

2011 Mission Hills Invitational

The 15th annual Mission Hills Invitational croquet tournament was held March 1-5 and the weather could not have been better. The 25 participants played in two flights with doubles in the mornings and singles in the lazy afternoons. After a few years of waterford doubles, the new officers of the club have brought back self-selected partnerships which did wonders for team dynamics and the overall enjoyment of the doubles experience. Visiting players represented just about every region in North America: Louisiana, North Carolina, Massachusetts, Maine, Wyoming, Idaho, and British Columbia. With the 2010 champion Bob Van Tassell taking the week off, the title was up for grabs. Ninety minute games and limited double banking set up yet another luxurious tournament at the USCA's "2010 Club of the Year."

In early doubles play, the local duo of Mary Rodeberg and Dick Engebretson that barely made it into the championship flight doubles beat the big dogs of Ben Rothman and "Uncle" Larry Stettner! Mary, the recent USCA Grand Prix winner, ran a seven hoop break going into last turns to get within one point, but she made 4-back out of bounds. Dick followed up with a spectacular 10-foot roquet of Mary's ball and a 60-foot take off to the attack. He created a rush to his hoop and two-balled his way to a 15-14 victory.

Rich Schiller and Val Terry went undefeated in first flight and snagged the top spot in the playoffs. A two-way tie at 2-2 will put veterans Karen Comeau and Jean Engebretson against rookies Bob Morford and Nick Gray in one semi-final. The last spot came down to the very last game as the Vancouver duo of John Destry and Keith Sjostrom narrowly defeated Carl Myer (Massachusetts) and Rob Franks (Louisiana) to sneak in the semi-finals 14-12.

Championship flight pitted the top two teams against each other in the final round of block play. A desperate attack by Stettner gave Rothman the game winning break in last turns to defeat Jim Butts and Aviv Katz for the number one seed. Ron Hendry and Chris Christian ended Mike Orgill and Robert Coleman's playoff hopes while securing the number two spot 20-16. The last semi-final spot was awarded to Peter Bach and Steve Mossbrook thanks to their 15-9 defeat of Dick Engebretson and Mary Rodeberg.

"By the skin of my teeth." That is the margin by which Steve Mossbrook made his first Championship knock-out in the last 14 years. The championship flight featured a play-in round to determine seeding in two-way ties. That is to say, if two of the eleven players finished with the same total number of wins, they had a full 90-minute game to decide who deserved to be ranked above the other in the 8-player knock-out ladder. The top two players, Rothman and Butts, played off while the third and fourth seed, Peter Bach and Rich Schiller, battled it out. But most importantly, the eighth spot in the ladder was played out between Steve Mossbrook and Mary Rodeberg.

Having just broken into the top flight, Mary Rodeberg has shown tremendous poise in her play while stepping her tactics up several notches to compete with the best. Mary, having lost two games by two or fewer points in last turns, decided she would put the tied game on her mallet with under five minutes remaining. With balls for one-back and two-back, Mary took-off from the West boundary near two-back all the way to Steve's balls on the East boundary near 4-back. The 100-foot shot fell short and left Mary with a daunting 18-foot roquet of a ball just two feet from the boundary, but she hit! Now for the easy part, or so she thought. Mary just needed to set up her partner and/or split up the opponents, but the danger ball was so close that it interfered with her stroke. With a shortened backswing and a

difficult angle, Mary committed a fault. Mary called the fault on herself and replaced the balls leaving Steve an easy go ahead play. The honorable defeat was hard to swallow, but it was the correct call. Hopefully all will remember Mary's shining integrity as she continues to make strides in the top flight.

With some blowouts and a few close shaves, almost everything went to seed in the various singles ladders. The third and fourth seed captured third and fourth in the playoffs while all three finals pairings are the number one seed versus the number two seed. The only upsets came in the fifth place ladder as seven and eight seeds Cindy Bagby and Jean Engebretson worked their way into the decider for who makes the top five in first flight. In a tight match filled with two-ball scenarios, Jean overran position in the final two minutes to give Cindy the chance she was waiting for culminating in a one point double overtime victory. After a one point loss to Karen Comeau, Judy Dahlstrom captured third place by defeating the wily Rob Franks and Bob Morford took third in the second flight with his second victory over newcomer Val Terry.

In Championship flight Jim Butts slipped up on a finishing break against his doubles partner, Aviv Katz, but recovered for a 21-11 win and had to play the red hot Peter Bach. Since winning both the singles and doubles at USCA Nationals in first flight, the pilot from Idaho has brought his game to a new level. Thanks in part to his forays into association rules, Peter's aggressive shooting and consistent break play led him to two upsets over Mike Orgill, a solid play-in win over Rich Schiller and a spot in the semi-finals.

The limit to Mr. Bach's well-orchestrated play seemed to be the negative handicaps. In block play, the national champion match-up between Rothman and Bach was an entertaining exhibition in exceptional efficiency. Rothman ran an eight hoop two-ball break that included a cannon at 2-back leaving Peter no opportunities. Peter lost 26-1 and his match against Jim Butts didn't go much better. Attempting an early attack, Peter collected deadness and got to watch Jim Butts at his best. After two breaks and a near perfect leave, Peter was eliminated 26-3. Peter went on to take third place over Rich Schiller in a tight match (18-16) with deadness traps and aggressive rover play by Mr. Bach. Ben Rothman cruised to the final with two 26-3 games over Steve Mossbrook and Rich Schiller.

The finals day featured the familiar Bloody Mary and Mimosa bar courtside with a cloudless view of the snow-topped mountains composing the beautiful backdrop for the doubles and singles finals. A surprised Carl Myer and Rob Franks won the second flight doubles over rookie players Bob Morford and Nick Gray, while John Destry defeated his fellow Vancouver resident Keith Sjostrom for the singles title. The high-low team of Rich Schiller and Val Terry wore out their welcome in first flight by defeating the scrappy Karen Comeau and Jean Engebretson (16-12) in the doubles final. Jean's husband (and unwilling opponent) Dick completed his perfect record with a convincing victory (14-8) over Karen Comeau in the final. Dick's stunning achievement was only overshadowed by Karen defeating several of the low handicapped players and making the final as a 9 handicap in her first flight debut!

The championship doubles was a great meeting of the minds as Croquet Puzzler Book author Larry Stettner and his protege Ben Rothman vociferously discussed tactics on when to enter the game and how to set leaves against club President Ron Hendry and Chris Christian of Pinehurst, North Carolina. All that mental acuity was derailed when Ron Hendry hit in on several leaves only to run into hoop trouble as soon as the break was in hand. The last narrow window of opportunity came when Larry had a three-ball break for the final three hoops and a peg out, but missed the return roquet after four-back! Ron once again hit in and built a break, but hoop five was blocked by two pesky stanchions. Rothman and Stettner won their first doubles title (ever) 22-9 with Rothman's parents (Stettner's cousins) Al and Arlyss enjoying the family circus.

The club pro quickly shifted into singles mode to meet Jim Butts in the main event. Rothman took an early attack and attempted a difficult break only to miss a tough angled shot at hoop three. Jim took a break around and watched with wide eyes as Rothman missed the 60-foot hit in. The more Luis the bartender poured, the more the crowd roared and Rothman retreated to the far side of the lawn to watch the championship slip through his fingers for the third year in a row. Having just run a nice break for eleven hoops it came as a big surprise when Jim failed hoop six. Ben realized the fleeting nature of this opportunity and managed to make the most out of it. Two boring breaks and several bottles of champagne later, Ben pegged out for the clean sweep and the title (26-17). With the tournament out of the way, pick-up golf croquet games kept the crowd satisfied and the atmosphere jovial well into the afternoon. The croquet never ends here in Mission Hills.