

STRATEGIES FOR USING BISQUES IN AC by Neil Hardie

This is the first of a series of four articles on the use of bisques, covering the strategies and tactics used when playing with or against bisques. These notes are mainly for bronze and silver players (apart from the article on playing against bisques) – for gold and platinum players the tactics with bisques are different, and these players need no advice anyway. If an impatient player wants all the information now, they can email Neil Hardie on nhardie@ozemail.com.au and he will send you all the articles.

OVERVIEW

It is difficult to use bisques sensibly. It is said that by the time you know how to use bisques, you don't get any because your handicap is too low. Many people play badly while they have bisques, then improve dramatically once their bisques have gone. This is presumably because they are confused by the bisques, and are not able to concentrate properly on their game while the bisques are there.

However, it is very profitable to use bisques well; for high handicap players it helps to develop breaks, and allows them to play against good players. Bronze players who play only against other bronze players take much longer to improve.

Better players are often poor at playing against bisques. Many of them avoid handicap tournaments because they are put off by an array of bisques against them. But just as there are techniques for using bisques, there are techniques for playing against bisques.

The methods of playing with bisques (or against bisques) varies according to the situation. You have a different strategy if you have a large number of bisques as compared to having only a few bisques. You have a different strategy against a top grade player as against a moderate player.

If you are playing against a very good player (say handicap 5 or less), then your opponent may only need two turns to finish the game. That means that one of your main aims is to stop the opponent from getting in. There is nothing more frustrating than losing a game when you still have a number of bisques left.

Against a moderate player there is little likelihood of your opponent making a long break, so you can afford to let them in several times, and keep your bisques for occasions when they will be most useful.

STRATEGIES FOR USING BISQUES

There are basically three main strategies for using bisques.

a). 'Keep it going' strategy

This is used against a very good player who can finish in two or three turns. This kind of opponent is usually good at roquets, so they are quite likely to hit a long shot across the lawn. This means that wherever you leave the balls, your opponent is likely to hit in and make a long break. If you are a high handicap player you will have a lot of bisques; if you are a silver player against a platinum grade, you will still have at least five and a half bisques.

The plan here is to set up a four-ball break (using one or more bisques) and take a bisque whenever you break down to keep the break going.

b). 'Make every bisque count' strategy

This is used when you only have a few bisques; for example, with a sixteen handicap player against a twelve handicap. As you have only a few bisques, there is not a great difference in skill between the players, and your opponent will need a lot of turns to finish the game. The plan is to use each bisque where it will have the greatest effect – in other words, when you can almost certainly make two or more hoops with the bisque, or where you stop your opponent from making several hoops.

c). 'Use with care' strategy

This is the strategy when you have a reasonable number of bisques, but not enough to keep using them regardless. Your opponent is a good player, but not someone who can finish in a couple of turns. Here you set up a break and

try to keep it going. But if you get to a position where another bisque will not help the break much, and your opponent is unlikely to make a break, you allow them a turn.

STRATEGIES AGAINST BISQUES

There are two basic strategies here.

a). Hit in and make a break

If you are a good player who can make long breaks, you try to hit in whenever you have the chance, even if it gives your opponent a good situation (especially against a novice with many bisques). Eventually you will roquet, and then if you can make a long break you put great pressure on your opponent and increase the chance of their making errors.

b). Draw the bisques

If you are playing against a player of similar ability and they have a few bisques, you make breaks whenever you can, but you avoid giving them easy chances to make hoops, and you set up leaves intended to draw bisques from your opponent.

In practice a player would use a combination of these strategies – try to hit in when there is a good chance of a roquet, and join up to draw bisques when an attempt to roquet would give your opponent an easy chance of several hoops.

There are some excellent articles on bisques on the Oxford Croquet website. We will provide links to these at the appropriate times. A good starting point is [How to Play – Intermediate’ section 9 ‘Using Bisques’](http://www.oxfordcroquet.com/coach/intermediate/9.asp):
<http://www.oxfordcroquet.com/coach/intermediate/9.asp>

USING BISQUES – THE ‘KEEP IT GOING’ STRATEGY

If we are playing an opponent who can finish the game in two or three turns, our strategy must be to keep them out of play for as long as possible. If you are a bronze player against such an opponent you will have at least ten bisques. If you are a silver player you will still have five or more bisques.

Here the aim is to make as many hoops as possible by using all the bisques. Against a skilled opponent there is no point in making one hoop at a time and hoping they don't hit in. So the first task is to set up the lawn for a break, even if this uses two or three bisques. If you have a half bisque, this is the best time to use it. Articles on the Oxford Croquet website at <http://www.oxfordcroquet.com/coach/beginners/bcn3.asp#WPTOHTML5> and <http://www.oxfordcroquet.com/coach/intermediate/9.asp> explain how to set up a 4-ball break from the opening; and there is a very nice animation on this at <http://www.oxfordcroquet.com/coach/3d/complex.htm?script=bisque1.js>

Once you have set up the lawn for a 4-ball break, with a ball at hoop 1, a ball at hoop 2, and a pivot ball somewhere near the peg, you are ready to start making hoops. Try to make sure that you keep the lawn set up, and if necessary use a bisque to do this. Don't leave any balls behind, and always try to get a ball near the hoop after the current one, and a pivot ball somewhere in the middle. The Oxford croquet site has some problems showing how to set up a break from various positions, such as difficult leaves by your opponent at <http://www.oxfordcroquet.com/coach/bisque/index.asp>

Now, each time you make an error, you take a bisque and keep going. Because the lawn is set up for you, this is always a good time to take bisques.

Your tactics are to make sure that you can keep going even if you make a mistake (blobbing in a hoop or missing a roquet) if you take a bisque. This means that you avoid shots that might leave you a long way from a roquet, or wired from another ball near a hoop. Do not try to rush another ball hard unless you are very close to it and are very confident of hitting. If you are a few yards away, you can either put a gentle shot to a good rushing position and take a bisque, or aim to roquet gently, and then roll the two balls up the lawn. If you aim gently and miss, you at least have an easy roquet for the next time after you have taken a bisque. You may use another bisque, but that is better than being twenty yards away. Don't try sharply angled hoops, because your chances of making them are small, and if you jam against the hoop leg you may need two bisques to extricate yourself; tap gently into a good position and take a bisque to run the hoop.

If you have twelve bisques, for example, and you use two to set up the lawn, and then make a couple of hoops for each bisque, you will have made your first twelve hoops and still have four bisques left for your next round. After you have taken your first ball around, separate all the balls to make sure your opponent cannot make a break – you can always start a break with one of your bisques, especially if your opponent joins up. Then if you can use two bisques to make a few more hoops – and keep one bisque to deal with your opponent's leave if they do hit in and make a long break – then you will have 16 or 17 hoops and have a good chance of winning.

ADVANCED PLAY

If you are playing advanced rules, with lifts and contact, you need to decide if you are going to go round to the peg and give contact. The advantage of this is that your opponent only gets one leave. The drawback is that unless you set a good contact leave (all balls on the boundary, away from baulks, and well separated), the opponent is likely to make a break. So if you have good distance control, and can put balls on or near boundaries, then go to the peg and set a contact leave. If you are not confident about this, go to 4-back and set a leave.

DO I KEEP ONE LAST BISQUE?

This depends on the situation. If your opponent has taken one ball round (to the peg, or to 4-back if they do triple peels regularly), then they need only one more turn to win – so there is no point in letting them have a chance of doing that. If, however, your opponent has not done this, they will need two turns to win. This means they will have to do a long break and then set a leave. If you have kept one bisque, then you will be able to disrupt their leave, and set up for yourself. If time is short, you can play defensively to keep them out of play until time goes. We are assuming that you will have made at least twelve hoops with all your other bisques so that you are ahead.

WHAT DO I DO IN THE OPENING?

If you win the toss, go in second – that means there are three balls on the lawn when you put on your second ball, and you have a better chance of a break. Don't set a tice – that just makes it easier for your opponent to hit in. My preference is to put a ball near hoop 2 (five yards south west) – that is a long roquet for the opponent, and it establishes my hoop 2 pioneer early. If you go in first, don't join up; your opponent will set a tice, and if they hit, they have an easy break. Aim hard for the tice, and if you miss the opponent has a difficult job to make a break. If you hit the tice, put it up the lawn and set a rush towards it.

RULES RELATING TO BISQUES

A bisque or half bisque can be taken at the end of a turn. The player must indicate clearly that they are taking a bisque by raising their hand and finger. If they are taking a half bisque they must call out clearly that they are doing so. Play must continue with the same striker ball as the previous turn. When a bisque is taken, all balls are live again.

If a half bisque is taken, no hoop can be scored in that turn. If a ball goes through its hoop after a half bisque, that hoop does not count, and the turn would end unless the shot was a croquet shot, or also makes a roquet.

A player who has indicated that they are taking a bisque (or half bisque) can change their mind, and decide not to take a bisque. However, a player who has indicated that they are not taking a bisque cannot change that decision.

No bisques can be taken after the bell for the end of time for the game. However, if the game goes on to a golden point period, then further bisques can be taken.

If a player's turn comes to an end, and they play a further shot without indicating that they are taking a bisque, the referee (or opponent) can require them to replace the balls to their previous position, state that they are taking a bisque, and replay the shot.

No bisque can be taken after a player has pegged out their striker ball, as they cannot continue with the same ball.

If a player takes a bisque prematurely (i.e. indicates that they are taking a bisque before their turn has ended) the opponent or referee must let them know that their turn has not ended, and they are entitled to continue playing before the bisque is taken. This usually happens when a player has a continuation shot, but indicates that they are taking a bisque.

In advanced handicap play, the striker gives contact to the opponent if they score 1-back and 4-back with their first ball during continuous play, even if they have taken one or more bisques in the process.

Bisques can be taken after faults or errors. If a fault occurs, the player can require the opponent to decide whether they are going to leave the balls where they are or replace them in the previous position before deciding whether or not to take a bisque.

It is the responsibility of the striker with bisques to ensure that bisque sticks are removed as appropriate, and that the bisque sticks represent the remaining bisques.

The next article will deal with the 'Make Every Bisque Count' strategy.

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'MAKE EVERY BISQUE COUNT' STRATEGY

This is the strategy to use when you have only a few bisques. That means that there is not a lot of difference in standard between you and your opponent; and a small advantage will decide who wins and who loses.

The extra hoops you can make using the bisques are likely to make the difference.

There are two aims in this situation: to make several hoops when you take a bisque; and to take a bisque to prevent your opponent from making a break.

USING A BISQUE TO MAKE A BREAK

The right time to take a bisque is when the lawn is set up for a break. If there is a ball near your hoop, and at the hoop after that, and there is a ball in the middle of the lawn, then the position is ideal to start a four-ball break and make several hoops. This can arise when your opponent sets up the lawn and then breaks down at your hoop; or it may happen that you have set up the lawn and then made an error. In either case, you use a bisque and get going. This also stops your opponent from making a break.

A typical situation is when your opponent has blobbed in hoop 1 with his partner ball nearby. Your balls are at hoop 2 and near the peg. An inexperienced player would probably aim firmly with the ball at hoop 2 at their partner ball near the peg. If they hit, they can take off and use the two opponent balls at hoop 1 to make the hoop – but they have no ball at hoop 2, so the break probably finishes there. If they miss the attempted roquet of the ball near the peg, they will finish a long way away from all the other balls, and there is no point in taking a bisque because they are unlikely to hit any roquet from there.

The more experienced player will plan to take a bisque if necessary, and also leave a ball at hoop 2. So the experienced player aims gently with the ball near the peg at the two balls near hoop 1. If they miss, they should be close to the target balls, so they take a bisque, make the roquet, send one ball up the lawn a little way with a stop shot, then make the hoop off the other ball. Now they have made hoop 1 and have a ball up the lawn and a ball at hoop 2 – ideal conditions for a break.

One situation when you should always take a bisque is when you have set up the lawn and break down with your partner ball nearby. Your opponent probably does not have an easy roquet, but if you allow her to take a turn, she will send the ball at your next hoop away and you will no longer have an easy break. It is your best chance to make several hoops while the lawn is still set up nicely!

USING A BISQUE TO STOP YOUR OPPONENT FROM MAKING A BREAK

The most common situation is when you break down at your opponent's hoop with the lawn set up and the opponent ball near your own. If you take a bisque you can continue your break, but if you don't take a bisque then your opponent can start a break. This is a time when you must take a bisque.

There are sometimes situations where it is difficult for you to start a break, but your opponent may be able to if you do not disrupt the position. These can occur when the opponent breaks down at a hoop which is not a hoop that either of your balls are heading for; and it can also happen when you accidentally leave a ball at your opponent's hoop (but not yours) and then break down. Another situation is where the opponent has a rush to their hoop, with the a pioneer next to the following hoop.

If your opponent sets up the lawn and then breaks down (with his partner ball near his striker ball), it may not be necessary to take a bisque at bronze level. It is usually enough to hit your ball away from the next hoop, and your opponent probably does not have the skill to start a break without a pioneer. At silver level and above, however, this can be a problem, as these players should be capable of rushing a ball to the next hoop and starting a break. You have to assess how likely it is that your opponent will be able to make several hoops from the position. You also have to assess how likely it is that you can start a break by setting

up the lawn. If both of these are doubtful, it is better to save the bisque for a better time. It is not worthwhile to use a bisque to stop your opponent from scoring a single hoop.

TIDYING UP THE LAWN

Let us suppose that the lawn is moderately well set up, but you over-run the hoop in your hoop approach. You may be tempted to tap the ball in front of the hoop and make the hoop with a bisque. However, it is often best to improve the lawn set-up and then make your hoop, as you are live on all the balls once you take a bisque.



Diagram 1 – tidying up the lawn

In the diagram shown, blue has misplayed their hoop approach to hoop 1 and cannot run the hoop. A novice would tap the blue ball in front of the hoop and run the hoop. A more canny player would see that the lawn is not well set up for a break – the yellow is a poor pioneer for hoop 2, and the red pivot ball is out of position (it will be very difficult to load hoop 3 and get behind the red ball after you have made the first hoop). So the right action is to send blue behind red with the continuation shot and use a bisque to rush red up the lawn, so it becomes a better pivot. Then you take off from red to get to the right of yellow and rush yellow near to hoop 2. Then you take off from yellow down to the black ball, roquet black, and then make hoop 1 with the other balls nicely in position for a break. Even if you do not get the rushes you want, by using some rolls you can certainly make the ball positions much more useful.

You need to decide whether the risk of playing all these extra shots is worth it. If the red ball was over near corner 4, a skilled player can go over and bring the ball into play (hit your continuation into corner 4 and then rush the red into position), but a novice would be better off ignoring it and concentrating on getting the yellow ball into a good position. Also, if you have put black a long way past hoop 1 it may be difficult to make the hoop on your way back from positioning yellow (unless you are good at judging take-offs) – so for bronze players it may be better to make sure of making the hoop first and possibly using another bique to improve the lawn set-up.

The next article will deal with the strategy to use when you have a moderate number of biques – the ‘Use with Care’ approach.

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THE 'USE WITH CARE' STRATEGY

This strategy is employed when you have several bisques, but not enough to keep using them indiscriminately. Your opponent is significantly better than you and is likely to make long breaks when they get in. Let us assume that you are a bronze player with seven or eight bisques against a silver player.

When you have a lot of bisques, you plan to keep going whatever it takes. When you have only a few bisques, you use each one with great care – only when you can make several hoops, or prevent your opponent from making several hoops. When you have a moderate number of bisques, you need to compromise between these two strategies. You take a bisque in promising situations and try to keep a break going, but you avoid wasting bisques and allow your opponent in at times.

In the opening it is probably best not to use two bisques to set up a four-ball break; it is more profitable to wait until you only need one bisque, or until your opponent breaks down giving you an easy roquet.

As in the 'keep it going' strategy, you try to keep the lawn set up and continue your break – but you play the break normally, not like the 'keep it going' strategy where you play every shot on the assumption that you will take a bisque if you miss. So you attempt rushes which may mean you finish a long way from a roquet if you miss; and if that happens, you do not take a couple of extra bisques to keep going. You try for angled hoops (unless your opponent ball is near, when discretion is often better policy).

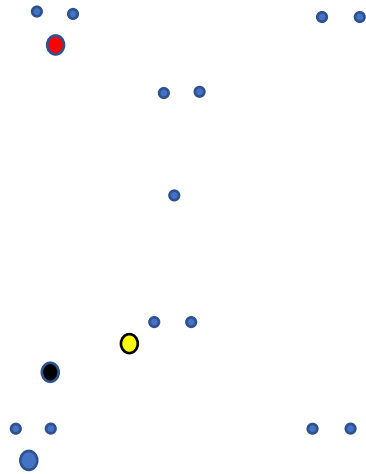
KEEPING ALL FOUR BALLS IN PLAY

Keeping a break going is a high priority, and that means you must keep all four balls in play. As soon as you leave a ball behind the break will collapse unless you are skilled at three-ball breaks – so don't do it unless you are gold standard or better.

The usual reason for leaving a ball behind is a badly placed pivot which means you cannot load the pioneer and stay near the pivot. There are two main techniques to deal with this situation:

- a. A backward rush after the hoop
- b. Swapping the pivot.

- (a) The simplest technique (though not always the easiest) is to get a backward rush after making the hoop to give yourself room to place the pioneer.



In this diagram, yellow is a badly placed pivot. After you make hoop 1 with blue and roquet black, you will not be able to put black up to hoop 3 and stay near yellow – let alone rushing yellow up near the peg.

One solution here is to run hoop 1 past the black ball, then rush black down to the south boundary. Then you will have room to stop-shot black up to hoop 3 and get behind yellow.

- (b) However, running hoops under control, and getting the striker ball where you want it is not common for bronze players, so you need a back-up solution. If you don't get a rush on black, the answer is to change the pivot. After a gentle roquet of black, you do a gentle stop-shot on black, sending it a little way up the lawn, and try to get a rush on yellow up towards the east boundary near hoop 2. Then you can put yellow to hoop 3 while going to red.

If you don't get a rush on yellow, then you use a split roll to get yellow up to hoop 3 while going to red.

If both of these are beyond your skills, then stop-shot black to the peg, roquet yellow, drive yellow to hoop 3, then use a bisque to tidy up the balls and go to red.

Another situation which can lead to a ball left behind is when you go too far through the hoop and finish up near the pivot in the middle of the lawn. When this happens, roquet the pivot – but then take off and go back behind the receiver ball and rush it down the lawn. Then you can roll this ball to be the new pioneer while you go to your next hoop.

Remember that to keep a break going well you need all four balls (unless you are an expert player) and you should make every effort to keep all four balls in play. Use a bisque if necessary. It is usually better to take a bisque early than to wait until your break falls to pieces and it is difficult to put it right with only one bisque.

The Oxford Croquet website has a useful animation on changing pivots (though the aim in this is different from ours) <http://www.oxfordcroquet.com/coach/3d/complex.htm?script=pivot-swap.js>

The next article will be about playing against an opponent with bisques.

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PLAYING AGAINST BISQUES

Playing against bisques is often daunting, especially for a low-handicap player who is faced with a great array of bisque sticks. However, with a sensible strategy the low handicap player can usually win – unless they are against an improving player who should really not have that many bisques. These notes are mainly for the game when you have many bisques against you i.e. a gold or platinum player against a bronze player. When there are only two or three bisques against you, you play normally except that you do wide joins instead of setting rushes when you do a leave.

The advantage of the low handicap player is that they can make long breaks, and if on form should only need two innings to finish the game. Once you have taken one ball round to the peg, your opponent cannot afford to let you in again, so it puts great pressure on your opponent, and they are likely to make more mistakes. If you do get in, take your first ball round to the peg – giving contact is only the same as one bisque.

There are two basic tactics against bisques – hitting in to make a break, and drawing bisques. Whenever there is a reasonable chance of hitting in, you should take the opportunity, so if your opponent is set up in the middle of the lawn, you can aim at them without giving them an extra ball.

The Oxford Croquet website has a good basic article on playing against bisques at <http://www.oxfordcroquet.com/coach/intermediate/11.asp>

OPENINGS

If your opponent follows the correct strategy and keeps the break going by using bisques whenever they break down, there is not much you can do about it. Your best chance is in the opening – if you can make a break from the opening it puts pressure on the opponent, and even the most competent bronze player will have to set a leave after taking their first ball round, which gives you your second chance of getting in.

The technique in the opening is to set a short tice, whether you play first or second. Your opponent will have to aim at your tice (if they don't, you simply hit it and start a break using the opponent balls which are presumably joined up). If they miss they ought to take a bisque to move it further away from the baulk. Most bronze players are reluctant to do this. A short duffer tice is a good option against bisques – if the opponent aims hard at this they finish near A baulk, and if they aim softly they will give a double.

Oxford Croquet has some useful advice on openings with bisques at <http://www.oxfordcroquet.com/coach/p1ot/index.asp#toc410385489>

There is also some excellent discussion at: <http://www.oxfordcroquet.com/coach/bisque1/index.asp>

DRAWING BISQUES

Bronze players are generally poor at rushes, so an effective technique is to join up a long way from the opponent hoops. The opponent has to come and get you, but their chance of rushing one of your balls to their hoop and making it is small – and they will be trying to make the hoop with your ball and not their partner ball – so a bisque is a likely outcome. If you are near the boundary, there is a good chance that your opponent's attempt to come and get you will be either short (and they miss the roquet) or long (and they go out) – either way, it is another bisque. (If your opponent is a

silver player who can rush reasonably well, make a wide join to reduce his chances of getting a good rush).

Another tactic is to put one of your balls on the boundary near their next hoop. They will have difficulty digging it out, but it makes them nervous about going to that hoop when you may have an easy roquet if they fail to make the hoop.

PEGGING OUT

If you get the chance, you should always peg out your opponent ball, as they will not be much good at three-ball breaks. Even if the opponent is on peg and three back, and you are still on one, I would peg them out, especially if they are short of bisques. If you leave their ball on, it just makes it easier for them to make the last few hoops. Forcing them to make the remaining hoops with your balls makes it much more difficult for them.

In advanced handicap games, always go to the peg (unless you are confident of doing triple peels). The contact you give your opponent is only the equivalent of a single bisque, and you only need to get in once more to finish the game – which puts pressure on your opponent.

This is the last article in the series on bisques.