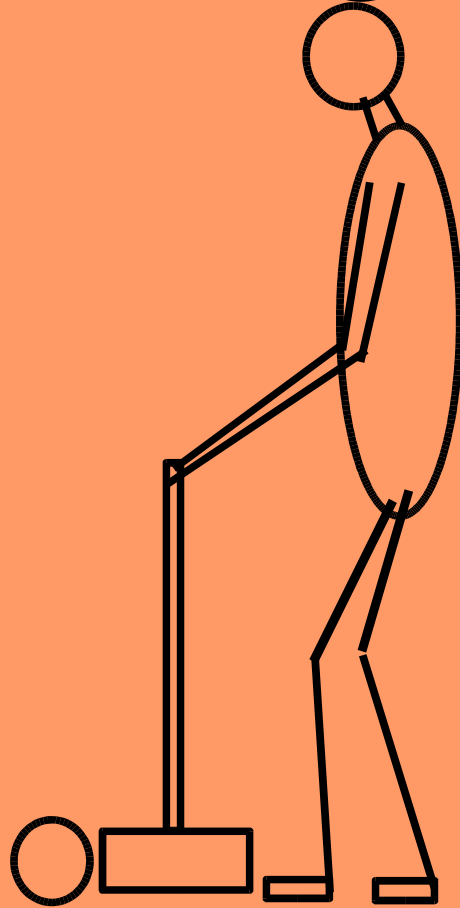


CROQUET COACHING: ERROR CORRECTION



by John Riches

CROQUET COACHING - RECOGNITION OF ERRORS

INTRODUCTION

This booklet is intended to assist coaches in diagnosing and treating the problems of technique commonly encountered by croquet players.

There are other books which explain how the various shots should be played, but few mention how to put things right when the shots are not turning out as expected.

In playing a roquet, for example, the player needs to give attention to such things as the suitability of his mallet (length, weight, size of grip, etc), stalking the ball, correct grip and hand positioning, correct stance and foot positioning, slope of handle, type of swing (from hands or shoulders; pendulum swing or forward push, etc.), body movement, length of backswing, tightness of grip, acceleration of mallet head, squareness of mallet face, follow-through, etc. In addition to the many things he must concentrate on getting right, there are things to avoid; and on top of all this there is his mental approach which also plays an important part in determining the success or otherwise of the shot.

When things are going wrong, the player often is unable to determine which of these things is the cause of his difficulties. This is understandable, because he is unable to watch himself play the shot from the various angles needed to ascertain whether or not he is actually doing things the way he thinks he is.

The coach needs to be able to quickly discover what the player is doing wrong. He needs to then know what the player OUGHT to be doing instead, and most importantly of all, he needs to know how to get him to do it.

The information contained here has come from years of experience in teaching and coaching, and from an author who can claim to have made more errors than most, and to have many times gone through the difficult process of trying without help to find out the cause of an error and how to remedy it.

SECTION A - THE ROQUET

1. "I KEEP MISSING MY ROQUETS, ALWAYS ON THE LEFT HAND SIDE."

PROBLEM: Either the alignment of the shot is incorrect, or - more likely - the mallet is being diverted from the alignment during the swing by the player pushing with his bottom hand.

CORRECTION: (1) Check foot positioning. If the swing is parallel to the front foot as generally recommended, then this foot may be pointing slightly outward. Alternatively, the foot may be too far from the line of aim, so that the mallet does not swing directly below the right eye as it should, assuming the player is right-eyed. View from directly in front to check for these errors.

(2) Take a longer backswing so that the falling weight of the mallet will provide sufficient force without any need to push into the handle with either hand. Relax the bottom hand so that it is used as a guide only, cock the wrists backward so that the mallet head is pulled rather than pushed through the ball, and reach forward as far as possible **ALONG THE GROUND** in the follow-through. (A player who concentrates on achieving this type of follow-through will automatically tend to get closer to the correct wrist-cocking and mallet-pulling action.) View from the side to watch for these errors. In the ideal swing the hands should begin to move horizontally forward just before the mallet head has completed its backswing. This requires the wrists to be slightly flexible at this early stage of the swing. Practise short roquets using the top hand only, in order to develop the timing of a swing that does not require additional force from the bottom hand.

NOTE: Failure to stalk the ball is not likely to produce such consistency of error, nor is movement of head and shoulders, nor is nervousness.

FURTHER NOTE: This problem, and possibly the next one as well, can also be caused by the player tightening his grip during the swing. Unfortunately, there is no way for the coach to tell by observation that this is happening.

The player should grip the mallet with the desired tension (preferably fairly light) before lining the shot up, check that the mallet face is square to the line of aim, and then maintain the same tension during the swing. This is much easier to say than do. Many players can avoid squeezing the grip tighter during practice swings or when they are practising roquets under no pressure, but find it difficult to stop themselves doing it in a pressure situation. A valuable tip for game situations is to be conscious of grip tension when hitting the balls into play at the start of a game, and also when running the first hoop.

To convince the player of the need for this, ask him to hold the mallet still and tighten his grip. The mallet face will turn a few degrees, and it becomes obvious that if he does this during the swing it will destroy the alignment of the mallet. Players often learn to accommodate this loss of alignment by aiming slightly to one side of the target, but this is only likely to work at certain distances and cannot be recommended.

2. "MY Mallet KEEPS TWISTING IN MY HAND."

PROBLEM: The player is not hitting the ball in the middle of the mallet face. He is hitting it off centre to one side. It is the force of impact on the ball that is causing the mallet to twist in his hands.

CORRECTION: Line up the shot more carefully, keep the shoulders still, swing smoothly from the shoulders watching the exact point on the ball where the mallet will contact it, and **REACH FORWARD** along the ground in the follow-through to keep the mallet head moving along the line of aim. Getting these things right will usually result in fewer off-centre hits.

If the problem is still not corrected, the player is almost certainly tightening his grip just prior to impact. This tightening can destroy the alignment of the mallet. Check this by asking the player to hold his mallet still just above the ground in the position where it is about to contact the ball, and then tighten his grip. Watch for movement in the mallet head. Explain the effect of such movement, and ask him to line up his shots while holding the mallet with whatever firmness he feels is necessary for the shot (remembering that the firmness should be provided by the top hand rather than the bottom one), then try not to tighten his grip as he swings. A tight grip (as distinct from 'firm') is neither necessary nor desirable.

NOTE: A player who misses a roquet will sometimes say, "I twisted my mallet", imagining that he did it himself. This is never so. HE did not twist the mallet - THE BALL twisted it, as explained above.

3. "I KEEP MISSING REASONABLY SHORT ROQUETS OF 4 OR 5 YARDS. I FEEL I AM AT LEAST AS LIKELY TO HIT A ROQUET OF 10 OR 15 YARDS."

PROBLEM: The player is swinging around a curve instead of swinging through in a straight line. This is especially common in players who play side-style. It would not matter, provided that the mallet head is travelling in the correct line of aim at the moment of impact, but this is rarely the case. The player has learnt (unconsciously) to accommodate the curved swing by aiming (or at least lining up) the shot to one side of the target ball, and holding the mallet so that the face is turned slightly outward as compared with the curve of the swing. This may allow him to roquet quite well over a set distance, but for roquets of a different length - either shorter or longer - the set of the mallet face will no longer exactly counteract the curve of the swing.

CORRECTION: There may be no satisfactory answer. It would be necessary to change BOTH the swing and the alignment of the mallet head. In addition, his line of aim would need to be changed, which will be difficult because he is not aware that he is aiming other than at the target ball. Changing only one of these will make things worse than ever, and the player will probably reject all further advice. The player may not be able to learn to swing along a straight line, especially if he has had a curved swing for many years. In this case, it may be possible for the player to understand what he is unconsciously doing, and learn to consciously vary the set of the mallet head in order to accommodate the effect of the curved swing at various distances. However, it will probably be better to simply suggest that he try to reach forward further along the ground toward the target ball, particularly on the shorter roquets. This should produce a slightly straighter swing, reducing the amount of correction needed.

If the player is a relative beginner playing centre style, the curved swing will be evident when viewed from behind, and it is more than likely that the curve results from incorrect foot positioning. In some cases the player does not realise that he is placing his feet so that with a straight backswing he would hit himself in the ankle.

4. "MY ROQUETS SEEM TO START ON LINE, BUT TEND TO CURVE OFF BEFORE THEY REACH THE BALL I AM TRYING TO ROQUET."

PROBLEM: Assuming that the curve cannot be attributed to irregularities in the lawn, then somehow or other the player is imparting side-spin to the ball. As the ball slows down the spin starts to take effect and causes the ball to swerve to one side. This spin may be due to either the mallet face being very slightly turned so that it is not quite perpendicular to the line of aim, or the handle of the mallet being tilted to one side so that when it contacts the ball the mallet head is not vertically below the hands. Neither of these need prevent the ball from being hit straight, but there will be some spin imparted to the ball, which is likely to curve off line as the player has noticed.

CORRECTION: It is possible to allow for the curve in selecting the line of aim, since the curve should always be to the same side. Many players actually do this, but it is hardly a satisfactory long-term solution for a player who aspires to reach the highest level. The alignment of the mallet face can be checked by using a few practice swings above the ball before striking it. It may not be sufficient to simply check the alignment before starting the swing, as the player may be altering the alignment during the swing.

If the mallet is leaning to one side during the swing, this will be apparent when viewed from behind. In this case it will NOT help to have the player reach further forward in the follow-through. The reaching forward helps keep the mallet moving along the line of aim, but this was not the problem, as the ball is already travelling along the correct line for most of its journey. In fact, reaching forward with the mallet tilted sideways is only likely to magnify the problem by imparting more side-spin to the ball.

One thing that may help is to ask the player to try lining up his shot with the mallet head NOT touching the ground, holding the mallet only lightly with the bottom hand so that the weight of the mallet makes it hang vertically below the top hand. Then the shot should be played essentially with the TOP hand (practise it without using the bottom hand at all) which must move directly forward in the line of aim. It may also help if the bottom hand is moved up closer to the top hand, even until the hands are interlocking or overlapping. Alternatively, if the player insists on keeping his hands apart then he could try placing the bottom hand more directly BEHIND the shaft rather than on one side of it. Most players who play with the shaft on a noticeable sideways tilt have their hands well apart and the bottom hand pressing against the handle from one side during the swing.

5. " AT TIMES I HIT THE GROUND WITH MY Mallet ON ROQUETS, OR MORE ESPECIALLY ON LONG RUSHES AND CANNONS."

PROBLEM: This is always caused by the player 'dipping' his shoulders as he swings, usually in an effort to impart more force to the ball.

CORRECTION: The player needs to concentrate on keeping his shoulders absolutely still on EVERY swing. It is important to do this even on shots where some shoulder movement would not seem to matter, so that it becomes an ingrained habit and will not be forgotten when he has to consider other factors as well. He must be convinced that shoulder movement will certainly not result in any additional force being imparted to the ball, and instead he could be encouraged to use a tighter grip (top hand only) on shots which require greater than usual force.

SECTION B - THE RUSH

6. "I CAN'T GET ENOUGH DISTANCE IN MY RUSHES, AND EVEN IN A ROQUET SHOT I HAVE TROUBLE REACHING THE FAR END OF A HEAVY LAWN. I DON'T HAVE THE STRENGTH FOR SUCH SHOTS."

PROBLEM: Since the weight of the mallet alone, with sufficient backswing, is all that is required without any additional force, it is evident that the whole weight of the mallet is not being imparted to the ball. Bad timing could account for part of the problem, but more likely the player is not using a simple pendulum swing from the shoulders. He is probably using a DOUBLE pendulum in which he keeps his hands close in to his body and swings the mallet mainly from his wrists instead of from his shoulders. This will usually be accompanied by an obvious push with the bottom hand in an endeavour to provide the additional force which should be coming from the shoulder swing. It is also possible that the player is moving his shoulders during the swing in a further misguided effort to gain additional force, and thus hitting the ball with the very bottom of the mallet face, instead of in the "sweet spot". This can result in loss of force from mallet to ball.

CORRECTION: Take a firm (not tense) grip on the mallet and lock the wrists in a position which will have the mallet handle vertical at point of impact. Keep the hands further out in front (about a foot from the body) throughout the swing, and swing freely from the shoulders, which MUST NOT MOVE during the swing. Observe from the side to check that at time of impact the hands are moving forward, not backward, and the shoulders are not moving at all. If necessary, place your hand on the back of his shoulders to stop them from moving upward until he gets used to the need to keep them still.

NOTE: (1) There may also be a need to alter the position of the bottom hand, which may be too far down the handle to allow a free swing from the shoulders without any push. For the rush shot the bottom part of the swing and the follow-through should be as flat as possible, but this cannot be achieved with the bottom hand too low on the handle, because the length of the pendulum from shoulder to mallet head is too short.

(2) It will also probably be necessary to assure the player that his problem is certainly not lack of physical strength. Even on a heavy lawn a normal mallet swung freely from the shoulders has sufficient force to send any ball the full length of the lawn, provided all of the force is correctly imparted to the ball. However, on a very heavy lawn it may be useful to use a firmer, longer grip and a longer backswing.

(3) Loss of force in rushes can also result from the striker's ball jumping slightly and hitting the other ball above centre. This is not likely to be the problem here, as the player is saying that his roquets are also affected.

(4) With the sharp ridges on the new Dawson balls, it has become desirable to play rushes of three feet or less with a semi-stop-shot action, in order to make the striker's ball skid along the ground rather than roll for the first part of its

journey. This is in contrast to a hoop shot where forward spin is desirable, and is one reason why it is recommended to stand further back from the ball on a rush than on a normal roquet shot, and use a long flat swing with the mallet approaching the striker's ball low along the ground. Forward spin on a ball with sharp ridging tends to make it ride up over the target ball, losing some of its force. If the balls are more than three feet apart, then the ball will have started rolling in this distance regardless of how the shot is played, so the player should concentrate on direction rather than spin.

7. "I HAVE NO CONFIDENCE WITH RUSHES LONGER THAN ABOUT TWO FEET. SOMETIMES I MISS ALTOGETHER WHEN I TRY TO RUSH A BALL ANY DISTANCE."

PROBLEM: The mallet is being taken off line during the swing, in a way that (presumably) does not happen in normal roquet shots.

Two things are likely to cause this

(1) The player is probably pushing forward with his bottom hand, and pushing the mallet slightly off line at the same time. This is particularly likely to occur on a heavy lawn when the player is not confident that his normal swing will produce sufficient force. It is very difficult to keep such a push in the exact line of swing, especially if the bottom hand is on the side of the handle rather than behind it.

(2) The player is lifting his eyes, and with them his head and shoulders, watching the target ball instead of the striker's ball. This will usually result in the ball being contacted OFF CENTRE on the mallet face, and the weight of the ball will push the mallet face off square.

CORRECTION: Observe from the side to check for pushing or shoulder movement, and from the rear to look for off-centre contact or swing being pushed off line. Then correct whichever of the two problems is evident as follows -

(1) Use a firm grip with the top hand and keep it moving forward throughout the swing. Relax the bottom hand so that it is placed only lightly on the handle, and use it to guide the direction of the swing without imparting any force.

(2) Keep the shoulders absolutely still and avoid any other body movement. A hand placed on the back of the shoulders is once again a useful aid.

8. "SOMETIMES MY BALL JUMPS WHEN I PLAY A RUSH SHOT. AT TIMES IT HAS JUMPED RIGHT OVER THE OTHER BALL."

PROBLEM: Unless the striker's ball is lying in a hole or just behind a tuft of hard grass, this can only be caused by the mallet head still being in its downward movement, with the handle tilted forward, when it contacts the ball. The player may be using a double-action pendulum swing in which the mallet swings mainly from the wrists, while the hands swing from the shoulders. The two pendulums thus created can easily get out of time (synchronisation) with each other so that the hands reach their desired contact position directly above the ball while the mallet head is still travelling downward.

CORRECTION: Stand a little further back from the ball and SLIGHTLY raise the front end of the mallet head. Swing smoothly from the shoulders with wrists locked and a firm grip with the top hand. This should produce a single pendulum with a long, flat swing in which the mallet head has passed the bottom of its swing and is just starting to move upward as the ball is contacted.

SECTION C - THE TAKE-OFF

9. "I CAN TAKE OFF FROM ONLY ONE SIDE OF THE BALL. WHEN I TRY TO TAKE-OFF THE OTHER SIDE THE CROQUETED BALL OFTEN DOES NOT MOVE."

PROBLEM: The player is swinging around a curve. It is also likely that he is turning his mallet face inward so that it is no longer perpendicular to the line of swing. He is probably not aware that he is doing either of these things, though some misguided coaches have actually taught players to consciously turn the mallet face inward on a take-off, in order to ensure that the roqueted ball moves.

CORRECTION: The curved swing may be difficult to change, especially if it is also evident in other shots, as is particularly common among side-style players. However, there is a strong tendency for all players - even those who swing straight through in roquets and rushes - to use a curved swing in a take-off, subconsciously endeavouring to 'shepherd' the striker's ball in the required direction. The player needs to develop confidence in the fact that if he swings perfectly straight with a square mallet face the striker's ball will still go where he wants it to (provided the line of aim is correct), and he will retain better control of the other ball as well.

One way to encourage the development of such confidence is to practise right-angle split shots, or "thick take-offs", choosing an aiming point midway between where he wants the two balls to finish (or more exactly, moving from this midpoint a little to the side where the striker's ball is going). He should concentrate on keeping the mallet face square and swinging directly at this point, following through in a straight line. Check that he finishes the swing with the mallet still pointing in this line and the mallet face still square. Then he can treat the normal take-off as merely a particular example of this right-angle split shot. Some players need to stand slightly further back than they would for a roquet, and use a flatter swing, to ensure that when it contacts the ball the mallet is moving forward rather than downward. It is difficult to control a take-off if you stand over the ball and hit down at it.

When he develops a straight, flat swing and knows which line to swing in, he will be able to take off from either side with equal ease.

10. "I FIND IT HARD TO CONTROL DISTANCE IN MY TAKE-OFFS. OTHERS SEEM TO BE ABLE TO JUDGE THEM FAIRLY WELL, BUT I GO TOO FAR OR STOP TOO SHORT. I SEEM TO TAKE FAR TOO LONG TO GET THE FEEL OF THE LAWN."

PROBLEM: It is very likely that a faulty technique is being used.

The player is probably turning the mallet face inward toward the croqueted ball and swinging slightly outward, producing a fairly thick take-off in most instances. He will have difficulty preventing the croqueted ball from going out on long corner take-offs, as it will not only be the striker's ball that gets out of control. The swing may or may not be curved, as it is possible to swing outward (away from the croqueted ball) with a perfectly straight swing, yet still move the croqueted ball provided the mallet face is turned inward. He is probably not consciously aiming the swing in any particular direction, and if asked where he is aiming will be forced to admit this, or will give some vague answer such as "where I want the ball to go" .

CORRECTION: The player needs to learn a better method of choosing an exact point of aim for each take-off, then learn to swing directly at this aiming point with a square mallet face. A useful method for a take-off right across the lawn is as follows

(a) If you are taking off from the RIGHT hand side of the croqueted ball, then place the striker's ball so that the V between the balls is pointing about one yard to the RIGHT of where you want the striker's ball to finish. This allows for the fact that the ball will "pull" inward as it slows down.

(b) Aim your swing about one yard (or a little more for beginners with wobbly swings) to the LEFT of where you want the striker's ball to finish. This means that the croqueted ball will move (usually about one yard), as you are swinging well inside the V.

(c) When taking off only halfway across the lawn, allow only half a yard on each side, and if the distance is shorter still, make a correspondingly smaller allowance.

(d) If the striker's ball is consistently going to one side of the target point, the one-yard allowance for "pull" can be increased or decreased accordingly.

(e) When taking off from the LEFT side, aim the 'V' to the LEFT of the target point and select an aiming point to the RIGHT of it.

(f) Once again, the swing should be flat and straight. Do not stand over the ball or hit down on it.

NOTE: This method amounts to essentially the same thing as the recommended method of aiming for all split shots, i.e. aiming at a point halfway between where you want the two balls to finish, since a take-off is merely a particular type of split shot in which the striker's ball travels a large distance and the croqueted ball a small distance. It is important for the player to realise this so that he can learn to control the position of the croqueted ball when a thick take-off is desired. However, teaching normal take-offs in the manner described here has the advantage that the player is making a conscious allowance for "pull", and he is able to increase or decrease this allowance as he feels it is necessary to do so. By choosing an aiming point the same distance away as where he wants his ball to finish, he is better able to judge the correct strength of the shot. Some players find it very difficult to judge the midpoint between where they want the two balls to finish when the distances are so disproportionate, especially since they usually do not want the croqueted ball to finish in any particular place.

SECTION D - THE STOP-SHOT

11. "MY STOP-SHOTS ARE NOWHERE NEAR AS GOOD AS THE ONES I SEE OTHER PLAYERS DOING. MY STRIKER'S BALL ALWAYS SEEMS TO GO TOO FAR."

PROBLEM: Too much force from the mallet is finishing with the striker's ball instead of the roqueted ball. The forward movement is not being sufficiently checked. This can be caused by one of the following

- (1) Mallet face not square.
- (2) Swing not exactly in line through the centres of the two balls.
- (3) The method used for stopping the forward movement of the mallet is not working satisfactorily.
- (4) Type of mallet.

CORRECTION: (1) and (2) can be checked by observing from the rear, and can easily be corrected by stalking the ball, etc.

(3) is more difficult to correct, as perfect timing is needed to achieve a really good stop-shot. It may be that the player is using one hand low on the handle to produce a flat forward jab with the mallet head horizontal. Stop-shots can be played this way, but it is difficult to stop the forward movement instantly, especially with a heavy mallet. Alternatively, he may be using a very light grip and swinging from the wrists only, contacting the striker's ball at the bottom of the swing and allowing the combined weight of the two balls to stop the forward movement. This is also a reasonable way of playing a stop-shot, but again good timing and a light mallet are needed.

Consistently good stop-shots can best be achieved with a very firm grip, lifting the front end of the mallet head ONLY SLIGHTLY and swinging downward. The ball is contacted AFTER the mallet head reaches the bottom of the swing, when it is starting on its way up, and at this instant the hands are moved vertically downward, or backward toward the body, in order to jam the rear end of the mallet head onto the ground and 'stop it dead'. The hands should preferably be together, but need not be at the top of the handle.

NOTE: In teaching this shot there may be a danger that the backward movement of the hands could be inadvertently transferred to other shots, e.g. the rush, in which the front of the mallet head is also slightly raised, with disastrous results.

(4) If the player has a mallet with a very springy handle (e.g. cane or metal) then he may have to accept the fact that it will not be possible to play stop-shots with it as consistently well as another player with a more rigid handle. A light head on the mallet can help counteract the effect of a springy handle, so that good stop-shots are still possible; but a heavy head will make them even more difficult.

SECTION E - THE ROLL

12. "I CAN'T DO A PROPER ROLL OR PASS-ROLL. THE CROQUETED BALL GOES TOO FAR, OR ELSE THE STRIKER'S BALL DOES NOT GO FAR ENOUGH."

PROBLEM: There are three possibilities

(1) At the moment of impact the mallet handle may not be sloping sufficiently forward. It is possible that the player is starting the swing with the handle sloping forward correctly, but during the swing the top hand is moving backward toward the body, so that by the time the ball is contacted the handle is almost vertical.

(2) The player may be hitting forward along the ground at the ball, instead of using a downward swing to contact the striker's ball high up (the mallet head should be about an inch above the ground at time of contact) and 'squeeze' the striker's ball forward with the forward-sloping mallet face.

(3) Equal-rolls and pass-rolls require some degree of smooth acceleration during the swing, with a pronounced follow-through. The player may be failing to achieve this acceleration, or mistiming it.

CORRECTION: Observe from the side to see which of the problems is in evidence, then correct as follows

(1) Change the swing so that both hands, and particularly the top hand, are moving forward. This makes it into a sort of forward push rather than a swing, in which the mallet is translated (i.e. moved forward with the forward slope of the handle being maintained) rather than rotated in a pendulum-like swing as for most other shots. Practise many times without a ball. Start with the mallet held out away from the body, and the handle sloping forward as desired, with elbows straight. Draw the mallet back toward the body by bending both elbows, maintaining the forward slope. Then push the mallet forwards by straightening both elbows, again keeping the slope constant. This gives an idea of the type of 'swing' needed.

(2) In actual fact, the swing (or better, push) as described in (1) should be directed downward as well as forward, to produce the forward-squeezing effect on the striker's ball.

(3) The acceleration can be learnt by playing the shot several times from a position directly behind a hoop, so that the hoop hampers the backswing. This forces a very short backswing which automatically results in acceleration during the swing. Then try it without the hoop, still using a very short backswing. Later the backswing can be lengthened, so long as the first part of the forward swing is very (almost painfully) slow. The degree of "pass" in the roll can be controlled by delaying the start of the acceleration to a greater or lesser extent. A firm grip is needed to ensure that the acceleration is smooth through the ball, and no fault is committed. This should all be done without any shoulder movement.

An alternative method is to use a very firm grip and keep the elbows stiff, but not necessarily straight. As the mallet head reaches the ball, swing the hips downwards, allowing your whole body weight to drop onto the ball. This produces a pronounced acceleration at, and just after, the moment of impact, and has the advantage of avoiding (in appearance, at least) the possible "pushing fault" which arises when the acceleration is produced from the elbows just AFTER contact. A disadvantage for some players is that the downward body movement finishes with the player squatting on his haunches, and thus may be physically demanding on muscles and joints.

SECTION F - THE SPLIT

13. "UNLESS I PLAY A TAKE-OFF, I FIND IT VERY HARD TO JUDGE APPROACH SHOTS FROM A YARD OR TWO TO THE SIDE OF THE HOOP. I CANNOT SEEM TO GET A FORWARD RUSH FROM SUCH POSITIONS EXCEPT BY SHEER FLUKE."

PROBLEM: The player does not understand the mechanics of split shots, of which approach shots are one particular type. He does not appreciate the effect of mallet slope on the outcome of the shot, nor how to determine the correct slope and line of aim, nor how to adjust the slope for wideness of angle. He probably has been swinging around a curve on such shots, in order to 'shepherd' his striker's ball to the front of the hoop, but thus losing control of the other ball.

CORRECTION: A decision must be made whether to (1) explain and teach the mechanics of ALL split shots, or (2) find ways of simplifying things to enable him to cope with most hoop approaches without worrying about other splits for the time being. After making this decision, proceed in one of the following ways

(1) a. First practise using the forward slope of the mallet to control the relative distances of the two balls in straight croquet shots. Alter the slope as required by moving the hands up or down the handle.

b. If the angle between the desired directions of the two balls exceeds 40 degrees, adjust the grip by moving the hands upward slightly so that the mallet is moved closer to vertical. If it exceeds 60 degrees, move up a little more, and for 80 degrees move right up to the top.

c. Find a point on the lawn half-way between where you want the two balls to finish, then move it a little to the side where the striker's ball will go. (This adjustment is necessary because the striker's ball, but not the other ball, is affected by follow-through.) This will give you the correct aiming point, and you should swing the mallet (with correct slope) in a STRAIGHT LINE toward this point.

d. If both balls fall short or go too far, hit harder or softer. If one goes too far and the other falls short, alter the mallet slope (by changing the hand positions) to change the relative distances. If the angle is too narrow or too wide, change the point of aim.

(2) a. Look at the distance of the roqueted ball from the hoop, and find a point this same distance from the hoop, but directly behind it. Line up the balls so that the roqueted ball will go to this point.

b. Choose a point of aim, which will also be directly behind the hoop. The aiming point is about one third (or perhaps slightly less to allow for 'pull' on the striker's ball) of the way from the hoop to the point where you intend the roqueted ball to finish.

c. Your distance from the hoop also determines the mallet slope needed for the approach shot. As you move back from the hoop, you move your hands down the handle to increase the forward slope of the mallet.

d. With this method everything is determined only from the approach distance. Thus for any approach shot from 3 yards, whether from in front of the hoop, behind it, to the side, or from any other direction, you will line up the roqueted ball to go to the same point 3 yards behind the hoop, aim your swing at the same point 3 feet (or slightly less) behind the hoop, and have the handle sloping forward at the same angle (about 15 degrees from the vertical, making an angle of about 75 degrees with the ground.) Accurate judgement of actual distances is required, but some people find this easier than the judgement of relative distances which is necessary for the accurate control of split-shots in general. Nor is there any need to estimate wideness of angle and allow for it, as this is taken into account in the method as given. In playing the shot the player can concentrate on judging the required strength, which is the only variable remaining. The method described gives a straightforward and consistent way of approaching a hoop from any distance up to about six yards, and from any direction; and allows a surprisingly large margin of error, so that a slight variation in the position of the aiming point or the mallet slope will not greatly affect the success of the shot.

e. A disadvantage is that the player who learns this method will eventually also need to learn how to adjust the approach shot to give the best chance of obtaining a rush in some direction other than straight ahead after running the hoop, and will soon come to realise that even for a straight ahead rush from some positions improvements could be made. For example, in approaching the hoop from only one yard out, he may do better to aim the roqueted ball MORE than a yard behind the hoop and play an angled stop-shot.

14. "ON SPLIT-SHOTS I CAN USUALLY GET THE STRIKER'S BALL WHERE I WANT IT, BUT I DO NOT SEEM TO HAVE MUCH CONTROL OF THE OTHER BALL. IT USUALLY STOPS WELL SHORT OF WHERE I WOULD LIKE TO PLACE IT. IN FACT, I NO LONGER TRY TO GET IT RIGHT DOWN TO THE NEXT HOOP."

PROBLEM: The player is probably using a roll action in which the mallet head is moving low along the ground as it approaches the ball and is being accelerated (or 'pushed') forward through the ball. He may also be 'shepherding' his striker's ball by swinging around a curve, and probably does not understand the need to adjust the mallet slope for wide angles. It is understandable that a player who has difficulty controlling split-shots will tend to concentrate on at least getting the striker's ball to the desired place, ignoring the croqueted ball.

CORRECTION: Check for these three errors by watching from the side (for horizontal approach and acceleration) and from behind (for curved swing) as he plays split shots at varying angles. Correct the errors as follows

(1) Explain that most split-shots should be played by hitting down on the striker's ball and contacting it well above centre. The grip should be firm and a semi-stop-shot action should be used, rather than a roll action which involves a much longer follow-through.

(2) Ask him to concentrate on developing as straight a swing as possible, realising that there is no need to 'shepherd' his striker's ball.

(3) Explain the need to alter the position of the hands on the shaft (and consequently the mallet slope) by moving the hands upward as the angle between the directions of the two balls becomes wider. He should practise making his striker's ball travel half (or later two-thirds or three-quarters) as far as the croqueted ball as the angle is gradually increased.

Then, when playing split-shots, he should concentrate on getting the CROQUETED ball exactly where he wants it. Contrary to popular opinion, the positioning of the striker's ball is usually less critical to the continuance of a break than the correct positioning of the croqueted ball. If the croqueted ball is going correctly to the desired place, then it is fairly easy to adjust either the line of aim or the mallet slope to ensure that the striker's ball also finishes close enough its desired place. It is much harder to make the adjustment the other way round.

15. "I CAN CONTROL SPLITS FAIRLY WELL IF THE ANGLE IS NOT TOO WIDE, BUT I AVOID A SPLIT IF THE ANGLE EXCEEDS 45 DEGREES, AS I'M NOT CONFIDENT THE BALLS WILL GO WHERE I WANT THEM TO."

PROBLEM: The player does not realise that the mallet slope must be altered for wider angles. This can be done either by moving the hands up the handle to lessen the forward slope of the mallet face, or by standing further back from the ball to achieve the same effect.

CORRECTION: Check that the player knows the correct hand positions for straight croquet shots, making the striker's ball travel, say, half (or two-thirds or three-quarters, etc) as far as the croqueted ball in the same line. If the foot positioning is not altered, then these hand positions will determine the forward slope of the mallet face for each shot, and should be satisfactory for all split shots where the angle between the directions of the two balls does not exceed 40 degrees.

With an angle wider than 40 degrees the striker's ball will start to slide across the surface of the croqueted ball as it begins to move. This results in less of the force being transferred to the croqueted ball, and more remaining with the striker's ball, so that the striker's ball goes further and the croqueted ball less far than they would in a straight croquet shot played similarly.

To counteract this, it is necessary to lessen the forward slope of the mallet face, which is usually achieved by altering the hand positions. Most players find that they need to move the bottom hand up about two inches if the angle exceeds 40 degrees, a further two inches if it exceeds 60 degrees, and further again if it approaches 80 degrees, by which time both hands should be together near the top of the mallet shaft.

16. "I CANNOT UNDERSTAND WHY I FIND SOME SPLITS, SUCH AS FROM 1-BACK TO 2-BACK AND 3-BACK, EASIER THAN THE MIRROR-IMAGE SHOTS, SUCH AS FROM HOOP 1 TO HOOPS 2 AND 3."

PROBLEM: Either the swing is curved or the handle of the mallet is tilted sideways, causing the striker's ball to come off one side of the mallet differently from the way it would come off the other side.

CORRECTION: Both of these errors would become evident when the shot is viewed from behind. The curved swing is best corrected by changing it to a forward push with both hands moving toward a carefully selected aiming point. The sideways tilt may result from the player endeavouring not to hit himself in the nose or face with the handle of the mallet during the swing, since he will be bent well over for these long split rolls. Here again it will help to develop more of a forward pushing action rather than a pendulum-type swing for these shots; or if he still wants to use a pendulum swing then he should keep his elbows straighter so that the mallet handle is further out in front his body and away from his face.

SECTION G - HOOP RUNNING

17. "I TEND TO STICK IN HOOPS ON ANY SHOT WHICH IS AT ALL SIDEY."

PROBLEM: There are three possibilities

(1) The player is lifting his eyes (and with them probably his head and shoulders) to look at the hoop during the swing, instead of keeping his attention focused on the point where he wants the mallet to contact the ball.

(2) He is not lining the shot up correctly. Some players fail to realise that you do not aim at the centre of the hoop when running it from a sidey angle.

(3) He is not imparting to the ball the forward spin needed to 'kick' it through the hoop after it contacts the hoop leg.

CORRECTION: After checking to see which of these is the main problem, proceed as follows:

(1) Since the eye-lifting and shoulder movement is usually caused by nervousness, the player needs to consciously relax his shoulders and arms before starting the swing. Then he should take a slightly longer backswing and let the weight of the mallet swing through without any push from the hands. He should keep his eyes fixed on the back of the ball and keep his shoulders still during the swing.

(2) As the hoop shot becomes more sidey the point of aim moves from the centre of the hoop toward the far leg. Players realise that the side of the ball must miss the near leg, but focusing attention on the near leg is unwise, since it is not in the desired line of aim. For a very sidey hoop shot (about 45 degrees) the line of aim should pass through the centre of the ball to the inside edge of the far hoop leg. If the shot is less sidey, the aim can be a little inside the far hoop leg and closer to the centre of the hoop. It should be noted that a sidey hoop shot needs to be hit more firmly than one from the same distance directly in front, to allow for the loss of forward momentum when the ball contacts the far hoop leg.

(3) It is a mistake to try to run a hoop by bringing the mallet head horizontally along the ground at the ball. This type of flat forward push with the mallet handle vertical will give little or no forward spin to the ball. Instead it will cause the ball to skid without rolling for the first foot or so, and it will only just be starting to roll as it reaches the hoop. (Note that this skidding is desirable in a rush, but is the opposite of what you want in a hoop shot, because a skidding ball will tend to 'stop dead' if it makes any contact with the hoop.)

For hoop running a pendulum-swing from the SHOULDERS is needed, with the mallet sloping slightly forward and hitting slightly down on the ball. The hands must move forward, not backward, and the forward slope of the mallet should be only slight - just sufficient to press the ball lightly onto the ground as it begins moving. This causes the bottom of the ball to be held momentarily against the ground as the top of the ball starts to move forward, producing an immediate rolling motion or 'forward spin' instead of the ball skidding. Although it is not necessary to do so,

some players accentuate the forward spin by lifting the mallet so that the head is about an inch above ground level when it contacts the ball, hitting through the top part of the ball. Care must be taken, however, to avoid hitting the ball with the bottom bevelled edge of the mallet face, as this would produce a misdirected mis-hit.

If the hoop shot is played from more than three or four feet out then there is less need to try to produce forward spin on the ball, since by the time it has travelled this far it should have stopped skidding and develop sufficient forward rolling motion. Thus for longer hoop shots the flat forward swing may be quite satisfactory, and direction rather than spin becomes the main consideration.

On all hoop shots the mallet head should follow through well past the point of contact. Players who use a stop-shot action for hoop running will find the ball sticking in the hoop not only on sidey hoop-shots, but on hoop-shots from straight in front as well.

18. "I CAN RUN HOOPS EASILY ENOUGH AT PRACTICE, BUT IN A MATCH THE BALL JUST WON'T SEEM TO GO THROUGH."

PROBLEM: The player's technique is adequate, but in a match his timing is affected by nervous tension.

CORRECTION: There are many things that can be done to reduce nervous tension, and ways of playing the first part of a game which take into account the need to avoid difficult shots until the player has started to relax a little. Such things are not within the scope of these notes, but we will mention a few things that can be done to make it less likely that nervousness will disastrously affect a hoop shot. It should be realised that regardless of appearances almost all players are nervous when playing a game of any importance. It is necessary to accept the fact that some nervousness is unavoidable, and find ways to still play reasonably good shots. Some of the following advice may help

(1) Allow time for the tension of the previous shot to drain away before attempting the hoop. If you have just made an eminently missable six-yard roquet, or played a difficult hoop approach, your adrenalin level will be high for a short while and your heart will beat faster. This will affect your timing, as your body (according to one theory which seems reasonable) takes its timing unconsciously from the heartbeat.

(2) Even allowing such time, some tension will remain and the heart will still probably be beating faster than normal. This tends to make the player hurry the swing by taking a shorter than normal backswing and 'snatching' or jabbing at the shot instead of using a smooth pendulum swing from the shoulders. To help counteract this, the player should consciously take a longer backswing with shoulders relaxed (not hunched up).

(3) If the player's hands are shaking it is possible to lessen their effect on the shot by gripping the mallet more lightly (the natural tendency when nervous is to grip it more tightly, which transfers the shaking directly to the mallet head) with the hands closer together, preferably interlocking or overlapping. Some players find that a shorter grip, with both hands moved down the handle, also helps.

(4) Before swinging, check that the stance is comfortable (toes relaxed, etc.) and stable. During the swing, concentrate on keeping the shoulders still and avoiding all body movement.

19. "I KEEP RUNNING MUCH TOO FAR THROUGH HOOPS, GIVING MYSELF A LONG ROQUET BACK."

PROBLEM: Obviously, the player is imparting too much force to the ball.

CORRECTION: This can be a real difficulty for some players, and although the problem is obvious the solution is not. It is unlikely to help if the player simply tries to hit more gently on hoop shots. There are several things that can be tried

(1) Play the hoop approach differently, so that the striker's ball finishes closer to the hoop and the croqueted ball further behind the hoop. A player who consistently runs hoops from three or four feet in front should not complain about going too far through, as he is fortunate to consistently run them at all from such distances. It may also be necessary to concentrate on getting the previous rush shot to a better position, so that the different type of approach shot is facilitated.

(2) When it is important to run no more than two or three feet past a hoop on the hoop shot in order to obtain a desired rush, some players find it helpful to shorten their grip on the mallet by moving both hands well down the handle. This seems to allow more delicate control of distance, but the effect on direction also needs to be considered, as the hoop-running may be jeopardised if it becomes more difficult to swing in a straight line.

(3) The force imparted to the ball can be lessened by shortening the backswing, but this cannot be recommended as it is more difficult to establish that the mallet is moving in the correct line, and the timing is also affected. It is better to retain the length of the backswing but slow down the forward swing. A lighter grip with the hands can also help, and some players slope the mallet further forward on such shots, hitting more down on the ball so that more of the force goes into the ground.

(4) It is possible that the player is playing hoop shots with the mallet handle vertical, using a flat, low swing which will not produce any forward spin on the ball. For this reason he may feel he needs to hit them harder to ensure that they still go through after contacting a hoop leg. However, if the ball does not contact the hoop on the way through it will run much too far.

20. "NO MATTER HOW HARD I TRY, I CANNOT PLAY A JUMP SHOT THROUGH A HOOP. THE BALL JUST WON'T JUMP FOR ME."

PROBLEM: The mallet handle is not sloping forward sufficiently at moment of contact.

CORRECTION: Stand further forward and lock the wrists. Swing from the shoulders without moving the shoulders. Do not consciously try to hit down on the ball (if the contact is made before the mallet head reaches the bottom of the swing this will happen automatically). Play the shot confidently, not tentatively, contacting the ball well above centre. Keep your eye on the exact spot on the ball where you want the mallet to contact it, and give it a decent whack, as most of the force will be absorbed into the ground. Do not try to play it as a stop-shot, as it is important to let the whole weight of the mallet-head go right through the ball. Some control of follow-through is needed, however, in order to avoid committing a fault by damaging the lawn.

In some cases the lawn itself may be the problem. It is almost impossible to make a ball jump on sandy, spongy or soggy lawns.

As with other shots, the jump shot should be played with the weight of the mallet, without any additional push from the hands or wrists. This is important because direction is critical. There is normally little or no margin for error, and any push from the hands is likely to take the swing off line.

SECTION H - THE BREAK

21. "I PLAY SEVERAL GOOD SHOTS TO GET A BREAK STARTED, THEN WHEN I HAVE ALL THE BALLS SET UP WHERE I WANT THEM, I DO SOMETHING STUPID LIKE STICKING IN AN EASY HOOP OR MISSING A SHORT ROQUET."

PROBLEM: The player is relaxing mentally as well as physically. There is a strong natural tendency to do this. In croquet physical relaxation is important, but mental relaxation can be dangerous.

CORRECTION: Be aware of the danger. The mental relaxation ("it should be easier from now on") can lead to failure to check all of the things necessary to ensure the success of the next shot. For example, the player may fail to check the squareness of the mallet face before playing a three-yard roquet, whereas on the previous more difficult shots he would have taken great care to check everything. He should develop the habit of taking the time to check EVERYTHING (body alignment, stalking, stance, grip, squareness, line of aim, shoulders still, etc.) before playing EVERY shot, even a gentle six-inch roquet. This is not because there is any likelihood of missing the six-inch roquet if he fails to check everything, but in order to develop an ingrained and automatic habit of getting it all correct, so that he is not so likely to inadvertently omit something when his mind is suddenly relaxed or distracted. In effect, he is using the six-inch roquet to practise for future shots.

ADDENDUM

Since this booklet was first written, important advances have been made in various areas of croquet coaching. In recent years the SACA and ACA Coaching Committees have adopted what is known as the "DRAMA" error-correction programme, which is set out in summary form on the following page.

I have decided to add it to this booklet so that readers can gain an understanding of all that is involved in the very difficult process of correcting errors of technique. The material we have covered here deals only with points 2 and 3 of the error correction programme, i.e. the recognition of the error and the alteration of technique that is needed to correct it. Even in these areas there is much more that coaches, particularly those involved in higher levels of coaching, need to know.

It is important that we lay to rest for all time the old idea that coaching involves simply telling a player what he is doing wrong. That in itself is difficult enough, but even if done correctly it is no better than a doctor who diagnoses your illness but makes no attempt to treat it.

A good coach will realise that the correction of errors involves aspects such as determination, organisation and psychology; and the player will need help in each of these areas. Most errors are only corrected over a period of time, with repeated involvement of the coach and continuing commitment by the player.

The final stage, in which the new technique is successfully assimilated into game situations under pressure, is often neglected by coaches, and consequently the player will tend at those times to revert to his old error-prone technique.

There is no room here to explain in full each of the stages in the summarised programme. That should be part of the training programme for accredited coaches, and at higher levels of training will be covered in even greater detail.

One point that is worth making here is that a serious competitive player will never reach the stage where he no longer needs the services of a good coach. On the contrary, the stronger he becomes, the more vital it is that he has regular coaching sessions with a personal coach in whom he has complete confidence. The reader will no doubt be aware that in most other sports (e.g. tennis, golf, etc.) the leading players all have their personal coaches who usually travel with them, providing both technical and psychological assistance on a daily basis. It is also worth noting that in almost all cases the coach cannot play anywhere near as well as the player can. Croquet has a long way to go in accepting this attitude toward coaching.

The author, at the time of writing this addendum, is currently ranked no. 2 player in Australia on the official ACA player ranking list. I would never have achieved this position without the assistance of my coach Jane Lewis, who is currently the ACA National Coaching Director, and whom I pay to coach me on a regular basis.

I cannot watch myself, and so am often unaware of the small errors that may start to creep into my technique. The coach is able to recognise such errors long before I would realise that I have a problem, and at such an early stage the errors are usually easily corrected because they have not become an ingrained habit.

I recommend that coaches study the error correction programme, and for further assistance in implementing it I suggest that they approach their state coaching committee personnel. If this is impractical, then I would welcome correspondence and will be interested in trying to assist with any particular problems.

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ERROR CORRECTION PROGRAMME

1. **DIAGNOSIS** of problem.

Be wary of accepting without question the player's version.

2. **RECOGNITION** of error.

(a) Consider possible causes: where to stand and what to look for.

(b) More than one error or cause of error?

(c) Disabilities, peculiarities, medical conditions?

(d) Assess whether or not the error is worth correcting, and in what ways.

- stance, grip, swing, mallet, etc.

3. **ALTERATION** of technique.

(a) Explain problem and reason for changing.

(b) Explain what will be involved (player commitment and expectations).

(c) Train muscles to co-ordinate differently

- eliminate variables (e.g. choose technique that does not depend on timing).

- isolate elements; look for success in one area at a time.

- devise practice drills (watch concentration and co-ordination spans).

- organise definite practice sessions, some with coach and some without.

4. **MAINTENANCE** of new skill.

(a) Follow-up coaching sessions.

(b) Re-training if necessary.

(c) Development of co-ordination and judgement with new technique.

- adjustment for other variables.

- accuracy over a range of variables.

5. **ASSIMILATION** into game when under pressure.

(a) Mental approach (I can do it!); positive reinforcement.

- no need to be confident of 100% success; nor of immediate success.

(b) Goal setting:

- when to start using new technique in games.

- how to remember the things to get right (under stress).

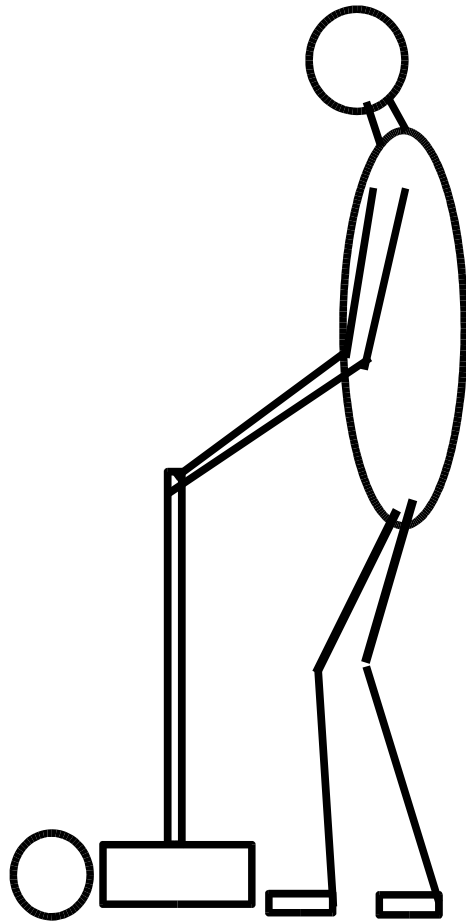
- may need to use visualisation, relaxation techniques, etc.

- realistic expectations.

- feedback.

NEXT PROBLEM?

CROQUET COACHING: ERROR CORRECTION



by John Riches

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