yards respectively in from the border. They should not be less than 2 feet apart so that (if black shoots at them and misses) red will not hamper the attempt by yellow to roquet black on the border. It is incorrect to place them closer to the border as black could then shoot at them, knowing that if he misses there would not be room for yellow to load hoop 2 and keep a rush to hoop 1. The balls are set behind hoop 2 rather than hoop 6 so that if black returns to blue yellow can load hoop 2 with red and take off to the opponent's balls.

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TWO RUSHES ARE BETTER THAN ONE

The diagram shows a common type of position in which red has just made hoop 3 and rushed its yellow partner ball back to a position near black on the north border.

In playing the approach shot for hoop 3 red had planned to continue in this manner rather than trying for a forward rush to hoop 4 or to the blue ball.

There are two reasons why the backward rush to the black ball is to be preferred:

(1) A backward rush is usually easier to obtain with accuracy than a forward rush, and

(2) It will enable the fourth ball to be brought in - even if only a yard or two - off the border.

Now, in order to continue the break, red will use a stop-shot to send yellow as far in from the border as he can comfortably manage while also getting behind black so that he can rush it down the court to either hoop 4 or to the blue ball near hoop 5.

Many players do not realise that in such situations the rush to the ball is generally preferable to rushing direct to red's hoop, even though it necessitates another rush (of blue from hoop 5 to hoop 4) before the hoop is made.
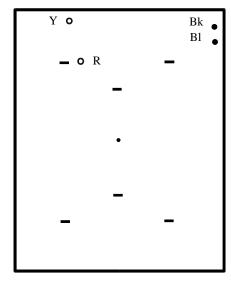
Here two rushes are better than one because the second rush is a relatively short one which allows the ball to be sent to hoop 4 with greater accuracy.
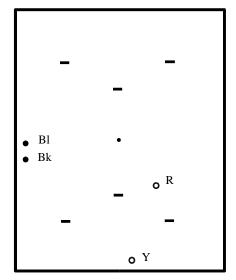
This is another case where you will often see players choosing the wrong tactical option and later incorrectly blaming a poor approach or hoop shot for breaking down.

A similar situation occurs when the striker's ball has just made hoop 1 and there is a ball at hoop 3 but not at hoop 2 . After making hoop 1 it may be possible to rush to the fourth ball near the 4th corner, and then get another rush not to hoop 2, but to the ball near hoop 3.

In almost all cases where there is an unused ball closer to your hoop than the one you are to rush, it is correct to organise a rush to the ball rather than to the hoop.

HITTING IN

The first diagram shows a position in which the red clip is on hoop 2, yellow and black are both on hoop 3, and blue is still on hoop 1.
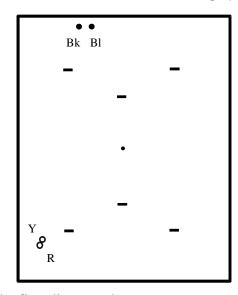
Many players would now shoot with red at yellow without even considering anything else. However, if the opponent is capable of playing sizeable breaks then yellow should shoot at red. The shot should be hit so that if the roquet is missed yellow will finish on the far boundary behind hoop 4.
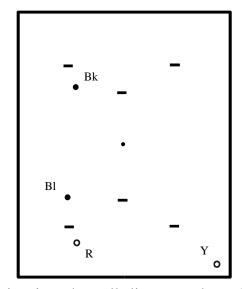
Even though this is putting a ball into black's "forward play" it is much safer than the shot with red at yellow, which if missed would allow black to rush blue to a position near hoop 4 and take off to red and yellow to easily set up a break. Whether the shot is hit or missed, it is preferable to have played yellow rather than red.

Of course, in the majority of cases it is correct to hit out rather than in, but situations where hitting in is preferable occur (and are overlooked) with sufficient frequency to make it well worth giving the possibility a moment's thought before automatically hitting the in-lawn ball out.

The second diagram, with all clips on the first hoop, is another example where the correct play is to "hit in" by shooting with yellow at red. Consideration of what is likely to happen afterward will reveal that if the roquet is made with yellow it will be easier to continue than if it had been made with red, and a miss with yellow would make it harder for the opponent to set up a break than a miss with red. Therefore, hit or miss, yellow is the ball to play.
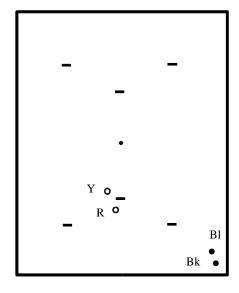
RUNNING AWAY

The first diagram shows a common type of situation where all clips are on hoop 1 and red has rushed yellow to a point 4-5 yards from the hoop. Many players would now take off to the opponent's balls and separate them rather than "risk" trying to make the hoop.
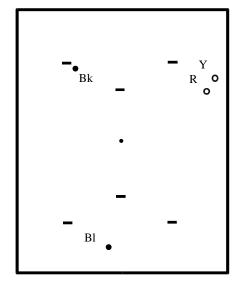
When both players can make breaks this is a very poor tactical move as it gives only a slightly better than even (say, about 60%) chance of getting a break going before the opponent does. Any player who believes he can successfully roll for hoop 1 and make it more than 6 times out of 10 from this position should not hesitate to do so immediately. On some occasions the attempt will be unsuccessful and you will then be leaving at least one ball at the opponent's hoop; but the alternative would have given him about a 40% chance of obtaining the next break anyway, though perhaps not immediately.

In the second diagram all clips are again on hoop 1 and red has played a poor approach shot with an opponent ball. For similar reasons he should attempt to run the hoop instead of returning to yellow provided he believes he could make it more than 6 times out of 10 from that position.

Even when the opponent's clips are on different hoops so that failure to make the hoop does not present the opponent with an easy break, players will frequently "run away" from such hoops in the mistaken belief that they are taking the safer course of action. Passing up a 70% chance of an immediate break is almost certain to be foolish rather than safe, as it is unlikely that you will get a better chance of establishing a break before your opponent does.

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THE RIGHT BALL

Even our leading players at times choose the wrong ball to play.

The first diagram shows a position in which red is for hoop 5 and yellow for hoop 4. In a top division tournament game red had failed to gain position to run hoop 5, and had sat in front, after which black had missed the roquet on blue near the 4th corner.
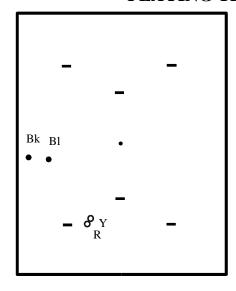
Now the player walked out and simply made hoop 5 with red, only to discover that there is no easy way to continue the break. It should be obvious that yellow is the correct ball to play, as it has at least an easy 3-ball break on offer by gently roqueting red and taking off to make hoop 4 with one of the opponent's balls.
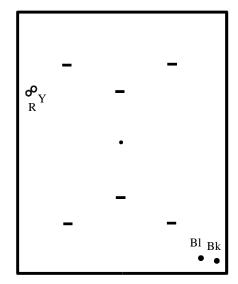
The second diagram shows another position from the same tournament. Red and yellow are both for hoop 2. Blue had run hoop 2 right through to the boundary and missed the return rush on black.

The player of red and yellow now played with red, roqueted yellow and took off to make hoop 2 with black. Once again the continuance of the break had not been given sufficient consideration. Correct was to play yellow and rush red to the south border somewhere near the blue ball. Then a stop-shot could be used to send red into the lawn (preferably to hoop 4) while gaining position to rush blue anywhere up the lawn to a position from which it can be sent to load hoop 3 as yellow goes to black at hoop 2.

You should prefer to play the ball that has the best chance of establishing a break rather than just making one hoop.

PLAYING THE BORDER BALL

In the first diagram red has just made hoop 1 and roqueted yellow. In using the opponent's balls the standard procedure is to go to the border ball (black) first, allowing black to be sent into the lawn with a stop-shot which gains position to rush blue to hoop 2. However in this situation it would not be possible to send black all the way to hoop 3, so it is necessary to load hoop 3 with the yellow ball in order to ensure the continuance of the break.
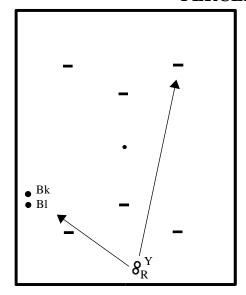
Therefore yellow should be sent immediately to hoop 3, and on this shot it is best to aim at getting red to a position where it can rush blue out to black, rather than going to the border ball first. There are 3 reasons for going to blue first: it is a safer shot; you can give more attention to placing yellow accurately; and you will be more certain of getting a good rush to hoop 2.
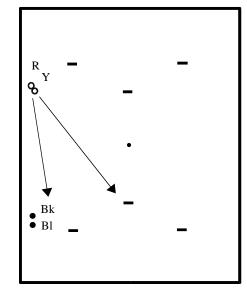
The one disadvantage is that the blue ball will be left near the border 'out of play' and will need to be later brought back into the break.

In the second diagram all clips are on hoop 1 and red has roqueted yellow near hoop 2. Red should take off to the opponent's balls and rush blue out to black rather than trying to go to black first. Again the shot will be safer and a good rush to hoop 1 will be more certain.

It is worth taking risks in order to get your break established, but a 3-ball beak (at least for the time being) is sufficient. You should aim to bring the 4th ball into the break as soon as you can, but without taking further noticeable risks. You should practise playing 3-ball breaks and picking up the fourth ball from various positions, so that you learn various ways of doing it, and also learn to correctly estimate the seriousness of the risks involved.
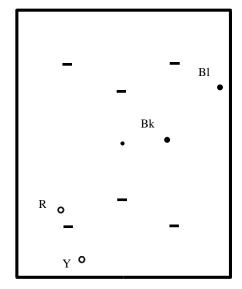
PERCENTAGE PLAY

In the first diagram red is for hoop 2 and has roqueted yellow on the South boundary. The best way to establish a break is to send yellow to hoop 3 with a long angled split shot in which red goes to the opponent balls on the West border, after which one of them can be rushed to hoop 2. Many players who are quite capable of playing the split shot will refuse to do so because they consider it risky. They would explain, "The red ball could fall short or go out or hit hoop 1 etc."
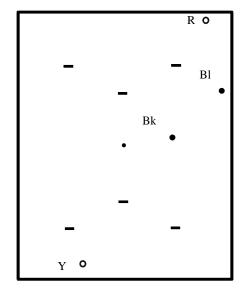
It is true that there is a certain risk involved, but you cannot expect to win games of croquet without taking risks. In this case, even if you would expect to roquet one of the opponent balls only 7 times out of 10 after playing the split shot, you should take the risk. Taking off may give you almost 100% chance of roqueting an opponent ball, but very little chance of establishing a break.

In the second diagram red is for hoop 4 and has rushed yellow to the border near hoop 2. The percentage play now is to roll yellow to hoop 5 while going to the opponent's balls. Again there is a risk involved, but it is one which most players should willingly take, since it offers an excellent chance of establishing an immediate break.

A player who merely takes off to the opponent's balls in such positions is likely to make only one or two hoops, and will usually not realise that he is losing games by passing up chances to establish breaks. Aggressive "percentage play" involves taking risks which will not always prove successful, but will result in many more wins than would otherwise have been achieved.
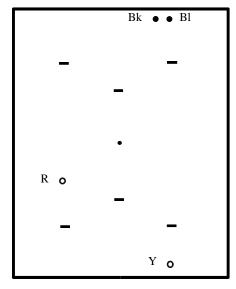
17

COVERING THE DOUBLE

When playing an opponent who is considered far stronger than themselves many players tend to hit into corners without shooting because they feel that they "cannot afford to give the opponent anything". They imagine that they are "playing safe", but in reality they are playing into the opponent's hands. It is a demonstrable mathematical fact that shooting at a ball will almost always give a better chance of winning than "playing safe" by "joining wide" or hitting into a remote corner.
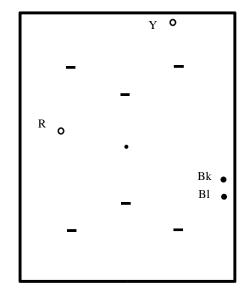
The first diagram shows one of the rare exceptions to this rule. All clips are on hoop 1 and red is wired from yellow. As red, you consider quite reasonably that a shot at either of the opponent's balls is too risky, but what would you do? Black is likely, though not certain, to roquet blue, so hitting red into the 1st corner can hardly be described as "playing safe".

The best place for red is shown in the second diagram - on the north boundary about 3-4 yards from the 3rd corner. This puts considerable pressure on the opponent, as a missed shot with black at blue will almost certainly give red an inviting double target on the next turn; and if black does roquet he will still need to play some accurate shots to get a break going.

"Covering the double" like this is a tactic which few players have ever thought of, and fewer still have ever used, yet it is much better and more aggressive than, say, hitting red into the second corner which removes all pressure from the opponent. Some would play red right into the 3rd corner, which would also put the opponent under some pressure but only give red a single-ball target on the next turn.
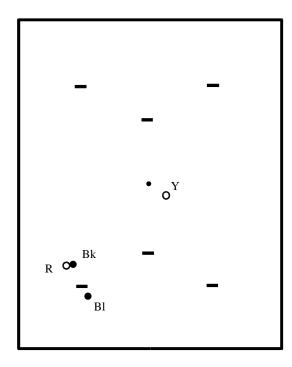
THE THREE-ONE PRINCIPLE

Before reading further, examine the two diagrams carefully. In each diagram all clips are still on hoop 1 which is in the bottom left corner of the diagram. You are playing with red and yellow and your opponent has just returned about 4-5 feet wide of his partner ball on the yardline. What would you do?

In both situations most players at all levels would immediately shoot with red at the yellow partner ball. However, if red fails to roquet yellow the opponent has an excellent chance of a break. In the first diagram blue can rush black to hoop 2 and take off to your two balls, then rush one of them to hoop 1. In diagram 2 blue can rush black up the border toward the third corner, then send it to hoop 2 and continue similarly. It is far better to shoot at your opponent's balls as a miss is only likely to allow him to make one hoop.

"Finessing" into a corner or returning wide of yellow would also be futile against a thinking opponent who can make breaks, since he should at least be able to bring about a situation where your balls are at hoop 1 and hoop 2, and he has a rush to one of them (preferably the one near hoop 2). Then another finesse would leave him with a break anyway; and any missed shot would be far more disastrous than if you had shot at his balls in the first place.

The 'principle' is that it is usually harder to get a break going with three balls together and one separate than with two and two, assuming all are border balls. This, rather than their expectation of roqueting, is why good players prefer to shoot at the opponent's balls in many situations rather than return to the partner ball.

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LOADING THE NEXT HOOP - Part 1

The most common tactical error seen on a croquet lawn is failure to load the next hoop as early and accurately as possible before making the current hoop.
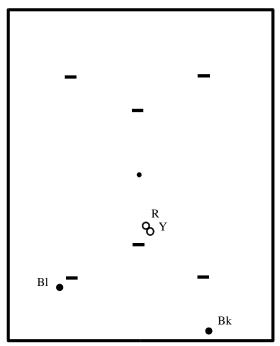
In many cases there is little or no risk involved. In the diagram all clips are still on hoop 1. Red has shot from near hoop 2 and roqueted the black ball near hoop 1. There is a strong temptation to make hoop 1 immediately, but it is imperative to play a split-shot which sends black to hoop 2 while red goes to yellow near the peg. Then red can take-off back to the blue ball and make hoop 1.

The reason why this is so important is that it sets up a break which gives an excellent chance of making not only the current hoop, but several others as well.

Even if loading the next hoop involves taking a risk which renders the making of the current hoop less certain, the risk is often well worth taking. A 60% chance of making two (or more) hoops is better than being certain of making just one hoop; and the player who is prepared to take such chances will consistently beat a player who refuses to do so and imagines that he is 'playing safe'.

In croquet there is nothing safe about refusing to take any risks, except that it is usually a way of safely losing the game!

Sometimes a player fails to load the next hoop because of the risk involved, but there are also many situations where the hoop could have been loaded in a way he just didn't think of. There will often be more than one way of loading the next hoop, so that a choice must be made between them. It is important to consider all reasonable possibilities before making the choice. In the diagrammed position, for example, red could also take off to yellow and either rush it to hoop 2 and take off back to blue; or rush it to the south boundary in front of hoop 1 and use a stop-shot to send it to hoop 2. In the remaining articles on this topic we shall look at situations where the best way of loading the next hoop may be easily overlooked.

The diagram shows a position from a recent match where all clips are still on the first hoop and red had roqueted yellow near hoop 5. The player of red, who was an experienced and quite capable player, took off from yellow to make hoop 1 from blue. When asked why he had not tried to load hoop 2, he pointed out that the angle was too wide to allow yellow to be sent to hoop 2 while red went to blue at hoop 1. Therefore he planned to make hoop 1 and possibly then go to black which could be sent to load hoop 3 while getting a rush on yellow to hoop 2.
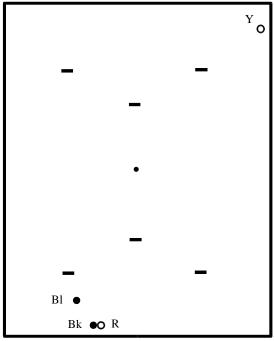
He apparently gave no thought to the possibility of going to black immediately and sending it to hoop 2 while going to blue at hoop 1; yet this shot, although a long one, is not a difficult one as it does not require extreme accuracy. He would not need to worry too much about getting a rush on blue, as long as he got close enough to roquet it; whereas the method he used of setting up the break required getting an accurate rush on yellow at the same time as sending black to hoop 3.

The correct shot in the diagrammed position is actually a pass-roll which places the yellow ball about a yard outside hoop 4 while going to black which will then be used to load hoop 2. (This allows you to 'cover the boundary' behind the yellow ball if anything should go wrong and you need to return to your partner ball.) Then hoop 1 should be made with a rush toward yellow.

There is a strong psychological desire in many players to "play safe" and make certain of the first hoop as did the player of red in this game. However, this involves giving the opponent additional chances to roquet, and is less "safe" than taking the slight risk involved in going to black immediately.

The recommended line of play does depend on your ability to keep the break going after having set it up. Test yourself by setting up the above position on the lawn 5 times and going to black immediately. Then try it another 5 times making hoop 1 immediately. Keep count of the total number of hoops made in order to determine which method gives the best chance of making the most hoops.

LOADING THE NEXT HOOP - Part 3

In the diagram red is for hoop 1 and has roqueted black. Many players would now send black as far as possible into the lawn with a stop-shot which holds position to rush blue closer to hoop 1 so as to be certain of making it. It will not be possible to send black more than a few yards past hoop 1.

More experienced players will usually prefer to use a stop-shot which sends black right up to hoop 2, even though red will run past blue and require them to turn around and roquet blue, then roll for hoop 1 from 3-4 yards out.

It is less certain that hoop 1 will be made this way, but if it is made then the 3-ball break is fully set up. This is the correct way to play in the diagrammed position provided that you can play the split shot from hoop 1 to hoops 2 and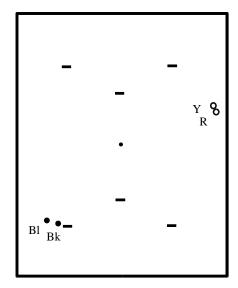 3 which will be necessary if you do not get a forward rush. The ability to confidently play such basic splits from any hoop to the following two is an essential pre-requisite for correct tactics.

If black is sent only part of the way to hoop 2, then after making hoop 1 you must do two things at once: load hoop 3 and get a rush to hoop 2. While a good player would expect to be able to do this on a reasonably high percentage of attempts, he will if possible avoid the need to do it. It is somewhat paradoxical that weaker players who cannot expect to do it so often tend to commit themselves to the attempt by not properly loading hoop 2.

There are two important principles of tactics involved here: (1) If possible, avoid committing yourself to having to do two things accurately in the one shot; and (2) In setting up a break it is better to take one immediate risk than commit yourself to later taking several smaller risks.

The recommended method may give only a 70% chance of establishing the break by making hoop 1, but the alternative (though hoop 1 can be made with certainty) commits you to having to play 4 or 5 (or more) accurate shots each of whose success rate would be no greater than 90%. Overall it is more likely that one 70% chance will come off than four 90% chances, as any mathematician will tell you.

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LOADING THE NEXT HOOP - Part 4

In the first diagram red is for hoop 1. The only way to load hoop 2 accurately is to rush yellow right out to the south boundary, then use a stop-shot to send it to hoop 2 while going to blue at hoop 1.
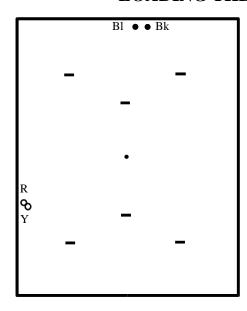
This may seem a patently obvious play to many of us, but it is amazing how many players in such positions will simply roquet yellow and take off to blue. Even a thick take-off to put yellow some distance into the lawn is just not good enough.
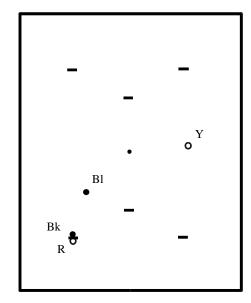
In the second diagram red is again for hoop 1 and has roqueted yellow. It should again be obvious that in taking off to the opponent's balls red should make certain of finishing on the northern side of them so that one of them can be rushed to the south boundary and then sent accurately to hoop 2. But here also many players will simply aim in the take-off to finish anywhere near blue or black.

The need to give yourself room to load the next hoop is often overlooked until it is too late.

This is also the reason why in the first diagram, after correctly loading hoop 2, the player of red should endeavour in making hoop 1 to get a rush to the outside of the lawn (i.e. to the boundary alongside hoop 2), rather than to the inside (to the peg or hoop 3) as in a 4-ball break.

In general, it is easier to load a hoop accurately with split-shot (especially a stop-shot) than with a rush or thick take-off.

LOADING THE NEXT HOOP - Part 5

In the first diagram red has made hoop 1 and cut-rush yellow to the west boundary. From here the ideal shot would be a long roll which places yellow at hoop 3 while red goes to the opponent's balls on the north boundary.
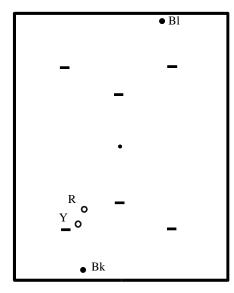
For many players this long roll would be too difficult and risky, and it is understandable that they would be unwilling to chance it.
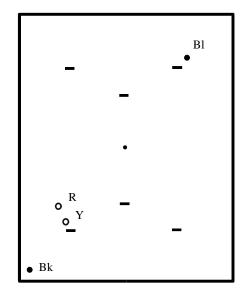
However, they should at least take off to the opponent's balls and roquet blue, not black. This allows hoop 3 to be loaded with blue in a stop-shot which also gains position to rush black to hoop 2. The stop-shot may involve a small risk, but it is one worth taking, since there is no satisfactory way to load hoop 3 if black is roqueted first.

The player who roquets black instead of blue may be more certain of making hoop 2, but will find it far more difficult to get a break going.

In the second diagram red is again for hoop 1 and has rushed black into the back of the hoop. The correct continuation is one that few players would think of: call the referee to check that black is partly in the hoop, then place red in the hoop against it and play a croquet shot that sends black all the way to load hoop 2 while red runs through to a position where it can roquet blue. The blue ball can be used to load hoop 3 before making hoop 2 with black - which has not been used since making hoop 1!

When shown this idea one experienced player remarked, "I could kick myself when I think how many such opportunities I have missed!"
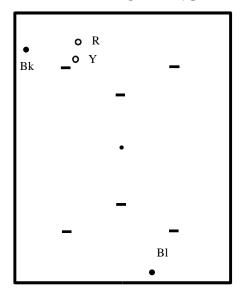
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LOADING THE NEXT HOOP - Part 6

In diagram 1 all clips are on hoop 1. Black has just shot from hoop 2 at the opponent's balls and missed. If the blue ball were in, say, the fourth corner, then for most players the best way of trying for a break with red would be to roquet yellow, take off to black, and use a stop-shot to load hoop 2 with black while making position with red to run hoop 1.
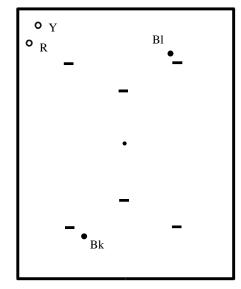
With blue on the border in front of hoop 3 as shown a reasonable alternative would be to make hoop 1 from yellow, being careful to obtain a backward rush (much easier than a forward one) to black, which should then be rushed not to hoop 2, but to the north boundary near the blue ball.

The second diagram shows a similar position, but the black ball is now in the first corner which makes the stop-shot less attractive than when it was more directly in front of hoop 1. Also, blue is now at hoop 3. This makes the stop-shot an unnecessary risk in any case, as it is relatively easy to make hoop 1 from yellow and in so doing obtain a rush back to black in the corner. Black can then be rushed either to hoop 2 or to the blue ball at hoop 3 to set up the break.

In situations such as those shown here the position of the opponent's balls needs careful consideration in determining which option offers the best chance of getting a break under way.

In some cases the player of red should also consider the possibility of making hoop 1 and setting so that he has a guaranteed break (unless the opponent roquets) on his next turn. This will be considered further in future articles.

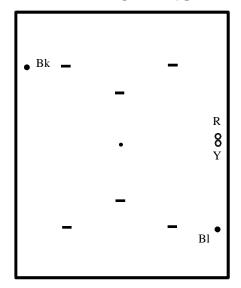# LOADING THE NEXT HOOP - Part 7

The first diagram shows a common situation where black has shot from hoop 3 at the opponent's balls near hoop 2 and missed. The red clip is on hoop 2 and yellow on hoop 1. How should red now play the turn?
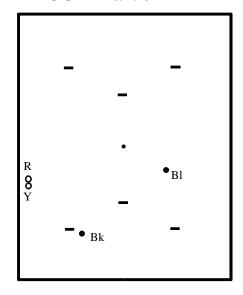
He has four options:

(1) Roquet yellow, make hoop 2 and rush or roll to hoop 3, ignoring the black and blue balls.

(2) Roquet yellow, take off to black and use a stop-shot to send black to hoop 3 while making position to run hoop 2.

(3) Roquet black immediately.

(4) Make hoop 2 from yellow with a rush to black. Leave yellow there and rush black toward hoop 1. Leave black near hoop 1 and go to blue. Send blue to hoop 3 and return to set up near yellow as shown in the second diagram.

Although frequently used, option (1) gives no chance of getting a break going and should not be seriously considered. Options (2) and (3) both involve loading hoop 3 before making hoop 2. Which of them is preferable depends on which shot (6-yard roquet or stop-shot for position) the player is most likely to play successfully.

Option (4) involves little or no risk and gives at least a 70% chance of a break on the next turn, since few players of blue and black would roquet 3 times out of 10 from the position of the second diagram. Therefore one of the other options should only be chosen if the player of red believes that it would be successful at least 7 times out of 10. We shall further consider leaves such as the one in diagram 2 in a later article.
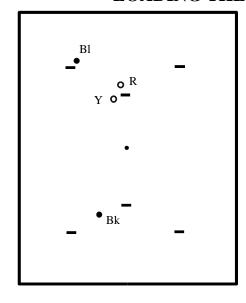
LOADING THE NEXT HOOP - Part 8

In the first diagram red is for hoop 4 and after making hoop 3 has cut-rushed yellow to the east boundary. How would you continue? Loading hoop 5 with yellow before rolling with blue for hoop 4 is too risky because if the roll is unsuccessful it could mean setting up in the middle of the lawn.
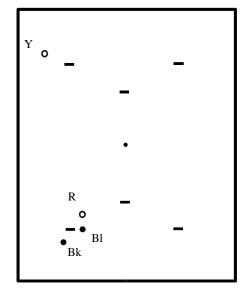
Many players would take off from yellow to blue, but this gives little chance of continuing the break.

The correct play is to roll both balls to a point about half way between hoop 4 and the blue ball, then roquet blue and send it just past hoop 5 while trying for position to run hoop 4. (In a later article on the "Trap Line" we shall consider this tactic in greater detail.) If the roll is unsuccessful it allows red to cover the boundary behind yellow to discourage a shot by blue.

In the second diagram red is for hoop 1 and has just taken off from blue and roqueted yellow. It is not possible to load hoop 2 with yellow while going to make hoop 1 with black. Where should yellow be placed? In the croquet stroke yellow should be sent as close as possible to the blue ball.

Such a move would never occur to most players, yet it is clearly the correct thing to do and involves very little risk. After making hoop 1 black can be used to load hoop 3 while going to the two balls you have conveniently left together. Then it will be a simple matter to use one of them to get an exact rush behind the other to hoop 2. No other shot from the position of diagram 2 gives as good a chance of continuing the break. If you can't load the hoop the next best thing is to leave two balls together.
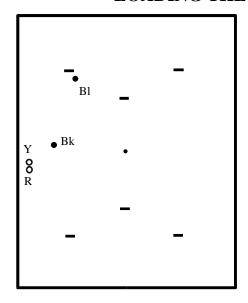
LOADING THE NEXT HOOP - Part 9

In an earlier article we mentioned the need to load the next hoop as early and accurately as possible. Players are often satisfied with placing a ball three or more yards from the hoop. The stronger and more experienced the player is, the less likely he is to be satisfied with placing a ball anywhere except right at the hoop.
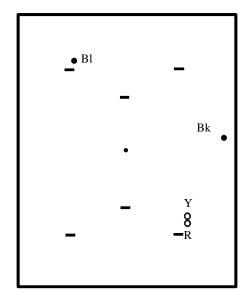
One would expect it to be the other way around, with a weaker player needing a ball to be more accurately placed. It is somewhat paradoxical therefore that in the position shown in the first diagram most inexperienced players as red, having just made hoop 6 in the process of a 4-ball break, would simply roquet yellow and take off to blue at the 1-back hoop.

For a stronger player this would not be good enough. He would rush yellow down and place it accurately a yard in front of 2-back, then rush black back up toward blue before making 1-back.

In the second diagram red is still for hoop 1. He has used a split-shot to load hoop 2 with yellow while coming to the opponent's balls at hoop 1. However, yellow has gone too far and finished about 3 yards away from hoop 2. Now he should rush blue out to the south boundary and use a stop-shot to place it right at hoop 2 before making hoop 1 with black. Sending it only part of the way to hoop 2 is not good enough.

If your first attempt to load a hoop is not sufficiently accurate then you should not miss an opportunity to improve it, as in the first diagram, or else put a second ball there as well, as in the second diagram.
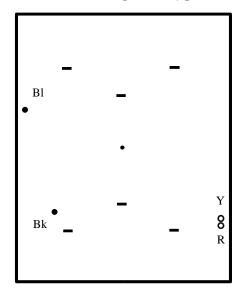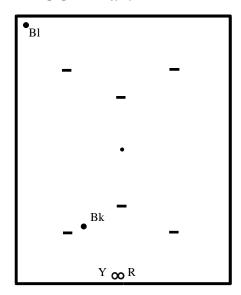
LOADING THE NEXT HOOP - Part 10

In the previous article we stressed the value of loading the next hoop as accurately as possible. Now we shall re-emphasise the importance of loading it as early as possible.

In the first diagram red has made hoop 1 and rushed yellow to the west boundary. Many players would now send yellow toward the peg while getting position to rush black closer to blue at hoop 2. However, this gives only one chance of accurately loading hoop 3. A better method is to use a stop-shot to put yellow at hoop 3, even though it means running past black so that you have to turn around and roquet it back toward the boundary. Then roll black into the middle while going to blue, or, if yellow did not go accurately to hoop 3, you have another chance to load it more accurately.

In the second diagram red is for hoop 2 and should send yellow to hoop 3 rather than leaving it at hoop 4. Players often take off to black in such situations, committing themselves to probably needing to do two things accurately in the one shot: place black at hoop 3 while also getting a rush on blue to bring it to the front of hoop 2.

It is surprising how many players, even at top level, miss such opportunities to give themselves a second chance at loading the next hoop. Remember, load the next hoop as early as is reasonably possible, and in so doing try to position the striker's ball so that if the first attempted loading is inaccurate you can rush the pivot ball to a position from where you will be able to make a second attempt at accurately loading the hoop. Players who follow this principle rarely fail to complete their breaks.
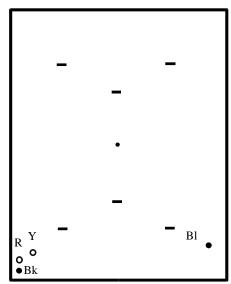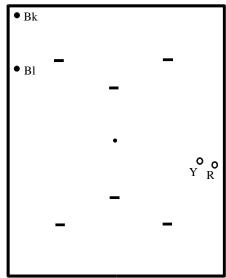
In the first diagram red is for hoop 1 and has roqueted yellow. It would be fairly easy to take off to black and make the first hoop, but hoop 2 cannot be considered "loaded" with the blue ball which is on the yardline.

A confident player may consider using a split shot to send yellow to hoop 2 while going to black with an immediate 4-ball break. If black were placed right at hoop 1 this could be the correct play, but with black placed as shown it would involve an unnecessary risk. Red should take off to blue and then use a thick take-off to put blue into court while going to black. There may be some risk in taking off right across the lawn to a border ball, and the loading of hoop 2 may not turn out to be really accurate, but this sort of small risk should always be taken.

In the second diagram the take-off to blue involves a slightly increased risk, and more importantly it would allow hoop 2 to be loaded only by playing a very difficult pass roll. In this situation yellow should be sent right to hoop 2 immediately as red goes to make hoop 1 from black. With blue in the 2nd corner some players tend to send yellow only about three-quarters of the way to hoop 2, but there is nothing "safe" about such chicken-hearted play. If hoop 1 is not made and red has to return to yellow the opponent will want to move the black ball rather than blue on the next turn, even if red and yellow are in the lawn close to hoop 2.

If red does not obtain a forward rush after hoop 1 he can simply take off to the blue ball and use it to load hoop 3, thus continuing the break.

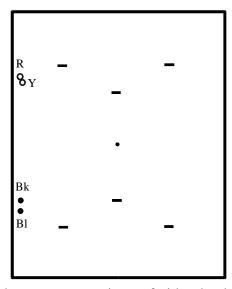# LOADING THE NEXT HOOP - Part 12

In the first diagram all clips are still on hoop 1, and black has just missed a shot from near hoop 2, finishing in the 1st corner. It is common to see players in this situation either ignore black and take the immediate rush to make hoop 1 from yellow, or else roquet black with red and use a stop-shot to send it 4 or 5 yards out of the corner before rushing yellow to hoop 1.
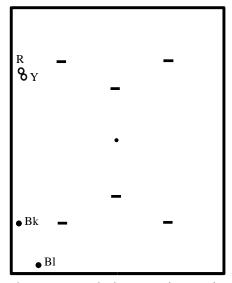
The blue ball is of little use, but the correct procedure is to play yellow, rushing red into the 1st corner to create a cannon which will allow the easy loading of hoop 2 with red while rushing black to hoop 1 in the same shot.

There are many different cannons which can be used to load hoops and set up breaks. Some are much harder than this one from the 1st corner for hoop 1. Good players practise them regularly and look for chances to create cannons at every opportunity.

In the second diagram red is for 1-back. A common continuation would be to rush yellow to the peg, take-off to black in the 2nd corner, and use a stop-shot to send it to 2-back before rolling with blue for 1-back. Trying to get a rush on blue in the stop-shot would be very risky.

A far better method is to rush yellow to blue and then rush blue into the corner to create a cannon with black. Another reasonable method is to rush yellow to a point between blue and black, then use a stop-shot to send yellow to 2-back while obtaining position to rush blue back toward black, in which case the break may be set up even if you do not succeed in creating the cannon.
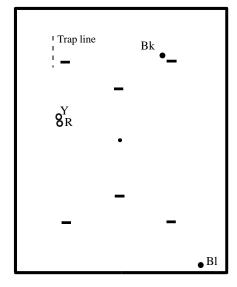
LOADING THE NEXT HOOP - Part 13

Players are sometimes afraid to load the next hoop correctly because it may involve putting the partner ball into the lawn. They fear the possibility of having to "set up" in the middle of the lawn if they do not succeed in getting the break started.
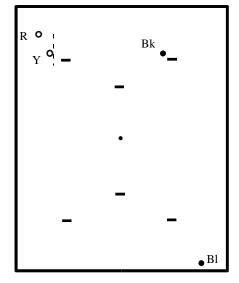
The first diagram shows a situation where red is for hoop 4 and has roqueted yellow on the border alongside hoop 2. Since the opponent's balls are together and accessible, the yellow ball should be sent to load hoop 5 with a roll shot in which red goes to a position where it can roquet one of the opponent's balls and use it to get a rush behind the other to hoop 4. As long as the roll shot is played so that red finishes well inside the boundary, this involves little risk.

Even when there is some risk involved, it may be well worth taking. It is really a matter of correctly weighing up the percentages. If the risk "comes off", you have an immediate break which could not have been obtained any other way. As long as you give yourself a noticeably better than 50% chance of getting the break started, the risk should be taken.

In the second diagram the opponent's balls are several yards apart, so the player of red would be far less certain of being able to rush one of them accurately to hoop 4. In this case he would be well advised to leave yellow where it is and take off to the opponent's balls with the idea of putting them both into the lawn in such a way as to give an easy break on the next turn provided the opponent does not roquet. This idea will be explained further in later articles.
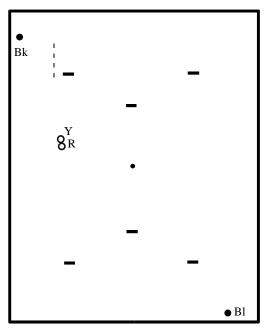
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In the first diagram the player of red is about to roll for hoop 2 with his partner ball. The normal thing, if making a short approach, is to send yellow to the right (or inside) of the hoop so that after making the hoop you can hope to rush the yellow ball toward either hoop 3 or the peg.

However in this case the approach shot will be a longish roll and the making of the hoop is no longer a near certainty, so it is wise to consider the possibility that you may not gain position to run the hoop.

For this reason it may be preferable to roll yellow to the left (outside) of hoop 2, placing it on what some English players refer to as the "trap line". For most players this imaginary line is situated between one and two yards to the left of the hoop, and is parallel to the west boundary. The yellow ball placed on this line meets the following conditions:

(1) it is near enough to the hoop to be easily roqueted after the hoop is made.

(2) if the hoop cannot be attempted, red can retire behind it as shown in the second diagram to a position about halfway between yellow and the side boundary, thus "setting a trap" for the opponent.

(3) If the opponent plays black to join up with blue (wherever it is - here we have placed it near the 4th corner), then red has a simple rush on yellow and can make hoop 2 before continuing.
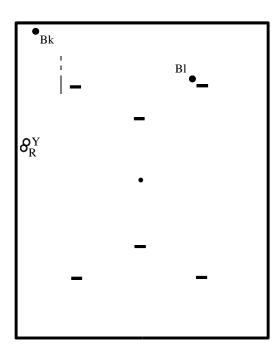
THE TRAP LINE - Part 1 (cont.)

(4) if black shoots at yellow or red and misses, then red is close enough to the border to immediately roquet black.

(5) yellow is far enough from the border so that after black is roqueted by red it can be sent right back to hoop 3 with a stop-shot which still allows red to hold a rush on yellow to make hoop 2.

Most experienced players realise the importance of "covering the boundary" to make a shot at your balls risky for the opponent, but many are not aware of the ways in which you can use the concept of this particular "trap line" to not only cover the boundary, but achieve the best possible "leave" if the hoop cannot be attempted. For example, in the second diagram on the previous page the boundary could have been covered by placing red right out on the border, or with yellow in various other positions; but then if black joined up with blue you may no longer be certain of roqueting yellow and making your hoop. Only if yellow is placed on the correct "trap line" will it be possible to meet the whole five desired conditions given above. It is useful to get out on the lawn and practise using this concept until it becomes an automatic part of your thinking in situations where the success of the approach shot is in doubt, until the exact position and length of the line is firmly fixed in your mind.

Note that you must be prepared to pay a price for using the "trap line", since if your approach happens to be successful and the hoop is made, you will have forgone the chance of obtaining a useful rush, and committed yourself to playing a longer split shot to send yellow to hoop 4 while going to the black ball at hoop 3. This split shot also needs practice. The diagram on this page shows another use of the line. Here black could be on the border anywhere within several yards of the 2nd corner. By placing yellow on the "trap line" with a slight pass roll as he goes to black, red can then send black to hoop 3 while trying for position to run hoop 2. Thus he gives himself a reasonable chance of establishing an immediate break, and retains the option of the leave shown in the second diagram on the previous page if necessary. (Previously the term "defensive line" was used, but led to some misunderstanding. The use of the "trap line" is in fact a very aggressive move.)

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THE TRAP LINE - Part 2

In part 1 we looked at two situations, in which the concept of an imaginary "trap line" could be used to ensure the best possible leave if you are forced to play a long approach shot to hoop 2.

The diagram shows a third case, and here we assume that red has just made hoop 1 and sent the blue ball to hoop 3, but failed to get a rush on yellow either to hoop 2 or to the unused black ball near the 2nd corner. The other three clips are still on hoop 1.

Many players in this situation would take off to either hoop 2 or the black ball, but a far better idea is to play a short pass roll which places yellow on the trap line while going to roquet black. Then the black ball is sent with a stop-shot to hoop 1 while trying for position to run hoop 2 with red.
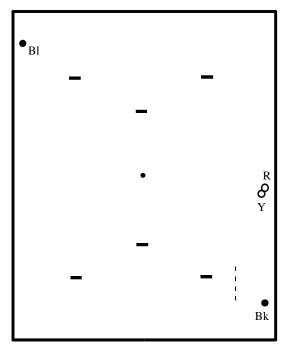
Note that sending black to hoop 1 (where your partner clip is) is better than placing it at hoop 4 or near the peg, as it gives the opponent a longer roquet and gives you a more certain break on your next turn if he misses. If the yellow clip were on hoop 4 or hoop 5, then black could be sent to one of those hoops. If yellow is already around on 4-back then there would be no better option than placing black at hoop 4.

If you cannot run the hoop, then you place red about halfway between yellow and the side boundary, so as to "cover" the boundary against a shot by blue, but being careful not to give it a double target.

You are then threatening to play an already set up 3-ball break with either ball in your next turn unless your opponent roquets. In fact, any missed roquet attempt will also allow you to have the fourth ball in your break almost immediately.

In this case you should place yellow near the in-lawn end of the trap line as shown on the diagram by the unbroken part of the line. This is so that if you gain position and are able to make the hoop, you can rush or cut yellow back toward hoop 1 and immediately bring the black ball into your continuing break.

THE TRAP LINE - Part 3

In parts 1 and 2 we looked at how the concept of an imaginary "trap line" near hoop 2 can be useful when making an approach to the hoop from a distance at which success is uncertain.

Here we consider the same idea in relation to hoop 4, where it is even more often likely to be of advantage.

The imaginary line near hoop 4 (see diagram) is further from the hoop and closer to the boundary than the trap line for hoop 2. This is due to the fact that the next hoop is closer, so you do not need as much room to send a border ball (e.g. from the position of black on the diagram) to hoop 5 with a stop-shot which still allows you to hold a rush on a ball from the trap line to hoop 4. 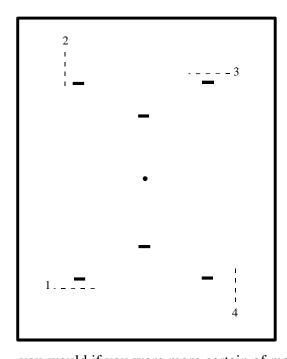In the diagram the black ball can be either at hoop 5 or somewhere near the border within 6-7 yards of the 4th corner. Red is for hoop 4, having just made hoop 3 and managed to cut-rush the yellow partner ball to the position shown. This type of situation seems to occur frequently. Many players would simply take off to black, perhaps risking going out in an attempt to get a rush, and then roll with black for hoop 4.

There is a far better alternative at any level of play. You should play a roll which places yellow on the "trap line" while going to roquet black (do not try for a rush on it). Then use a half-roll to send black to hoop 5 while trying for position to run hoop 4. If you succeed, the split of yellow to hoop 6 while going to black at hoop 5 should not prove difficult. If you do not gain position to make hoop 4, then you can place red so as to give it a rush on yellow to hoop 4, and "cover" the boundary at the same time.

Most players prefer to send black a yard or two past hoop 5, hoping to wire it from yellow on either hoop 4 or hoop 5. For this reason it is worth trying to put yellow so that it is not only on the trap line, but also on a line through the two hoops, to make the wiring easier.

The shots mentioned above need practice, with yellow and black starting from various positions. In some cases the position of blue may also be relevant.

THE TRAP LINE - Part 4

In parts 1 and 2 we examined the concept of an imaginary "trap line" to the left of hoop 2. In part 3 we saw that the "trap line" near hoop 4 is even more important, and is situated about a yard closer to the side border. The partner ball should be placed on this line when:

(1) using a long roll to approach the hoop with your partner ball and the next hoop is loaded with an opponent ball.

(2) the long roll approach with the partner ball would be too dangerous because there is an opponent ball "sitting over" the hoop on or near the border within 7-8 yards of the corner.

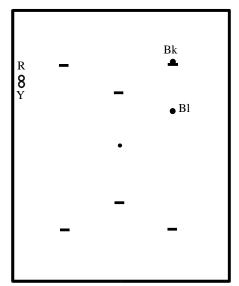The same concept is sometimes useful at hoops 1 and 3, where it involves placing the partner ball behind the hoop instead of in front as you would if you were more certain of making it; and therefore it means sacrificing any chance of obtaining a forward rush if the hoop is made. The diagram shows the approximate position of the "trap line" for each of the corner hoops. Placing the partner ball on this line enables you to "cover the boundary" if the approach is unsuccessful, by leaving your striker's ball about halfway between the partner ball and the boundary. This makes it extremely risky for the opponent to shoot at your balls with his ball which you have sent to your next hoop.

It should be noted, however, that if you succeed in making the hoop then the following split shot from the border in front of hoop 1 to hoops 2 and 3, or from the front of hoop 3 to hoops 4 and 5, will not be an easy one. The position of the fourth ball can be an important consideration here. For example you can use the hoop 1 "trap line" more happily if the fourth ball is near hoop 4, since if you make the hoop you can send your partner ball to hoop 3 and go to the ball at hoop 4, then take off to the ball at hoop 2.

Note also that there is no effective trap line for the centre hoops. For the 'return' hoops (1-back to 4-back) the "trap lines" will correspond in position to those shown in the diagram, but their use may be complicated by the fact that the opponent could be entitled to a 'lift'.

BALLS IN HOOPS - Part 1

In the first diagram all clips are still on the first hoop. The player of red and yellow has accidentally put his red ball into the jaws of hoop 5 and the opponent has since set up in the 1st corner. What should red do now? The main rule is: Don't panic. The red ball is actually in quite a safe position.

Yellow should now shoot at red, or even at the opponent's balls. Red can be left in the hoop for several turns, provided yellow has a shot which will not give the opponent an easy 3-ball break, and the opponent is not likely to make hoop 5 in his next turn.

In the second diagram black has failed in an attempt to run hoop 3, and red, whose clip is still on hoop 1, has roqueted yellow on the west border near hoop 2. Black could easily run hoop 3 on its next shot, so has to be removed from the hoop.
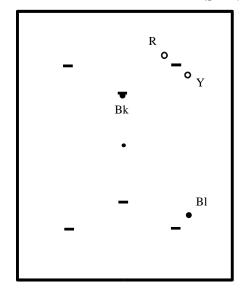
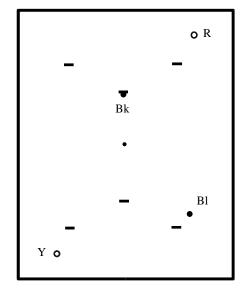There are two principles which apply here but are often ignored:
(1)   If possible go to the ball in the hoop (black) first.
(2)   Do not hesitate to concede the hoop if there is anything at all to be gained.

Many players would take off to blue, then to a position just behind hoop 3. They would succeed in removing the black ball from the hoop, but without any way of continuing the break. The correct play is to take off to the playing side of hoop 3 and rush black through the hoop toward the blue ball.

This gives black the hoop, but also allows red to get a rush on blue to hoop 1 with a reasonable chance of getting a controlled break under way.

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BALLS IN HOOPS - Part 2

When you have unintentionally put an opponent ball into a hoop there may be little you can do if there is a ball near a baulk, unless you can continue the break.
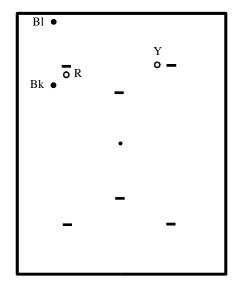
The first diagram shows a situation taken from a tournament game between 1st division players. Red had left the black ball partly within the jaws of hoop 6 and then failed to gain position to run hoop 3. Red had only one shot remaining, and a "saving" shot was impossible because red was wired from yellow. With the black clip on hoop 4, red could see his opponent taking the black ball to B-baulk and roqueting yellow, sending it at least part of the way to blue with an easy break to follow.
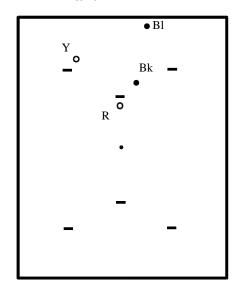
After some thought, he hit his red ball to a position one yard east of the blue ball! The opponent could still have taken the baulked black ball to either baulk, but with red threatening to continue its break he did not have the nerve to do so. He reluctantly played blue, which was still for hoop 1 and had little chance of making a break.

Blue's correct play here would have been to set up the position shown in the second diagram by rolling red toward B-baulk while going to yellow, and sending yellow toward A-baulk before returning to hoop 4 where the black clip is. Unless red or yellow makes a roquet, black can claim the baulk on his next turn with an easy break. Any shot taken and missed would immediately give black the fourth ball as well.

If you had been red or blue in these two positions, what would you have done?

THE FOURTH BALL - Part 1

A 4-ball break is easier to play than a 3-ball break, so it is desirable to convert a 3-ball break into a 4-ball break whenever a suitable opportunity presents itself.

If the fourth ball is on the yard-line behind an even-numbered hoop then the most obvious way of 'picking it up' and bringing it into the break is to run right through to the border in making the hoop.
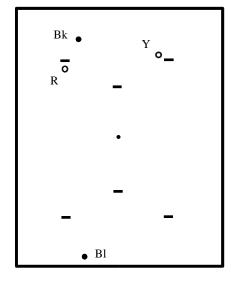
In the first diagram red is about to make hoop 2 and will run through to the border before roqueting blue. Notice that on the approach shot black has been left in front of hoop 2 rather than behind it. This will allow blue to be sent all the way down to hoop 4 with a stop-shot in which red holds position to rush black closer to the yellow ball at hoop 3.
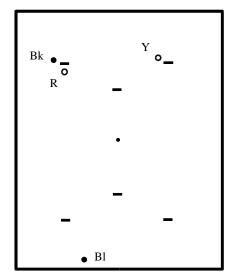
In the second diagram red is about to make hoop 6. It is quite common for players to miss the opportunity to run right through to the north border and roquet blue, which can then be used to load the 2-back hoop.

Instead they make hoop 6 and roquet black, then send it only part of the way to 2-back while going to yellow. After making 1-back they suddenly discover that they must do something about the blue ball because they have given a 'lift'.

Somewhat better would have been to take off from black to blue and split blue to 2-back while going to yellow; but this requires you to do two things accurately in the one shot. While a good player should not find this shot difficult, he will avoid the need to play it when there is a simpler alternative as described above.

Players are sometimes advised to play a 3-ball break until they have loaded the hoop nearest to the fourth ball, then think about bringing it into the break. In the first diagram this would involve red making hoop 2 and splitting black to hoop 4 before making hoop 3 with yellow. Then yellow can be used to load hoop 5 before making hoop 4 with the black ball, which can then be rolled to load 2-back while going to blue which can be sent to hoop 6 while going to yellow at hoop 5.
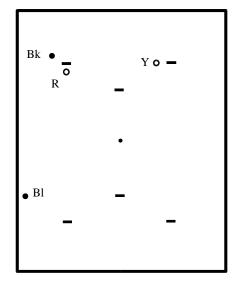
An alternative after making hoop 3 would have been to take off from yellow to blue and use a slight pass-roll to load hoop 5 with blue while going to black at hoop 4. Then hoop 4 should be made with a rush on black to yellow in order to immediately bring it back into the break.
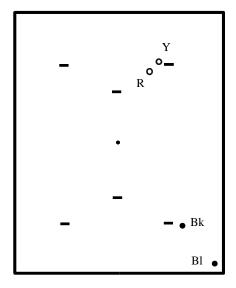
It is important that a player should learn to do all this if necessary, but a good player should also consider the advantages of trying to bring blue into the beak immediately, by placing black alongside hoop 2 to the left in the approach shot as shown in the second diagram.

After red makes the hoop black can be rushed to any point on the south boundary between blue and the 1st corner, then sent to hoop 4. Blue can often then be cut-rushed into the lawn, or else brought a yard or two out in a take-off to yellow.

For most players there is nothing to lose by attempting to bring the blue ball into the break immediately, and it offers a good chance of making things easier for yourself. Players should practise both methods in order to find out which one best suits their range of shots.
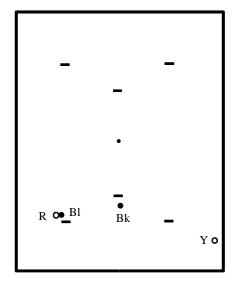
THE FOURTH BALL - Part 3

In the first diagram red is about to run hoop 2, and on the approach shot has placed the black ball to the left of the hoop in order to begin the process of getting the blue ball into the break. After making hoop 2, red will rush black about half-way to the blue ball, and from there use a stop-shot to load hoop 4 with black while going to blue, which can be sent a few yards into court toward the 2-back hoop as red takes off to yellow.
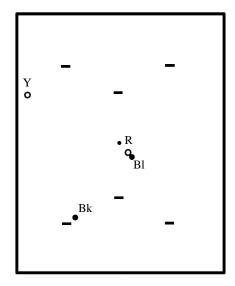
After making hoop 3 red would again be hoping to get a rush to blue so that he can bring it fully into the break. If he does not get the rush after hoop 3 he should still be able to get behind blue with a take-off. A player who does not follow this procedure will be forced to play a 3-ball break for quite some time, with an increased chance of breaking down at some stage.

In the second diagram the fourth ball (blue) is in the 4th corner. After making hoop 2 red has correctly sent black to a position outside hoop 4 and slightly behind it. Many players wrongly place black between hoop 4 and the peg, but find that if they fail to get a forward rush on yellow after making hoop 3 and have to take-off to blue, the shot needed to load hoop 5 with blue and get a rush on black to hoop 4 is far more difficult than if black is placed correctly as shown in the diagram.

This particular situation seems to occur in games with surprising frequency, but the correct placement of the black ball is rarely seen. After making hoop 2 the player had to think six shots ahead in order to appreciate the value of placing black so as to give himself the chance of bringing blue into the break in the simplest and safest way.

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THE FOURTH BALL - Part 4

Some quite strong players fail to bring the fourth ball into a break when it is their partner ball. They prefer to play a 3-ball break with the opponent's balls, leaving the partner ball near the border so they will have "somewhere safe to come home to" if the need arises.
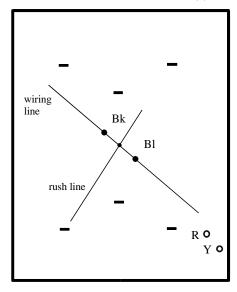
This is foolish and negative thinking. By leaving the fourth ball out of play they almost guarantee that the need to return to it will arise, and unfortunately this only serves to strengthen their conviction that they have done the right thing.
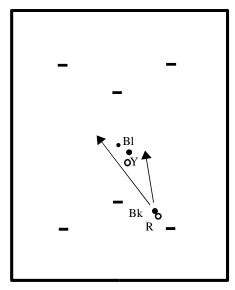
In the first diagram red is for hoop 5 and has roqueted blue near hoop 1. Red should immediately take off to yellow in the 4th corner and split it to hoop 6 while going to black at hoop 5. This is far better than sending blue to hoop 6 and leaving yellow on the border. The second diagram shows a similar situation where red is for 2-back and has roqueted blue near the peg. Instead of sending blue to 3-back he should take off to yellow and send yellow to 3-back while going to black.

Apart from making the break easier, another excellent reason for having your partner ball in the break is that it enables you to achieve more accurate placement of the balls (including, of course, the partner ball itself) after making the final hoop.

This may all seem rather obvious, but I have seen a player start a 4-ball break and deliberately convert it to a 3-ball break by rushing the partner ball to the 4th corner and leaving it there! When he insisted that this was tactically correct, I could only say, "I hope you do it when you play me!"
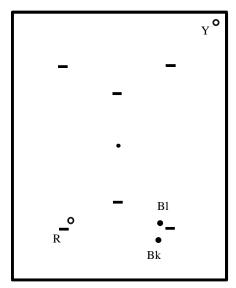
WIRING - Part 1

When a player has learnt to make regular breaks with only a small risk of breaking down, he should try to not only complete the break but achieve the best possible "leave" at the end of it. The first diagram shows a situation where red has wired the opponent's balls at the peg so as to give his yellow partner ball an excellent chance of a further immediate break if the opponent fails to roquet.
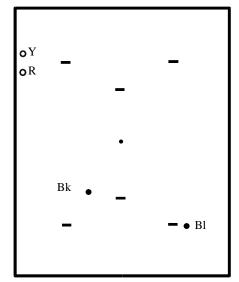
This leave is quite strong if the yellow clip is on hoop 1, and better still if it is on one of the centre hoops. Note that the wiring line is approximately at right-angles to the line joining the peg to hoop 1 so that yellow will not have the peg interfering with a rush of either blue or black to hoop 1. The best way to achieve this leave is as follows:

Before making the final hoop (say, 3-back) with red, place the yellow partner ball and one opponent ball together near the peg. The best place for them at this stage is on the wiring line and on the side of the peg nearest 3-back.

After making 3-back with red (see 2nd diagram), send black past the peg and go to the two balls. Roquet blue and use a gentle croquet shot to wire it from black. In this shot blue should be sent, as much as possible, in a direction along the wiring line rather than across it, so as to allow a greater margin for error. Then roquet yellow, which was left close to blue so that in positioning blue you did not have to worry about getting red over to it, and roll both balls to set a rush near the fourth corner. If the rush is also set on or near the wiring line you will have an exact rush to whichever ball the opponent leaves in the middle.

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WIRING - Part 2

In the first diagram the red clip is on hoop 1 and yellow on hoop 3. Blue has just failed to make hoop 4. As red you may shoot at black, but what will you do if you roquet it? Most players would try for a rush on blue to make hoop 1 with little chance of continuing the break. In doing so they would be missing an excellent chance to almost guarantee a break for yellow on the next turn.
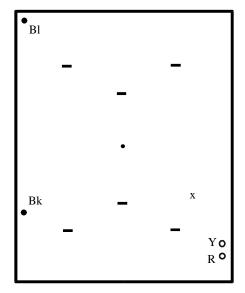
It should be a relatively simple task to leave the opponent's balls wired at hoop 4 with a couple of gentle croquet shots, then hit red back to give yellow some sort of rush to hoop 3.
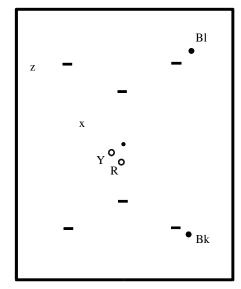
The player who wishes to improve his wiring skills should work out wired positions for himself and practise obtaining them. Some are difficult to achieve and others may be achieved much more easily, especially if you start planning for them early enough.

Diagram 2 shows an excellent "leave" when the yellow clip is on hoop 4. Because there are two hoops between the opponent's balls the wiring is easier to achieve, and even if blue and black turn out not to be properly wired from each other any shot the opponent takes will be very risky.

Experienced players get to know the places on the lawn where wiring is easy to achieve, and learn to keep the possibility in the 'back of their mind' at all times so that whenever a situation arises where there will be a lot to gain by wiring the opponent's balls they can start working the balls into position as early as possible.

WIRING - Part 3

The position in the first diagram is commonly seen at the start of a game, after blue has missed the shot at black which had been set as a 'tice'.
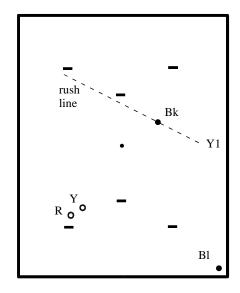
On a strange or difficult lawn some players would then play red and simply cut-rush yellow to point x which is wired from both opponent balls, and there set a rush for hoop 1. (Note that either blue or black should shoot at the rush unless both are wired from it.) Then the opponent will probably think of removing his black ball from the vicinity of your hoop, but would be taking a considerable risk if he chose to shoot at blue and give you two balls in forward play.
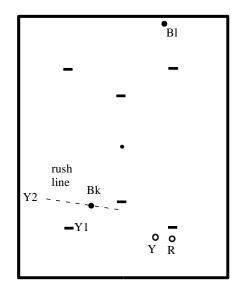
In the 2nd diagram red is already on the peg and is setting up for yellow to make 3-back. He has sent black to 3-back and blue to 4-back and now is about to rush yellow out to the 2nd corner and set a rush for it back to 3-back. This is a reasonable course of action, but he should at least consider the possibility of rushing yellow instead to point x where he can set the rush wired from both opponent balls.

It is true that if the opponent happens to roquet, the balls left in the middle of the lawn may make it easier for him; but if he misses then yellow will find it easier to rush the shorter distance to his hoop with accuracy.

An alternative wiring position could be near point z, which is further from yellow's hoop, but has the advantage that wiring from blue is no longer necessary. A good player will be aware of such doubly-wired spots so he can use them to advantage when there is a good chance to do so.

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RUSH-LINE THEORY - Part 1

This theory states that the best way of obtaining a rush to a hoop is to play the preceding croquet shot from a point along the line of the desired rush.
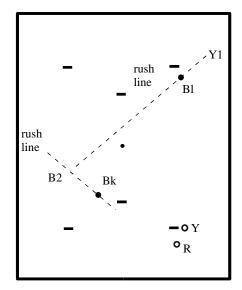
In the first diagram red has just made hoop 1 and will need to rush black to hoop 2. Yellow should be rushed therefore to point Y1 which is on the desired rush line drawn from hoop 2 through black.
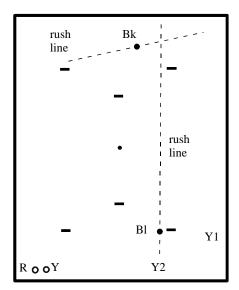
The theory arises from the idea that if the croquet shot is played from on or near the rush line, the striker's ball will travel along this line as it approaches the black ball. Therefore there is a greater margin for error than if the striker's ball were rushed only to a point near the peg and had to travel across the rush line.

When approaching along the rush line you can aim to get 1 yard from the black ball, and if the red ball goes 1-2 feet further or falls 1-2 feet short then you will still have a reasonable rush. A ball travelling across the rush-line has a much smaller margin for error.

In the second diagram red has just made hoop 4. Many players would rush yellow to point Y1 near hoop 1 and load hoop 6 with a stop-shot in which the red striker's ball travels across the rush line almost at right-angles. The rush-line theorist would instead rush yellow to point Y2 on the rush line and play a split shot with a wider angle in which the red ball approaches black along the rush line. The wider angle may make the split slightly more difficult, but in compensation for this there is a greater margin for error as explained above.

RUSH-LINE THEORY - Part 2

The rush-line theory explained in part 1 can be extended to involve a second rush-line in some positions. In the first diagram red has just made hoop 4. The yellow ball should be rushed to point Y1 from which yellow can be sent to load hoop 6 while red gets a rush on blue to point B2. Notice that point B2 is on the rush-line of black to hoop 5.
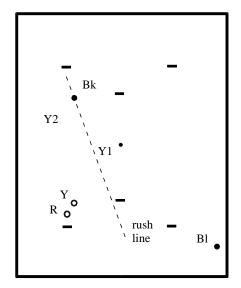
By rushing each ball to the rush-line of the next ball in this manner red can maximise his chance of getting accurate rushes and continuing the break.
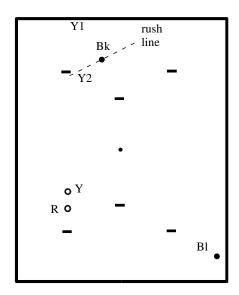
The second diagram shows another example where two rush-lines are involved. Red is for 1-back and many players would rush yellow to the blue ball, then rush blue to 1-back. It would be better to rush yellow to point Y1 on the east boundary so that yellow can be used to load the 2-back hoop; and the rush on blue would be better made to the black ball rather than the 1-back hoop.

Better still is to follow rush-line theory, and rush yellow to point Y2 on the south boundary. From here also there is room to send yellow to 2-back while approaching blue along the rush-line to point B2 which is on the rush-line of black to the 1-back hoop.

Finding the best place to rush yellow to thus requires thinking six shots ahead. This may sound impressive, but a player who makes a habit of thinking in terms of rush-lines will learn to see it all in a flash. He will even learn to think further ahead and leave his balls at the end of the previous turn so as to be able to take advantage of the rush-lines if the opponent plays as expected and fails to roquet.

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RUSH-LINE THEORY - Part 3

The extent to which a player accepts and adopts rush-line theory will depend on the range of shots with which he is comfortable.

There are many situations where it will be desirable to rush a ball closer to a hoop, but it is impossible to load the next hoop with a croquet shot played from the rush-line. In other cases the shot may be possible but of dubious value.
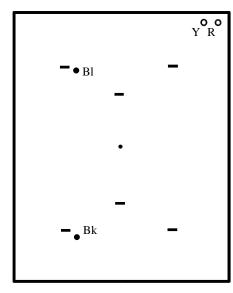
In the first diagram, rush-line theory would recommend that red, which has just made hoop 1, should rush yellow to point Y1 on the rush-line of black to hoop 2. However, loading hoop 3 from point Y1 requires a wide-angle split in which the difficulty in controlling the direction of the striker's ball may outweigh any gain in the margin for error as regards distance.
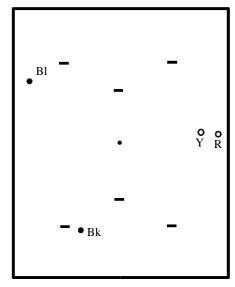
For this reason many players would have preferred a rush on yellow to point Y2. This would involve loading hoop 3 with a stop-shot in which the red ball travels across the rush-line and so has only a small margin for error in distance; but with both balls travelling in the same line the stop-shot is likely to be easier to control than a wide-angle split.

Similarly, if black were placed as in the second diagram many would prefer the stop-shot from point Y1 rather than the split from point Y2.

Note that from point Y2 the red ball would travel as nearly as possible along the rush-line. There is no point beyond black on the rush-line from which it is possible to load hoop 3 and keep a rush on black to hoop 2.

IDEAL LEAVES - Part 1

When a player has developed the ability to make consistent breaks he should start planning "ideal leaves". The planning is done while your opponent is in play. You know where your clips will be when it is your turn, and you ask yourself, "If I cannot make a hoop next turn, but could place the balls wherever I want to, where would be the ideal places to leave them?"

The diagrams show two "ideal leaves" when red is for hoop 1, and yellow is also for hoop 1 or is already on 4-back. Notice that in neither of them are the red and yellow balls anywhere near hoop 1, nor is there a rush set for hoop 1.
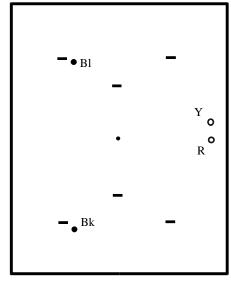
If allowed to place the balls anywhere they wish, (barring wired positions), most players would choose a 'leave' inferior to those shown here.
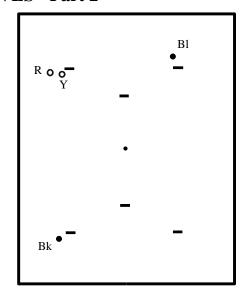
In the first diagram red can cut-rush yellow to the blue ball at hoop 2, then rush blue to hoop 1; or if black shoots at blue and misses then the first rush can be to black.

In the second diagram blue is 1-2 yards in from the border to the side of hoop 2. This allows red (after black moves) to rush yellow out near blue without having to worry about judging the strength of the rush, then put yellow in near hoop 2 while getting a rush on blue to hoop 1.

Either leave gives red about 70% chance (since black has less than 30% chance of roqueting) of a break on the next turn. When it is your turn, unless you can see at least a 50% chance of an immediate break, you should set up such an "ideal leave."
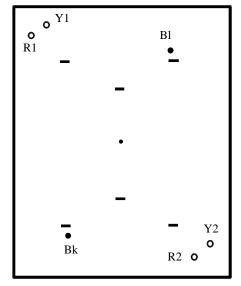
IDEAL LEAVES - Part 2

The first diagram shows an "ideal leave" when the red clip is on hoop 2 and yellow is still for hoop 1. Unless the opponent roquets, either red or yellow has at least a 3-ball break on the next turn. After making hoop 1 in any game, if the other balls are placed so that you have a less than even chance of continuing the break, then it is wise to aim instead at achieving a leave such as this.
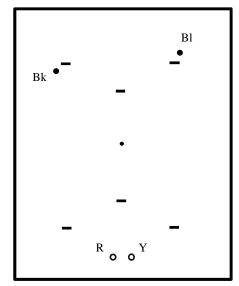
The red and yellow balls are set parallel to the east border, and preferably 1-2 yards in from the border so that if the opponent shoots at them and misses you will be able to roquet his ball and get it out some distance into the lawn immediately. It is better still if red and yellow are partly wired from one or both of the opponent's balls, but "ideal leaves" should be planned without any thought of wiring, since it is likely that if you have sufficient control of the balls to achieve wired positions, you should have been able to continue the break.

An alternative "ideal leave" for the same clip positions is shown in the second diagram. Here red and yellow are set near hoop 2 rather than on the boundary. This is so that, if black shoots at them and misses, red can run through hoop 2 to the border and immediately bring black into the break. Notice that the 'ideal' position for black in these two leaves is slightly different.

In practice sessions it is good to place the balls in such "ideal leave" positions, shoot with black or blue at any ball, then play the break with red or yellow.
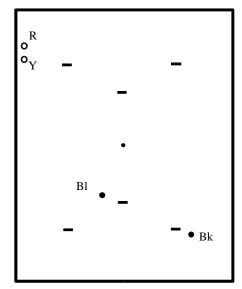
IDEAL LEAVES - Part 3

When you have clips on hoops in opposite corners the "ideal leave" is to place an opponent's ball at each of your hoops. In the first diagram red is for hoop 3 and yellow is for hoop 1. The red and yellow balls can be set in either of the other two corners, and are best placed 2-3 yards from the corner on an angle diagonally across the corner as shown.
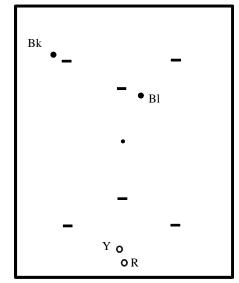
If red and yellow are in the 4th corner (positions R2 and Y2) then red should be able to rush yellow to a point on the east boundary opposite hoop 4 from where a thick take-off will put yellow in near the hoop while red goes to blue at hoop 3. Alternatively yellow is also threatening to cut-rush red to the south border and send it to hoop 2 with a split-shot in which yellow goes to black at hoop 1.

The second diagram shows another "ideal leave" for the same clip positions. Yellow can cut-rush red to make hoop 1, or red can similarly put yellow at hoop 4 before taking off to the blue ball at hoop 3. The red and yellow balls should be set 2-3 yards in from the border to make the cut-rushes easier, but still allow an opponent ball to be roqueted immediately on the south border if the opponent shoots and misses.

With clips on 2-back and 4-back, or on the other two diagonally opposite corner hoops (i.e. hoops 2 and 4, or 1-back and 3-back) there are corresponding leaves similar to these two. A player with such positions in mind is able to choose whether or not to set up the leave rather than make an unlikely attempt to establish a break immediately in any given situation, and will often succeed in reducing the number of opportunities the opponent has to roquet, which will also increase his own chances of getting a break established before the opponent does.

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When the two clips are on the same hoop, or one ball is already around, it may be harder to find an "ideal leave" which will guarantee you an easy break if the opponent fails to roquet.

In the first diagram red is for hoop 4. If black is not wired from blue and shoots at it, then a miss will allow red to rush yellow to black, followed by black to blue and blue to hoop 4. Red can cut-rush yellow to blue at hoop 5 in any case.
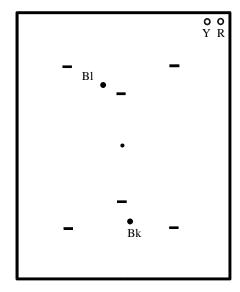
In this leave the opponent's balls may seem closer together than is desirable. They could be left further apart, but that would decrease your chance of getting the break fully established if, say, the opponent retired with black into the 3rd corner. Therefore it is likely that you would have to allow him further chances to roquet.
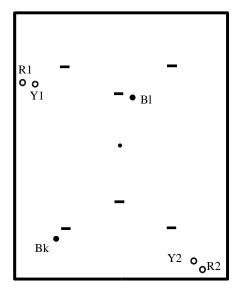
It is more aggressive to allow him only the one chance to roquet, and it is also sound tactically as the percentages favour aggressive play.

The second diagram shows a very similar leave if red is on hoop 6 and yellow is on the same hoop or already around. In this case the rush is best set to the black ball at the 1-back hoop.

As explained above, clips on the same hoop usually make it harder to find an "ideal leave". This is one reason, among others, why experienced players tend to refrain from "making a double" by peeling the partner ball through a hoop as they make the same hoop with the other ball.
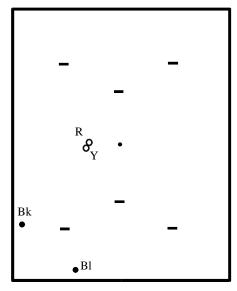
IDEAL LEAVES - Part 5

When your clip is on a centre hoop it can be more difficult to find a good leave. In the first diagram red is for hoop 5 and yellow is either already around or is also for hoop 5. The rush could be set to either of the opponent's balls, or, as shown, to the position where black will finish if it shoots at blue and misses. If black plays into the 4th corner then red will have to cut-rush yellow to a position near the blue ball and rush blue to hoop 5.
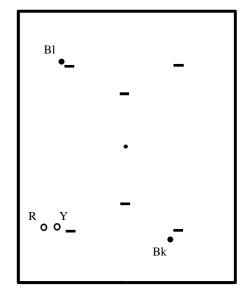
There is a good chance of wiring black from blue with two centre hoops and the peg in between, but there is also the possibility that blue could take the shot, and with the opponent's balls at the centre hoops you cannot leave your balls more than 15 yards from one of his.

If the yellow clip is still on hoop 1 (and red on hoop 5 as in the first diagram) then a leave such as the one shown in the second diagram (positions R1 and Y1) makes the break simpler to establish provided the opponent does not roquet. Again the rush could be set to hoop 5 instead of to the blue ball at hoop 6. Setting at positions R2 and Y2 leaves the opponent with a longer roquet, but if blue is played into either the 2nd or 3rd corner then yellow will need to play a long split shot from near the 4th corner to put red at hoop 2 while going to black at hoop 1.

A comparison of these two diagrams with those we have given previously will explain why some experienced players try to avoid having their clips on the centre hoops. They achieve this by not making hoop 4 (or possibly even hoop 3 - instead they would set an "ideal leave") unless they can keep going and make the centre hoops as well; and by either stopping at 4-back or continuing the break right to the peg.

IDEAL LEAVES - Part 6

The planning of one or more "ideal-leaves" for the position of your clips during your opponent's turn will enable you to give yourself the best possible chance of getting a break on your next turn in the following situations:
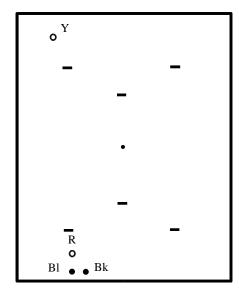
    (1) When you have little chance of continuing the current break because balls are out of play.
    (2) When you have roqueted with a ball which is already around.
    (3) When you wish to set for your partner, especially in handicap doubles if you are the stronger player.
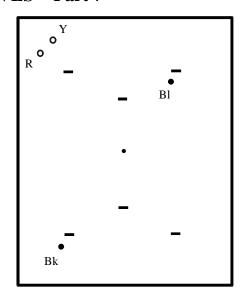
    It is surprising how often players reduce their own chances by setting a leave which is clearly inferior because they had not worked out the best possible positions to leave the balls.

    In addition to the above uses, you can sometimes go about setting up a break in a way which reserves the option of reaching an "ideal leave" if your attempt is unsuccessful.

    In the first diagram red is for 2-back and yellow for 1-back. Red has roqueted yellow and should now roll it to a position just west of 2-back while going to black on the border. Black can then be placed at 3-back while red goes to blue, which should be sent to 1-back (yellow's hoop) as red tries for position to run 2-back. If red cannot then make the hoop it can give itself a rush behind yellow, setting up the "ideal leave" shown in the second diagram and giving an easy break on the next turn if the opponent does not roquet. Most players can appreciate the value of this, but it requires the player to have the position of the second diagram clearly in mind at the start of the turn.

IDEAL LEAVES - Part 7

While the practice of working out and using "ideal leaves" may not enjoy universal support among leading players, many have made it an important part of their tactical play.
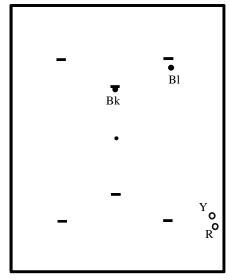
At international level, where the opponent is likely to roquet almost everything, there is more pressure to go for even the slightest chance of a break rather than electing to set an "ideal leave". For us mere mortals, however, there are several different types of situation, as explained in parts 1-6, where deliberately playing for an "ideal leave" can increase our chances of winning the game.
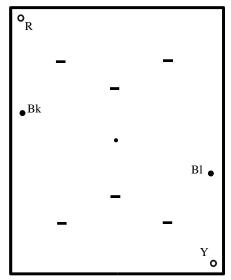
In fact, one of the most interesting uses is when you know you are not playing well. Perhaps you have not been able to practise recently, or you just do not seem to have the "feel" of the lawn.

In such a state you have arrived at the position shown in the first diagram. The yellow clip is still on hoop 1, but you have muddled your way through two hoops with the red ball, which is now for hoop 3, and have taken off from yellow to the opponent's balls on the south boundary. If you were playing well you may roquet blue and rush black to hoop 3, hoping afterward to get a rush to either yellow or blue and somehow set up a break.

Today you decide instead to roquet black, put it at hoop 1, then send blue to hoop 3 while returning to yellow to set up the "ideal leave" shown in the second diagram. Unless the opponent roquets there will be a ball at one of your hoops on your next turn and a good chance of loading the following hoop. Even when out of touch you should be able to make some progress from here.

NON-STANDARD LEAVES

There are various recommended "standard leaves" used by players at top level after they have completed the first nine-hoop break to 4-back or the second 12-hoop break to the peg. They can be found in almost any croquet textbook, together with an explanation of how to arrive at them, how to continue afterward, and what to do when the opponent uses them. Some are set mainly to give the best chance of a triple peel on the next turn.

Since these articles are not intended for players at the top level I will only mention two non-standard leaves which may prove useful.

In the first diagram red is for 4-back and yellow has just gone to the peg and set up as shown. It is not hard to leave black in or on the penultimate hoop if you put 2 balls at the hoop before making 4-back. The only danger is that the opponent will now pick up black and roquet blue, but few players below top level would risk leaving blue at your 4-back hoop.

The second diagram shows what I call the "gala day" leave, since it is particularly useful on small lawns when you have gone around to 4-back and your opponent has a 'lift'. Black and blue should be left about six inches in from the border so that if one of them shoots from where it is at the other and misses you will have an attractive double target.

The distance of blue and black from your balls depends on the ability of your opponent, but should be slightly greater from the ball you have taken to 4-back, since that is the one the opponent will prefer to shoot at. You would need to practise reaching this position, and must start working for it immediately after making 1-back.

FOR THE COACH

I believe it is of utmost importance that the ideas covered in this booklet should be passed on as widely as possible to Australian Croquet players. However, many will be unable to learn from diagrams and explanations such as those I have given. Those interested in coaching will face many problems in the teaching of this material.

First of all, and probably most difficult, the players will need to be convinced of the need to spend time doing things which will result in an improvement in their tactical play. Then a judgement must be made as to which tactical ideas a particular player is ready to receive, understand and incorporate into his play, given the level of skill he possesses.

Effective methods of teaching the ideas must also be found. Some coaches have tried using a magnetic board drawn up as a croquet lawn, with coloured markers (glued to small fridge magnets) to represent balls. It seems, however, that only about 30-35% of players (even of those who are keen to learn) are able to transfer the concepts from the magnetic board to an actual game situation.
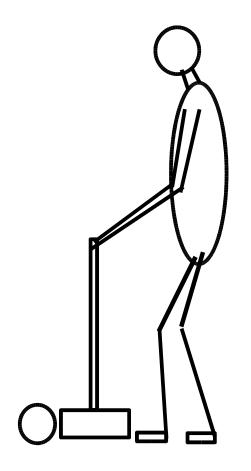
The most effective way may be to set up positions on the lawn similar to those given in this booklet, then ask a player what he would do if it were his turn, and allow him to do it. This takes time, but he may then be willing to enter into discussion of other possibilities, and try them out. Positions such as those given in the sections on Thinking Ahead (pages 3-5) and Returning To The Partner Ball (pages 8-10) have been found to be particularly effective in convincing players that there is much to learn in the area of tactics. It is important to allow the player to practise the correct tactical moves in as many different ways as possible, in order to fix them in his mind and increase the chance that he will think of them in a game when under pressure.

As one experienced player has commented, the player who understands and adopts tactical moves such as these should never again need to worry about opponents who use the legendary "Aunt Emma" tactics, as the odds will be weighted so much in his favour (given that the difference in shot-making skill level is not too great) that the result will not be in doubt.

On this page I have raised many problems and answered few of them. The answers belong in a coaching manual which may one day become available to coaches. It seems that until now most such manuals have concentrated on technique. Some have tried to set out some basic tactical ideas (and some more advanced ideas, e.g. detailed explanations of triple peeling), but I am not aware that anyone has yet given much consideration of the most effective ways to teach such ideas to players who need to know them.

CROQUET: LESSONS IN TACTICS

by John Riches

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