

USCA National Championships (American Rules)

6-12 November 2011

Mission Hills Country Club, Rancho Mirage, California

by Ben Rothman, Tournament Director



Mission Hills Country Club

Hidden in a sunny valley beneath the San Jacinto Mountains is a secluded set of fantastic croquet lawns. For the winter croquet season this year the Mission Hills Croquet Club might as well be called the National Championship Center. The first of three national championships to be held in the desert this year was the American Rules contest in November. Over 40 players from all over the United States and Canada fought through nagging deadness and tight wickets to claim the 35th USCA title.

Defending the championship singles and doubles crown was a tall task for Ben Rothman, now directing and playing. Last year's runner-up David Maloof was entering the tournament on a 26-game winning streak after his Selection Eights performance and the North Carolina Club Teams. North Carolina was well-represented with the 11-time champion Jeff Soo and the lowest handicapped player in the American game, Danny Huneycutt. Doug Grimsley brought his six-month-old daughter, Anna, along with wife Stephanie out to enjoy one of the few tournaments he has played this year – while he dragged Rich Curtis around the court, as usual, in doubles. With reliable lawns and nearly 20 players with a zero or lower handicap, the title was up for grabs.

Jeff Soo emerged as the early favorite for the championship as the only undefeated player through the six block games. Soo beat Grimsley and Maloof (ending his win streak at 32) while Huneycutt beat the defending champion with the first half-Spooner of the tournament 26-1 to redeem his early loss to Paul Bennett 20-19. The prodigal son of the game, also known as Oz, had already scored a half-Spooner against Charlie Smith while Ben

Rothman attempted to be unique by completing a triple peel against Johnny Mitchell. Jeff Soo noted that the triple has been completed in the American nationals “like, a million times” before. Rich Lamm scored all three peels (in the only other attempted triple peel) against Charlie Smith but failed to peg out, finishing 25-19.

Steve Mossbrook took undefeated honors in the first flight singles while Sandy Knuth only faltered in her last block game. Dr. Knuth earned the third seed behind Chris Mondt who was also on five wins. The final spot in the eight-player ladder was a dead heat. Cindy Bagby and New Paltz alumnus Dave Cohen were both on the bubble with two wins. The tiebreaker for the eighth seed in the playoffs was an uncommon but extremely fair test: they would play for it. The play-in game came down to one stupendous 11 point run including a difficult rush-peel towards the end of regulation, which put Dave ahead 16-11. Dave would continue his run into the playoffs securing fourth place in singles. Cindy was dropped into a cross-block between the four first flight players that failed to make the playoffs and our four high-handicapped players who began in the second flight block.

Second/third flight was the story of a new Mission Hills player Cameron Evans. Cameron has been knocking balls around for a year during social golf croquet days but only picked up American Rules over the summer. The practice paid off as Cameron defeated all of the second flight and all but one of the first flight cross-over players to achieve an 11-1 record. Cameron went on to win the third flight singles trophy against San Diego player, Val Terry. The four players who missed out on first flight honors became their own playoff ladder for second flight. Don Oakley, responsible for Cameron's sole defeat, took the American title back to Canada with victories over Karen Comeau and Jean Engebretson in the “second” flight ladder.



Johnny Mitchell, Don Oakley, Ben Rothman



Ben Rothman, Cameron Evans, Johnny Mitchell

First flight doubles was very well-matched as most teams were 4-2 or 3-3. Oddly enough, the two teams with four wins lost in the semi-finals leaving Steve Mossbrook and Lee Hamel to play Dave Cohen and local Mary Rodeberg in the finals. Dave was unable to repeat his brilliant break running and missed hoop four with a game-winning break all lined up. Mossbrook was not done as his undefeated streak had continued all the way to the final of the double elimination singles ladder. Steve returned to form after a few seasons back from his long hiatus from the championship game. With convincing peg-out victories in two of his playoff games and the position as “holder” in the final game(s), the trophy seemed destined for Wyoming. But Mary Rodeberg had other plans. On the heels of her last turn victory over Chris Mondt in the loser's bracket final, Mary was ready for a battle. Steve could not organize his breaks as he had against Mary in the semi-final, but he held a slight lead all game. Bending her body to direct difficult shots, Mary gave it her best but the fickle fate of tight games finally failed our femme fatale. Steve Mossbrook took both titles in what he hopes is his final first flight tournament.



Peter Bach (2010 winner), Steve Mossbrook, Ron Hendry (2004 winner)

Championship doubles was riddled with strong teams. Jeff Soo and Rich Lamm took the top seed with an undefeated block performance only to be matched by the five wins from the underdog team of Charlie Smith and Steve Johnston who celebrated courtside with some of the finest wines from Charlie's Smith-Madrone vineyard. 2010 champions Rothman and Cumming took the second seed from the block while 2009 champs Grimsley and Curtis took the third spot. A well-deserved wild card went to the Bennett brothers' team and the final spot was a close shave where Britt Ruby and Rory Kelley edged out Jim Turner and Sherif Abdelwahab by net points for the final spot in the ladder with just two wins. As many players know, when the playoffs begin it is a whole new tournament.

The high-octane winos couldn't continue their winning ways against Ruby and Kelley and returned to the winery after the first round of the loser's bracket to Huneycutt and Maloof. The last wild card team went on to beat Grimsley and Curtis as well as Soo and Lamm by one point each thanks to clutch hit-ins by Ruby. Rothman and Cumming were knocked down by Soo and Lamm but relished their roles as knockout artists on their way back to the finals. This was Rothman's fourth consecutive doubles finals appearance (second with Cumming), but the true double elimination format gave Ruby and Kelley a nice advantage. Ben faltered in the first game, knocking a line ball out of bounds on the attack, but Brian recovered after an unintended cross-wire by Britt. The 26-8 victory was just the set up for the second, winners-take-all game. Game two was an ugly affair as each player put down a break or two and limped through lots of deadness. Ruby and Kelley continued their "good American tactics" and kept at least one ball alive while Rothman and Cumming grasped at straws. Eventually both Ben and Brian failed costly line rushes to cement their deadness situation while Rory, now a rover, loomed large as the enforcer. Britt Ruby and Rory Kelley kept the lead without having to score one-back a second time and won 19-10. This was Rory Kelley's first national title and Britt Ruby's first doubles title.

While Britt was very happy, he was no longer “just happy to be here.”



Rory Kelley, Britt Ruby

The championship singles knockout followed last year's format with a double elimination ladder with redemption in the semi-finals followed by a best-of-three final match. With nearly every game rewarding early attackers with lop-sided victories, the more reliable format was very popular. Lamm scored an early upset over Osborn 24-22 while the other Johnny (Mitchell) handed David Maloof a free pass to the loser's bracket 26-12. Doug beat Danny 26-4 and made his daughter proud enough to warrant a diaper change in the process. Jeff Soo continued his streak without allowing more than five points in a game and cruised into the finals with victories over Butts, Bennett, Rothman and Cumming. Danny recovered from his second round loss and took out Maloof, Rothman and Grimsley twice in a row for a chance at his first American rules national championship. The only obstacle: the man with the most USCA national championships.



Anna, Doug Grimsley

The match was one of the best national championship finals ever with two nearly perfect games followed by one of the most dramatic back-and-forth battles of the tournament – or any tournament. Danny drew first blood 26-2 and showed that Jeff was human after all. Jeff returned to form after patiently waiting for Danny to bring both balls in and attack. The attack worked, but Jeff hit a heroic long shot and stole the break(s) to level the match with another 26-2 victory. Game three started cleanly, but both players lost control with missed roquets and stuffed hoops leading spectators to wrongly declare the inevitability of a two break finish. Danny was more productive before he relinquished control, but Jeff still had a chance at the end. A lengthy takeoff to hoop three left Jeff with a knee-knocking twelve-foot hoop shot in last turns, but it would give him a game-tying break.



Danny Huneycutt



Johnny Mitchell, Jeff Soo, Ben Rothman

The crowd was hushed enough for all to hear the ball gently nudge the stanchions as it sailed through the hoop and down court. Jeff had two balls on court and a good chance to win if he could get the break together. Sadly, the drama ended as quickly as it began when the ten yard return roquet was too long for Jeff's medium paced shot to stay on target. Danny took the title 26-2, 2-26, 20-10 and all the spoils along with it. The USA team captain collected enough tracking points to become the first -4 handicap in USCA history and his lead in the grand prix should be enough (ask Rich Curtis) to secure the "Player of the Year" award for 2011. Jeff Soo may have lost, but the best-of-three match is much preferable to years past when several times he lost a single game in the tournament and took second.

Players and guests stayed fixed under the canopies during the finals as they witnessed a rare rainy day in the desert. The courtside bloody mary bar was enough to keep spectators happy despite the realization that the wonderfully-catered lunches were now a thing of the past. Special thanks were given to the tournament manager Ron Hendry and his thoughtful wife Genie who brought lunches every day and ran a profitable "Mallet Makers Mania" auction and raffle featuring eight different brands of North American croquet mallets. While the end of the tournament was bittersweet, some took comfort in the unavoidable déjà vu of two more national championships in the desert this year!



*Back: Mary Rodeberg, Don Oakley, Jean Engebretson, Dave Cohen, Steve Mossbrook, Jeff Soo, Cameron Evans, Ben Rothman, Anna, Doug Grimsley
Front: Val Terry, Danny Huneycutt, Rory Kelley, Britt Ruby*

Full Results

Champion Flight Singles

1. Danny Huneycutt
2. Jeff Soo
3. Doug Grimsley
3. Brian Cumming
5. Johnny Mitchell
5. Ben Rothman
7. David Maloof
7. Rich Lamm
9. Paul Bennett
9. Rory Kelley
9. Steve Johnston
9. Britt Ruby
13. Johnny Osborn
13. Jim Butts
13. Mike Gibbons

13. Peter Bach
17. Sherif Abdelwahab
17. Rich Schiller
17. Jim Turner
17. Rich Curtis
17. Patrick Sweeney
17. Steve Scalpone
17. Rick Sheely
17. Charlie Smith
17. Aviv Katz
17. Gary Bennett

First Flight Singles

1. Steve Mossbrook
2. Mary Rodeberg
3. Chris Mondt
4. Dave Cohen
5. Lee Hamel
5. Rick Landry
7. Judy Dahlstrom
7. Sandy Knuth
- DNF. Bob Kays

Second Flight Singles

1. Don Oakley
2. Jean Engebretson
3. Karen Comeau
3. Cindy Bagby

Third Flight Singles

1. Cameron Evans
2. Val Terry
3. Nick Gray
3. Sally McGrath

Championship Doubles

1. Britt Ruby & Rory Kelley
2. Ben Rothman & Brian Cumming
3. Jeff Soo & Rich Lamm
4. Doug Grimsley & Rich Curtis
5. Danny Huneycutt & David Maloof
5. Steve Scalpone & Patrick Sweeney
7. Steve Johnston & Charlie Smith
7. Paul Bennett & Gary Bennett
9. Sherif Abdelwahab & Jim Turner
9. Johnny Mitchell & Rick Sheely
9. Jim Butts & Aviv Katz
9. Johnny Osborn & Rick Landry
9. Peter Bach & Sandy Knuth

First Flight Doubles

1. Steve Mossbrook & Lee Hamel

2. Mary Rodeberg & Dave Cohen
3. Rich Schiller & Val Terry
3. Judy Dahlstrom & Nick Gray
5. Cindy Bagby & Karen Comeau
5. David Cartwright & Don Oakley
5. Chris Mondt & Sally McGrath



Danny Huneycutt