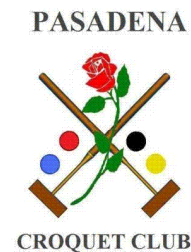


PASADENA CROQUET INVITATIONAL
(aka The “Pasadena Eight”)
June 26-29, 2014



At the recent USCA AC National Championships, much courtside discussion focused on the playing conditions at the just-completed MacRobertson Shield held in New Zealand. In particular, USA team members noted how hard it was to run the novel Atkins Quadway hoops set in hard ground on lawns that were sometimes covered with actual green grass, sometimes not. The word “challenging” seemed to be universal among our lads.

So how can USA players prepare for such conditions in the future when almost every championship lawn in America is perfectly flat, beautifully green and usually sand-based? Longtime national team member and Mac veteran Jim Bast asked me that question and I had an answer for him: “Come to Pasadena.”

The Pasadena Croquet Club plays on two lawns that were installed in 1921. The grass is resilient Bermuda and the base is, well, it might as well be granite for all I know. What’s certain is that we have the hardest croquet ground in all the USA and, perhaps, the world, excepting the top of Half Dome. To compound that boast, I told Jim we could sink our hoops into that granite base and create some distinctly challenging croquet conditions rivaling any club in New Zealand or Yosemite.

Jim then asked if the PCC would be willing to host a small, high-level tournament designed as a training ground for USA team members and aspirants? I checked with club leader Eric Sawyer and we both thought it possible. We generally hold our club championship in June. Why not up the stakes?

Jim made some calls to USA team members around the country and got some support. He said this could happen. And so the Pasadena Croquet Invitational was conceived on the fly and recruiting began.

Pasadena club member Charlie Fleming, a talented up-and-comer who will soon ruin his promising croquet career by attending med school, convinced two of his St. John’s college buddies to come out: Charlie “Gilmo” Gillmarten and Robert Hurst, both recent USA team members. Eric recruited Martyn Selman and managed to clear his own busy docket. Leo Nikora, recent USA team member and reigning PCC champion naturally wanted to defend his title. Jim was in, because it was his idea; and rounding out the field was USA’s number one player, Ben Rothman. With this group we had what I thought would be a very competitive “Pasadena Eight.” I volunteered to be the tournament manager and reserve player in case anyone had to drop out. Thank goodness that didn’t happen.

My goal from the beginning was to oblige Jim’s vision with challenging conditions and present a world class format. I decided on a block of eight, all play all in 3 hour games for the first two days, feeding into two KO ladders, upper and lower, with best of three games to the peg and no time limit to decide the champion and create a test match environment. Everyone would play two matches on the final two days.

Now, all I had to do was back up my sadistic boast about creating those challenging conditions. The ground was the ground—nothing I needed to do about that. But I could do something with the hoops. I wanted to channel the living spirit of CB Smith (now 91 and still enjoying his personal slice of Heaven in Santa Monica), who

used to set hoops for the Sonoma-Cutrer World Croquet Championships. CB is a master hoop-setter, which left me thinking, “What would CB do?” Well, he’d set some scary tight hoops in that hard ground and cackle at every stuff and clang.

We used full carrot Jaques of London cast iron hoops. Each took about a hundred whacks with a three pound sledge to get them in the granite-like base. I told the players that this would be only time we caught fresh ground—there just wasn’t a chance of whacking them in more than once and I was confident that the hoops would hold their settings for all four days. Using a Rodoni hoop clamp (my favorite hoop-setting contraption), I set the clearance for the first day’s play at slightly under 1/16th. Ease the guys in, I thought. I’d set the hoops tighter each day until I reached 1/64th on the final day. They sunk in as expected and might as well have been set in concrete.



Can you see daylight?

Play began on Thursday morning, June 26th, under a cooling blanket of classic Southern California fog—June Gloom, as it is known in the City of Our Lady, Queen of the Angels. Ben ripped through his first two games, running flawless TPs. I wondered if the hoops were too wide? Then the sun came out and the carnage began. The lawn became less predictable, the hoops less forgiving. Ben lost his next two games, first to Robert Hurst, and then to Martyn Selman in a game that went to time.

By the end of Day One, America’s number one player was in fourth place, on the cusp of making the championship cut. That got Ben’s attention.

Over the next four days, the hoops punished bullies, rewarded precision and took no prisoners. Add in the beguiling Bermuda lawns with patches of green and brown and every shot was a treacherous journey. Jim said it was “decidedly Antipodean,” unlike any other venue in the US. In my mind’s ear I heard CB cackle with delight.



C.B. Smith at the San Francisco Open in 1995

By the end of block play, Leo Nikora was in first place with six wins, his only loss to Ben. Ben, Robert and Jim had five wins each, placing them in the championship KO. Martyn, the two Charlies and Eric went into the consolation ladder.

Playing to form, Ben and Jim advanced to the final, knocking Robert and Leo into the 3rd place match. Martyn and Eric reached the final in the consolation ladder.

The hoops set up as planned for the final day, with nary a slice of light visible between ball and uprights. During the first hour of play, Ben, Leo, Jim and Robert, double-banking on the South Lawn, made a cumulative total of five hoops. Leo wondered if they would finish a single game before dark, let alone a full match.

Those fears vanished as Ben adapted his play to the conditions and ran two remarkably controlled TPs to win the championship. Robert took third with some excellent play of his own.



Ben Rothman & Jim Bast

Of note, Jim played the entire final with an ailing shoulder, the result of an injury during his semi-final match. At one point he thought about withdrawing, but knew if he did that he'd hear from Doug Grimsley, who played for five days at the recent WCF World Championships on a broken leg.

To round out the tournament, the Pasadena Lawn Bowling Club graciously opened its clubhouse to the croquet players, providing a welcome respite from the sun and a place to eat. In a throwback to the old days of croquet, a modest continental breakfast and deli buffet lunch was provided to the players each day, compliments of Michelle Thomas. PCC member Joanne Woods baked a delicious Apple Crisp. And in a nod to the overseas tradition of the croquet pub, players enjoyed a few cold ones after play each day. Well, maybe more than a few.

The tournament could not have happened without the support and help of Caren and Eric Sawyer, who continue to be the guiding lights of the Pasadena Croquet Club. All in all, a great Pasadena Eight.

--Rhys Thomas

Final Standings

1. Ben Rothman
2. Jim Bast
3. Robert Hurst
4. Leo Nikora
5. Martyn Selman
6. Eric Sawyer
7. Charlie Gillmarten
8. Charlie Fleming