



USCA Southeast Regional Championship

June 18-22, 2014

Redart, VA

You simply don't stumble onto turtle-mating season every year, but there I was, driving over shells with regularity. In retrospect, I guess the season for turtle mating probably does occur at least once every twelve months. Just not around me. And when I say that I was driving over them, I by no means mean that I was splattering them all over the road as the sound of an evil laugh filled the car! In fact, it was quite a task to either swerve around them or maneuver my vehicle so that the tires acted like bookends for their camouflaged bodies. Box turtles, I think, and you could almost make out their panic ridden expressions as they prepared themselves for the view of the undercarriage of my Toyota.

I had originally driven north from Florida to run the USCA Southeast Regional Championships, an event to be held upon the Middle Peninsula Croquet Club grounds. That's in Redart, Virginia. For the life of me, I cannot remember how I wound up with this job. Nor did I ever find out what ever happened to the original town of Dart. But there I was, now motoring, on day two, from the beautiful home of my hosts, Jack and Patty Chase, to the three beautiful Club lawns located an easy twenty miles away. Jack is the USCA District President who did such a phenomenal job of setting everything up on a local level. Patty, his wife, still scares the hell out of me! Simply put and a lesson for everyone reading...never tell a woman that there are deer in her garden. Nothing good comes from that, and while I understand that everyone knows not to shoot the messenger, given her reaction to my gleeful words, I was in my car within seconds. I hoped that the deer would fend for themselves.

West Palm Beach, where I reside, is close to the Everglades, but that by no means should suggest that I am a nature expert. I know how to run like a wild eyed idiot when faced with an alligator. And that Fire Ants are not friendly, no matter how you run or shake. And - that all of nature's creatures are beautiful. What I have also found out, through travel, is that the three courts at the MPCC are, while not perfect, almost predictable in their uncertainty. They run a bit slow, but having had the chance to play upon them for a short period of time, I loved them! And they are always the same courts for everyone. Accented by a recently built Clubhouse and offering an abundance of equipment, the facility serves the game of croquet as well as any. Distractions from the snakes, tics, beetles and other attacking insects I quickly learned to ignore. Kind of. Did you know that beetle-mating season also occurs in June, at least in this neck of the woods? Yes, June is a busy month in Virginia.

If it sounds as though I was out of my element, that's not really the case. There was croquet involved, and thus I fell into my comfort zone. For five days I was more than impressed with the sense of humor, spirited play and overall unity which bonded all of the players together. The set-up each morning took a great deal of effort, and the combined energy of many was more than impressive. I think I used the word 'inspiring' during the closing ceremonies, and I stick to it.

Of course, it did take me more than a while to understand why Rick Darnell was so hated. Honestly, I had not met 75% of the players in attendance, and those that I did know I had not seen in over a decade. But who was this Rick Darnell, and why did everyone want either he or I sent into a pit of snakes, beetles, or slow eating turtles? Cornered by the participants at the Opening Reception, somewhere between the Swedish Meatballs and the Cheese Station, it took some time to answer statements that had no question marks attached.

As things turned out, Mr. Rick Darnell is one of the most amiable gentlemen I have ever met. And everyone agreed with that perception. The only apparent problem was that his handicap was listed as a 'questionable' nine. Beyond that, and according to the many, it seemed equally ungodly that he should be playing with his partner, eight-handicapper Ward Lefler, in the First Flight. Factually: There were only two Flights in Doubles and this was the Regionals, meaning that partners were a matter of choice. And the Second Flight Singles was listed in the Invitation as for those holding handicaps of 9 or above. If Darnell's handicap was somewhat off, well...and so there I was with a fondue fork stuck into my neck, hot words being served, with much enthusiasm, by a Second Flight contestant. "Darnell could beat me with a broom!" Hmmm, I thought, the intelligent part of my brain wisely encouraging silence.

As things turned out, Rick actually did win the Second Flight Singles, but it was not without excitement. In block play, he lost to Macey White (13) and Dennis Koziol (14), and barely snuck past the remaining three participants with one or two point victories. What was becoming more apparent was the fact that while Rick's handicap may not have been that far off, other players within the Flight needed some serious adjustments! By Sunday, Rick did begin to live up to the rumors and defeated the determined Macey White (16-10) to capture the Title. Carter Richardson and Conor Johnson, both impressive players, tied for Third Place.

The First Flight Singles was crammed with talent, and matches were close throughout the entire event. Sunday morning saw Alan Langley (4.5) defeat (14-12) Marie Haas (6) while Douglas Nagel (7) overcame (11-10) Conrad Haas (4.5) in the other Semi-Final. It was great to see such a relaxed and competitive Final, one in which two of the more easy-going men I have ever met made croquet look like fun! Alan took home the larger prize (17-13), but the match was equally enjoyed by both.

The Championship Flight Singles was equally intriguing, and Warren Buffett would have been safe in offering some money for a correct draw. By the time the field had narrowed down to the Final four, a wide variety of characters were left standing. On one side, youngster Zack Watson (1.5), who may play faster than I ever did, overcame (21-8) the slow but steady Bill Hartmann (1). On the other side, the experienced Barry Williams (1.5) finally fell to the deliberate (nice way of saying slow) play of Rodney Lassiter (2). As opposed to the First Flight, play in all of these matches was concentrated, and when things came to the Final, the confident play of Zack, who made reaching 26 points a habitual habit, was just too much (26-8) for Mr. Lassiter.

In Doubles action, Marie Haas and Douglas Nagel found their way to the Winner's Circle with a close 17-14 victory over Ward Lefler and the notorious Rick Darnell. Zack Watson, teamed with his mentor Travis Watson (2.5), showed more consistent shooting while defeating (20-13) Rodney and his partner, Jim Coling. Throughout all of the play in both Flights, and throughout the Single s divisions, good sportsmanship was exhibited throughout.

Overall, the tournament was nothing short of a joy. Weather was a threat throughout, but as though a friend of croquet was in charge of the on-off button, only a handful of matches were canceled due to overhead activity. What I am truly impressed with is the fact that not a game throughout the five day event went without a volunteer offering his/her services for board keeping duties. The set-up each morning and the take-down each evening went like clock-work, with more hands always available than actually needed. The lunches were wonderful, liquid was always nearby (Thanks Barbara!) and the scheduled social activities were fantastic. Even when nothing could be found listed within the program, personal homes were opened and the festivities went on throughout. There really are too many people to recognize! A great deal of gratitude goes out not only to all of the participants, but especially to the Middle Peninsula Croquet Club members. A fantastic facility, incredible people and wonderful enthusiasm...I strongly encourage and hope that the USCA Regionals can be held there again soon!

As a final note, while we sometimes feel as those good things simply happen, there are usually people who allow this sense of comfort to occur. Avril Nicholson, Regional VP, has been at her job for, I believe, about eight years. For this event alone, between securing venues, participation, budgets, garbage patrol and a million other things that we as players/directors do not always recognize, she has worked well beyond her volunteer call of duty. Try to convince her to keep her job. And, one way or another, thank her when she least expects it. She deserves it.

I'm back in Florida now. Tomorrow I fly up to Long Island and eventually head off for a little hike in the White Mountains, New Hampshire. It has nothing to do with croquet, but I expect that new wildlife will wander upon my path. And I imagine that good memories of the Southeast Regionals will enter my mind. That's all good. Now if I can only get rid of the ants now trying to claim my condo as their own.

Final Order

Championship Flight Singles

1. Zack Watson
2. Rodney Lassiter
3. Bill Hartmann
3. Barry Williams
5. Travis Watson
5. Jack Chase
7. Freeman Turley

First Flight Singles

1. Alan Langley
2. Douglas Nagel
3. Marie Haas
3. Conrad Haas
5. Ward Lefler
6. Arthur Olsen
6. Jim Coling
8. Avril Nicholson

Second Flight Singles

1. Rick Darnell
2. Macey White
3. Conor Johnson
3. Carter Richardson
5. Connie Coling
5. Dennis Koziol
5. Mary Stewart Regensberg
8. Carl Johnson
8. Robert McCreary
10. Jane Koziol

Championship Flight Doubles

1. Zack Watson & Travis Watson
2. Rodney Lassiter & Jim Coling
3. Bill Hartmann & Arthur Olsen
4. Jack Chase & Freeman Turley
5. Conrad Haas & Alan Langley
6. Barry Williams & Avril Nicholson

First Flight Doubles

1. Marie Haas & Douglas Nagel
2. Ward Lefler & Rick Darnell
3. Conor Johnson & Jane Koziol
4. Carl Johnson & Dennis Koziol
5. Mary Stewart Regensberg & Carter Richardson
6. Robert McCreary & Connie Coling