

2011 NEW YORK CROQUET CLUB - OSBORN CUP
Central Park, New York City
September 22-25, 2011

If words can paint pictures, or create images, I will admit defeat before the keys of this laptop even warm. And if you have never been to New York City, the words and descriptions that follow will barely stain the mental canvas. While many have called it the Big Apple, apparently few know why. Others have referred to it as 'the city that never sleeps', a simple yet massive understatement. Inspiration lives without pause, as does excitement, and danger, and joy. As does amazement, and indefinite energy. Acting as the heart of determination within the Empire State, residents refer to it as The Imperial City, and without a doubt the unstoppable pulse could beat no faster. Colors flow, unclassified hues floating like air through time which passes without limits - without a shot clock.

"You're not going to make it," said Rebeca Bergofsky. This was back in June, during the New York Croquet Club's Clayton Cup, one of the two Invitationals held by the Club each year. She was hosting the Opening Reception and had cornered me somewhere between a table of seductive food and a visual orgy of images, all of Central Park and all streaming through the window and into her 16th floor apartment. "You are going to freak out!"

At first I had thought that this was in reference to the weather report, a forecast filled with gloom and doom. Or, perhaps, she had forgotten that I had spent the first 31 years of my life living within the land of the yellow cab, and thus still able to handle the occasional pan-handler or the eternal grid-lock my taxis would undoubtedly experience. With uncertainty now settling in and my tie suddenly acting somewhat like a noose, I nodded, as though I understood. My eyes darted elsewhere, an attempt to shield the question marks now forming within them. "You're doomed," she yelled, "doomed!" And I had no idea what she was talking about.

Of course, I know what you are now thinking. Why does the New York Croquet Club have two Invitationals per year? Well, let's put it this way: the NYCC has one of the largest Memberships in the country. It has one of the most aggressive and active playing schedules in the world. Like The City itself, the Members never rest - volunteers emerge without request. The two Central Park courts (four during Invitationals) are treated like Holy ground, and hard is it to find any historical croquet figure who has not played upon them. And no matter what your impression of New York might be, you have to visit. You just have to! The Invitationals are like a party, or a celebration, and the NYCC Members are always looking forward to another game. Or another friend. Or another reason to expand upon croquet within the Universe. Players here enjoy the game. They laugh win or lose. They laugh a lot. And there is never enough time within a calendar year for enough of that.

Admittedly, things do not always work out perfectly. The Clayton Cup had it's fair share of rain and canceled matches and, yes, although no one really saw it, I did freak out a little (more on that later), but with the Osborn Cup came hopes that play would proceed without interruption or issue. The Opening Reception, held at the Racquet and Tennis Club, following the Annual Meeting, found smiles throughout the facility. The field was the largest in some time and things were going quite well, jocular conversation filling the room, until: "You can't do it twice! Can't survive two! It's impossible! Impossible I tell you!" Yes, there was Rebeca Bergofsky, threatening me with a Pig-in-a-Blanket and more adamant than ever. "You're sexy, but you are not Superman...I can only pray for you so much!" And I nodded, now understanding and worried that her words may come true.

While I offer neither vital nor pertinent information here, I feel that it is important to explain that the Osborn Cup was named after the Club's founder, Jack R. Osborn. After playing croquet in "The Rambles" for several years, a somewhat infamous area of Central Park, the NYCC was formed out of the work of many. Now sharing a facility with a long-standing lawn bowlers club, the first National Championships (1977), followed by many, were held upon these hallowed grounds. In a multitude of ways, the USCA started in New York, it's offices located but a few blocks from the lawns. This particular tournament began as the Club Championships, but later on expanded into an event open to all. And what a good idea that was.

Held over the span of four days, competition within this event is always condensed - long hours and a multitude of games always the standard. Lunch on the run and seven rounds of play is not uncommon. This year, like placing a comma within a sentence, things were scheduled at a slower pace. The reason? Similar to the Clayton Cup in the Spring, the weather forecast was miserable. No, not miserable

with heat, or a drizzle, or the standard terrorist threat, but with non-stop rain throughout the proceedings. No, the earthquake within the last month had no bearing, but the hurricane and the record levels of rain certainly did. Any sprinkle, with certainty, would flood the already over-saturated lawns beyond play.

The format of the event was quite simple and standard. Kind of. While singles action was the accustomed block to playoffs, doubles was reformatted into the Waterford style, thus allowing the weather-oriented elimination of a round (or two) if necessary. Games were timed at one hour and a quarter and only six rounds of play were used per day. And 'oh' did all of this help, for when the rain did come down Friday, it came with an attitude. Granted, people run in New York, but this was more like an exodus, the Clubhouse quickly filled with a soggy sea of white. Make-shift cloths lines were constructed and game times were either rearranged or rescheduled. Players took turns peaking throughout the door, or the small window, and all the time planning how to spend what in many locations would be a lost afternoon. In New York, this was just an opportunity to explore.

That evening, even though and as the rain continued, players still showed up at The Emerald Inn, the unofficial drinking station of the NYCC. A casual and unpretentious establishment, the Emerald holds great stories within its wooden walls, secrets and dreams shared only between croquet players hoping for or reflecting upon desires or memories. There are donated trophies on the shelves...look for them. And as the weather continued to threaten, and while suspicious clouds would occupy Saturday, and against all odds, play did continue. The Player's Dinner was held that night at Orsay, where both food and drink beat any expectations. Those making the Playoffs were announced, and glasses were raised throughout the room.

By 6:30 Sunday morning, I was already putting wickets into the ground. Tim Rapuano, my able assistant, was arriving soon and would shortly fall into the full New York rhythm, setting lines and making sure that everything was just right. He would again look at his parking ticket from yesterday, and then ignore it - there was work to be done. George Blake, the ultimate volunteer, would be there within minutes. Sara Low, President of one of the greatest Club in World, would follow, as would Carla Rueck, and Norris Settlemyre, and Karen Kaplan, all ready to shrug a shoulder and do things, unseen to the untrained eye, which would lend to the comfort of all. A road race was being held nearby. Vendors set up their carts. The bee-hive that New York is was filtering into Central Park, all of the croquet players migrating into the swarm.

In that a round of both Singles and Doubles had been lost due to the unplayable conditions earlier, Sunday began with the final two time-slots of the Waterford Doubles. Crucial to some and casual to others, dependant upon previous results, everyone was there and everyone played. And the weather was polite to all, no matter what importance each player put upon these games. By mid-day, matters became a bit more serious, as the Singles Playoffs, divided into four Divisions, began.

The New York accent of Martine Fournage was the first I heard as play began within the Third Flight Playoffs. I forget the exact words, but they were something like: "Oops." Since Martine and I had won the New York State Golf Croquet Championships in June, I had a reasonably good idea that this previously unheard utterance was not a good sign, and though she had won all of her matches in Block play, she slowly fell (13-15) to the diabolical hands of Philip Hedger. Cecily Greenaway would also fall two points short (7-9) to the laid-back Keith Nichols, relaxed perhaps due to the extra sleep he had acquired by snooze-buttoning (new word) his way through his first Singles match. And if a refreshed mind does help, it was perhaps proven as Keith continued on to defeat Philip in another (14-12) two-point match, thus capturing the Third Flight honors.

I tried my best to avoid the court designated to the Second Flight Semi-Finals. In one of the double-banked matches, amiable Bill Blakesley was slowly torturing the quickly-improving Ted Hilles, the result being the friendliest (17-13) 'water-boarding' ever to have been seen. Sadly, it was the other game which offered the stuff reoccurring nightmares are made of. There was young Ryan Thompson, Clayton Cup winner and a wild-card in any crowd, battling against one of the most distinctive New York accents ever, that of Rebeca Bergofsky! "Get away from this lawn," she yelled at me, "you're just dangerous now!" Whether this had any effect on her game or not, Ryan would caffeine his way to a 11-8 victory. And the Final itself, while Rebeca was trying to find a number for Homeland Security or Bellevue, was a great deli of opportunity, even by New York standards. Both players had many funny comments and even more great chances, but when the dust settled, with Ryan winding up almost seven-ball dead, Bill walked away with a well earned 13-9 victory.

In the First Flight Singles, number two seed Sean Hartley and Reine Bitting had the most exciting of the Semis, Sean victorious in a 15-14 nail-bitter. Spectators agreed that Reine may have uttered a curse

or two, but that she used the kind of words that really did not count in Manhattan. In the other game, Rich Greulich was saying 'drat' a lot, probably because of the fact that the number one seed, Gene Nathanson, was making more (11-7) wickets. This set up an intriguing Finals. OK, not really. Sean, a man of very few words, let his mallet do the talking, and with it maneuvered his balls to a 12-9 victory. Gene, who really had not competed in some time, was still impressive given this lack of play. "Double-drat," he now said.

Before not only the Championship Flight Playoffs, but those matches in every Division started, a female spectator had wandered over to sexy Chris Patmore. "You have an English accent," the 20-something-year-old beauty said, "Where are you from?" And without breaking a beat, his response was simple: "I'm a New Yorker." And with that, like ringing a bell for the field, Chris, and Martine, and even Rebeca began to play.

Chris was faced with a tough Semi, his opponent the determined, verbal, foot-scoffing Rich Curtis. And quite a battle they had, both grinding until Chris had made the last shot, one allowing him to proceed (13-12) into the Finals. On the other half of the draw, lumberjack Micah Beck faced off against the too-regular Tim Bitting. While Micah played well, Tim had control throughout most of the match (24-17) and earned the right to battle for the top honors. And, once again, a great game erupted. I think. What I do know is that it went into overtime. The sun had actually made an appearance and all of the other matches had been completed, pretty much the way that one would hope things would be. Quiet, if there is such a thing in New York, almost lingered, only to be followed by an eruption of applause. Noises from outside the gates surrounding the lawns became evident and Chris Patmore had his arms raised in the air, a repeat from his Clayton Cup victory in June.

Me? I did not witness the end of that match. No, with the facility split into two adjoining lawns, I was just relaxing on a bench, one facing the two courts upon which all of the other wars had come to a conclusion. And yes, I was reflecting a bit, at all of the times during which I had either taught or played upon these lawns, or simply stopped by for some nice conversation. The field of green was not so green this year, with sand applied generously and acorns swept frequently, but nobody really seemed that bothered. More importantly, I had hoped that none of the players had ever realized how close I had come to breaking a mallet's shaft, or a neck. What I was doing now was breaking the newly instigated law: no smoking in Central Park. Trophies were about to be awarded and if NY was to ticket me, I really didn't care. I was pretty happy at how nice the weekend it had been. I watched the clouds I had made float and dissipate into the scenery of Central Park West. I even enjoyed the eruption of sound which had broken the moment.

The New York Croquet Club does everything with enthusiasm. Players taxi, drive, bike, walk or skateboard to the courts, but they are inevitably there. Information is always available. Activities are planned with precision. Instruction is offered with honor. While the history of the Club is rich, the future looks more like a fortune. Next year I will remember my electronic cigarette, news Rebeca Bergofsky was pleased to hear. When she came up to receive her trophy, I literally picked her up in my arms, perhaps inspired by the nicotine still flowing through my veins. She probably knew via scent, because the smile on her face was grand. Everyone was smiling. And I certainly thank the croquet gods that I didn't drop her.

RESULTS

CHAMPIONSHIP FLIGHT SINGLES

1. Chris Patmore
 2. Tim Bitting
 3. Micah Beck
 3. Rich Curtis
 5. Norris Settlemyre
 5. Tim Rapuano
 7. David McCoy
 7. Ted Quimby
 9. George Blake
- Also played: John Osborn

FIRST FLIGHT SINGLES

1. Sean Hartley
2. Gene Nathanson
3. Reine Bitting
3. Rich Greulich
5. Sara Low
5. Templeton Peck

SECOND FLIGHT SINGLES

1. William Blakesley
2. Ryan Thompson
3. Rebeca Bergofsky
3. Ted Hilles
5. Hope Harmon
5. John Seidler
5. John Woodside
5. Ralph Charles

THIRD FLIGHT SINGLES

1. Keith Nichols
 2. Philip Hedger
 3. Cecily Greenaway
 3. Martine Fournage
 5. Freear Pollard
 6. Anthony Bryant
- Also played: Carla Rueck

CHAMPIONSHIP FLIGHT DOUBLES

1. Norris Settlemyre – William Blakesley
2. Ryan Thomson – Tim Rapuano
3. Rich Curtis – Rich Greulich
4. Sara Low – Ted Quimby
5. John Woodside – Micah Beck
6. Gene Nathanson – George Blake
7. David McCoy – Hope Harmon
8. Templeton Peck – Tim Bitting

FIRST FLIGHT DOUBLES

1. Patricia Duncan – Ted Hilles
2. John Seidler – Rebeca Bergofsky
3. Cecily Greenaway – Karen Kaplan
4. Freear Pollard – Jane Osgood
5. Anthony Bryant – Rita Kay
6. Martine Fournage – Carla Rueck (dnf)

-John C. Osborn (TD)