

First Thoughts on Bronze Skills and Tactics

This note is intended for the start up bronze player; to consolidate initial skills and knowledge and help reduce a handicap to the mid bronze level.

Tactical options depend significantly on technical skills and at this stage an important element of progress is to be comfortable with all the basics. This note gives some general comments on tactics and some drills for skills.

What do I do now....??

This is probably the most common and frequent thought in the mind of the beginner and early bronze age player. It may also cross the minds of more experienced players....!

This note is not about the technical range of shots; awareness of these is taken as a given (though not necessarily the skill to execute them all consistently well!); it is more about where to play the balls. It deals with just a handful of basic ideas.

After some general thoughts, there are three main sections (the traditional ones): Beginning, Middle and End. Then there are ten top tactical tips and some core shots to practise and master.

Since the idea is to score hoops (!), possibly the single most important general tactical concept is to keep (or to obtain) control of the lawn. If you are not on the lawn you can't score hoops. But do not feel you must score a hoop every time you have a turn; sometimes it is better to set up the lawn in order to score on your next turn.

To control the lawn, your balls should be together at the end of your turn whilst your opponent balls are separated; you should have a ready roquet (or a good chance of one) on your next turn whilst your opponent does not.

Another important concept is to tailor your tactics to your ability: know your skills. And know your opponent's skills too. Know your own skills and assess (or learn quickly!) those of your opponent. How far apart is a safe leave? Some opponents may only be able to roquet consistently from a short distance, others can do it from a lot further away - and don't just rely on what you are capable of doing as the measure of an opponent.

And finally know your own temperament. Are you a risk taker or are you risk averse? This will often be a determining factor. All other things equal, some players will go for a 50:50 shot, others will not.

The Beginning of the turn

As we walk on to the lawn we have some decisions to make. The first is which ball to play, the second is what shall we do with it?

The decision may be very easy, e.g. only one of your balls is within easy reach of a roquet. Or it may be much harder, requiring thought about the options available for each of our balls.

Even with your balls together you still have to work out which one to play and that may well mean thinking about what could be done with a rush. Where would that take you with one ball and where would it take you with the other?

In any event, before you hit a ball, have a plan. You may need to change this as the turn progresses and things don't quite work out as you want but always have a purpose at least two or three shots ahead (ideally even more...!). And good etiquette requires this decision to be made within a reasonable time.

The situation may be that we are in control of the lawn and can plan to make a break (or set up a break) or it may be that we are not in control of the lawn and need to think how to obtain it.

When in control of the lawn the key issue is whether to make a hoop (or hoops) or whether to set up for your next turn. In the early days, the temptation to score a hoop now (even when this may only be a slim chance) is very strong. Deferred gratification may well prove more successful in winning games: give up a single hoop now in exchange for a break of, say, two or three (or more?) hoops next time.

When not in control of the lawn (your balls are separated) then how to obtain it or at least make life more difficult for an opponent? Here is a simplistic guide to this problem.

When opponent's balls are far apart (they have no easy roquet available), then join your balls together to threaten on your next turn.

When opponent's balls are together (an easy roquet has previously been set up), then you can choose the wide join with partner ball (i.e. close enough so you can probably roquet, but far enough apart for opponent to have difficulty setting up a rush) or shoot for them. If they are in the middle of the lawn then hit hard enough to carry on a distance beyond if you miss (and then be out of range for opponent and/or on a boundary edge). If they are at the edge of the lawn, whilst the opponent may get three balls together if you miss, they are often too close to each other and can be hard to use effectively. However, when opponent's balls are on the boundary and close to their hoop, the wide join may be the better choice.

The Middle of the turn

You have control of the lawn and this is now all about making a break. You are on your own to make the most of it. A lot of this is about planning (helped by practice...!). Two items are of particular importance: the approach shot and the pioneer.

The approach shot is primarily about making the hoop and the first priority is always to position your ball to run the hoop. The secondary issue is where to position the non-strike ball and this may not necessarily be best placed straight behind the hoop. Much depends on which hoop you are running and what you plan to do after that; think about this before you make your approach shot.

An easy approach shot can be made from a ball which is about three feet in front of the hoop and a little to one side. If it is not there already, it may be possible to rush that ball to such a position or something close to it before taking croquet.

The pioneer ball is the key to making a break. A good pioneer ball set up at the hoop after the one you plan to run now is the easiest way to make a break. A pioneer in a good position is ideal; if it is not, then plan to rush it there with the shot before. Planning an appropriate rush can turn a poor pioneer into a better one and even a distant ball into one that is good enough. Two balls together, although some distance from the hoop, can often do this for you (roquet one, then set up to rush the other).

A pivot ball in the centre of the lawn makes a break a lot easier; plan to set this up as soon as you can.

In addition to the psychological advantage of getting the first hoop and getting even one or two hoops ahead of your opponent, there is the practical advantage that you quickly get a better feel for the lawn, you get a few good shots under your belt and build confidence, whilst your opponent sits out - and then may have only one chance with one awkward shot (if you have arranged a good leave) to get going themselves.

Another feature of the middle game is choosing which ball to roquet (this issue can also occur at the start). The nature of the dilemma is often that one roquet is relatively easy (say one yard away - and certain of success) but leads the turn nowhere; the other is harder (say two yards away - and only an 80% chance of success) but could readily develop the turn into a 2- or 3- hoop break (or perhaps more). As a beginner, the temptation is to go for the easy roquet just to keep control of the lawn. However, to win games you may need to go for the 80% chance - and practise your two yard roquets to make it a 90% chance (!). The choice made here is an indicator of when a beginner is really improving their game - and not least because they are able to think tactically a few shots ahead....

The End of the turn

Having had control of the lawn, this is now about recognising when your position has broken down. Typically this happens after one bad or unlucky shot leaves you too far for another roquet or too awkwardly placed to run a hoop in order to continue the break. And recognising you have indeed become too awkwardly placed to continue is critical; it is often tempting to press on regardless with the original plan...! Now you need to find a safe retreat.

Faced with an awkward shot to continue the break, the decision to take the risk or retreat is partly a personal judgement (what is your temperament and appetite for risk?). It may also be affected by the particular situation. For example, attempting a difficult hoop with a partner ball on the other side is not the same as attempting it with an opposition ball on the other side.

Having chosen to retreat, then essentially you return to the idea of maintaining control of the lawn: keep your balls together and your opponent's balls apart.

You may only have one shot left (having used all the other balls) or you may still have a roquet to use. This may determine the detail of your leave tactics.

However, the sooner you are able to recognise that your turn is not going anywhere, the sooner you can use the time and any remaining roquets to set up the lawn for a future break and a safe exit.

In particular, when you join your balls together on your final shot, aim to leave them in a position for a good rush and, better still, have options for a good rush with whichever ball you choose to play. But be careful not to leave a "double" for your opponent.

A useful final shot, when circumstances permit (e.g. when the opposition balls are well separated, away from your next hoop and the last roquet is on your partner ball) is a full roll to take both your balls to your next hoop and, with the continuation shot, to set up an easy rush to get in position for the approach shot with the ball that is for that hoop.

And don't forget to put your clip on the next hoop for your ball before you leave the lawn...

Summary: Top Ten Tactical Tips

#1 Make time for practice

Practise basic shots and practise making a break.

#2 Control the Lawn

You only make hoops when you are on the lawn.

#3 Tailor your Tactics

Match your tactics to your skill - and your opponent's skill.

#4 Pick the right ball to play

Always review the situation afresh when you walk on.

#5 Have a plan

Think about what you will do with your turn before you hit a ball.

#6 Defer gratification

Be prepared to give up a hoop now to set up for a break next turn.

#7 Set a pioneer for hoop +1

Before you make the next hoop, set up for the one after that.

#8 Know when to retreat

Recognise when to abandon your plan and look for a safe leave.

#9 Risk manage every shot

Assess the impact of success - and failure.

#10 Etiquette

Be familiar with the rules and the etiquette of the game.

And Ten Technical Skills to work at...

Tactics and skills go together. Know what you can and can't do. In some cases 80% sure of success is desirable for a shot, in others 50% is good and may be safe to try.

#2 Concentrate on your shot.

Once you have the strategy worked out, focus on executing your current shot, not your next one – or the one after that.

#2 The roquet

There will be a lot of roquets in your turn; probably more than any other shot. This repays practice! Know your success rate at various distances.

#3 Running a hoop

Avoid the frustration and embarrassment of playing a perfect sequence of shots to get right in front of the hoop - and then blobbing it.

#4 Hoop approach

A good approach shot makes hoops too; it can be very tiresome to miss out on just the right position and then have an awkward angle or distance to work with.

#5 Take off: Longer

Distance: e.g. getting across the width / length of the lawn to roquet another ball - and not go out.

#6 Take off: Shorter

Precision: e.g. positioning for a rush. Aim a short distance to the correct side of the target. Avoid the frustration of hitting the target ball or finishing on the wrong side.

#7 Rush

Best to ensure a hit. Attempting the more advanced cut rush and missing altogether (aka the passing rush...!) is not a good look. Even a rush not quite the right distance or direction is generally better than end of turn. You do have two more shots. And a partial rush in the right direction (effectively just a firm, confident roquet) is better than a timid roquet leaving a long shot after that.

#8 Drives and Rolls and Stop shots

You will need these along the way; get both balls to stop the distance you want them.

#9 Split Drives and Split Rolls

You will need these too - but even better to find a sequence that avoids them.

#10 Practise the 4-ball break

This uses most of the shots and builds confidence. And if your opponent has set up the lawn and then fluffs a shot you may be able to leap in and make a good break yourself knowing the right sequence of shots - and being able to execute them....

Practise with Purpose

Single drills for single shots can be boring; a better practice routine is a series or sequence of shots that may arise in a game. An excellent way to practise is making the classic 4-ball break. The pivot stays near the peg and a take-off is used to reach a pioneer that has been set on the exit from a previous hoop. If you break down, take a free shot and keep going; aim to reduce the number of times you break down !

#1 To practise the croquet shot to be made after running a hoop

This routine gives a player some practice at the key croquet shot from a standard position after running each hoop in a 4-ball break. Players should experiment with their own style to see what variations from this position might make this shot easier for them – and consider how to achieve such a variation.

To provide a standard base, all such croquet shots are taken from a receiver ball just roqueted and now directly behind the hoop and two yards out (except H5 and H6, where a position slightly to either side is assumed). Note: the 4-ball break shot assumes a pivot ball close to the peg.

H1 = Hoop 1 etc. / LOC = Line of Centres / AP = Aiming Point (aka line of swing).

Hint: Always check the LOC taking a view from at least 3 yards back.

Assume pioneer is already at next hoop.

After H1: LOC to H3

Straight shot, $\frac{1}{2}$ roll.

After H2: LOC to H4

Straight shot, $\frac{1}{2}$ roll.

After H3: LOC to H5

Split shot, AP halfway between peg and H5, $\frac{1}{2}$ roll

After H4: LOC to H6

Straight shot, $\frac{3}{4}$ roll.

After H5: LOC to H1B

[set receiver ball 1yd to left (or right) of the line between peg and H5]:

Split shot, AP halfway between H6 and H1B, drive.

After H6: LOC to H2B

[set receiver ball 1yd to left (or right) of the line between peg and H6]:

Split shot, AP halfway between H2B and Rover, $\frac{1}{2}$ roll.

Thoughts arising:

If you have trouble with rolls, and naturally prefer a drive or a stop shot, then consider how you might change the post-hoop croquet shot. Can you move the balls to a slightly different place so that you can use your preferred shot to reach the pivot in a 4-ball break?

This might mean rushing the pivot ball earlier to some other spot and/or positioning the receiver ball elsewhere on your approach shot – maybe not directly behind the hoop as taken for the exercises above.

In any event, when preparing to roquet the receiver ball after running a hoop (assuming it is reasonably close), don't just tap it and then look up. Always stop to ask yourself: from where, along a simple rush line, would I prefer to take the next croquet shot? And then send the receiver ball to that spot....

#2 To practise the Take-off and Rush shots.

A good grasp of these two shots will give you the ability to move comfortably around the lawn and will open up tactical possibilities.

Often a pioneer is not set as well as you would like. A key feature of a successful 4-ball break is to be able to improve such a pioneer when taking off from the central pivot ball. This is a practice routine to help achieve such an improvement.

Taking croquet from a pivot ball (B1) near the peg, take off to a poor pioneer (B2) which is, say, two yards or more from a hoop (anywhere round that hoop), in order to rush B2 to a better pioneer position and then make the hoop.

The end position for the strike ball (B1) after the take-off should be directly on the rush line to point about a yard in front of the hoop from where you wish ideally to take the approach shot (say point AS). The balls should then be on the line: B1-B2-AS with B1 close enough to B2 to rush B2 to AS.

#3 A 2-ball exercise for Hoop Approach and Hoop Running

To win games you have to score hoops. Enough said....

Set a simple starting croquet shot of choice, making the approach shot with one strike ball (B1) to set the other ball (B2) as receiver on the far side. Run the hoop. Roquet B2. Make an approach shot from that position to run the hoop in the reverse direction. Run the hoop. Roquet B2 again. Make an approach shot from that position to run the hoop in the initial direction. Run the hoop. Continue as long as you can. How many hoops can you score before you get out of position and fail to run the hoop?

If this is too easy, try to deliberately set B2 in an awkward position each time....

#4 Play games.....

This is what it is all about. And of course the best way to learn better tactics is to play plenty of games (doubles with a better player is a good idea; you can discuss things as you go along) or even just watch better players.....

Some References to explore

A Book

The KTG (Know The Game) Series has a good starter book, simply called "Croquet". It is written in association with the Croquet Association UK.

A Website

The website where you can find most things about croquet is the Oxford Croquet site: www.oxfordcroquet.com