

Further Thoughts on Bronze Skills and Tactics

This note follows an earlier one: “First Thoughts on Bronze Skills and Tactics”, which was designed to help beginners move from the initial stages, learning the essential shots and skills, into playing the game. For this second note, the assumption is that the reader has been playing the game for a while and is familiar with it and now is seeking ways to improve their mid-level Bronze handicap - and is aiming for Silver....

There has to be a certain level of technical playing skills to allow tactical choice. These skills are generally only achieved with practice; they may not come by play alone. Many of the best players still find time to practise – even if they may be practising their triple peels whilst those at a lower stage are still practising their roquets or making simple breaks. But both put in the hours to get better....

Some guidance on the skill levels which might be expected of a mid-level bronze player are considered later. However, games are still often won or lost (mostly lost...!) for these two reasons:

- #1 A loss of concentration (e.g. fluff a hoop from an easy position)
- #2 A poor choice of tactics (e.g. a hard or risky way to do something)

Loss of Concentration

First, it is tempting to be thinking about the plan for the next few shots and so not give full attention to the one in hand (especially when running a hoop). Remind yourself to attend fully to the current shot.

Second, when nerves kick in, you may make a quick jab may instead of concentrating on a smooth shot. Some deep, slow breathing may help; take a few steady breaths then breathe in before the stroke, breathe out as you play it.

Third, concentration can be required for a long time. Mental tiredness during a game (and even more during a competition) can be a factor. Keeping that focus whilst you make your break (hopefully nine hoops come more often now...) takes effort. And finally, even the best players stalk the ball; just watch someone like Robert Fletcher. This routine may also help to calm the nerves and focus on the shot at hand.

Choice of Tactics

One generic point is to recognise your own style of play and in particular: what shots do you like to play, what shots do you not like to play, what risks do you take, what risks do you not take. Each player has their own personal take on these aspects and the ability to tailor your game to your strengths may make a significant difference to your game.

For example, the optimum position of the pivot ball for you will alter slightly according to whether you prefer a stop shot, a drive or a roll to load the hoop after next and also get position on the pivot ball. There is no “one size fits all” in this matter, and in

this regard it is not unlike the grip you have on the mallet. Some people like a Standard Grip, others the Solomon (or the Irish). The important point is that it should be the one that works for you.

It is a consideration of the pivot placement in the 4-ball break which leads from the classic 4-ball break with a central pivot to the modern break using a moving pivot and it is this that gives the mid-level bronze player the critical means to take the next step forward in their game. To quote James Hawkins from his excellent book "Complete Croquet":

The classical model remains the most popular among beginners and intermediate players, but its use has fallen significantly from fashion among the top players in the game. For previous generations, and those not having the luxury of top class lawns and equipment, the Classical Theory has proved ideal. The key elements of this traditional technique are the take-off from the pivot to each hoop, and the occasional straight roll

On the other hand, critics of the take-off avoid its overuse, particularly on a fast lawn, where balls can go scooting well past their target; or on a lawn with an uneven pace, where accurate judgement of the correct strength is something of a lottery. ...

The Classical Break requires a rigid structure, which is often not in place at the start of a turn when it is most needed. ...

Many players see the classical structure as being good enough to allow them to score hoops, but lacking sufficient flexibility for dealing with testing conditions. ...

Rather than relying on take-offs and half rolls, the [moving pivot] game now focuses on stop shots and rushes.

The ability to think in several different ways about moving the pivot and setting up pioneers (and how to reach them or improve them later in the turn) is the start of controlling the lawn sooner, making longer breaks and taking your game to the next level. Indeed, expanding on this concept, the pivot can be almost anywhere except near the peg....!

The flexibility of the moving pivot structure engenders a flexibility of attitude and vision; the possibilities of how to play the turn and plan a break immediately become significantly greater from the moment you step on to the lawn.

The ability to see many more options and assess them to find the one most likely to succeed for you becomes the next major step in your game. Choice of tactics, choice of shot and technical skill become even more closely linked.

From a technical point of view in planning a break, one point to bear in mind is that however the pivot is moved, the pioneer is usually best set up with the croquet shot and there is a reason for this: it is generally much easier to control the position of the non-strike ball playing a croquet shot than playing a rush shot.

Discretion or Valour?

A major tactical issue frequently faced is when to keep going and when to accept that the turn has broken down and to consider an appropriate exit strategy. How to choose?

There is no “answer” to this problem (or indeed to many other tactical puzzles). The solution (or the several possible solutions) will depend on, for example, the positions of the other balls (friend and foe), the hoops that each one is going for, the shot skills at your disposal, the shot skills you think are available to your opponent and - not least - your personal appetite for risk. Whilst you play to make a break and may have to take a risk from time to time, an awareness of what might happen if your shot goes wrong can be an important (or even a deciding) component in your tactics.

3 Balls?

Another common situation which requires both skill and thought is when you do not have all four balls easily in play because one has been defensively and deliberately placed in an awkward corner by the opposition. Here there is the tactical decision on when to dig out that 4th ball. Could you go for it immediately and make a break? Or perhaps set up the lawn for a break on your next turn? Or is your best chance to execute a 3-ball break for a few hoops till you get to the corner where that 4th ball is to be found and is then easier to bring into play?

Some other typical moments when a tactical decision can be required (at any level of the game) are:

Which ball to play?

At the start of a turn, which ball to play? Sometimes one ball offers an immediate roquet but the other does not and the choice is clear. But what if each ball offers a roquet? Then the choice may depend on the position of the other balls and/or which offers the best chance to make a bigger break. But what if the distances are such that you think one roquet has a 70% of success but generates the prospect of a good break whilst the other is an 80% chance but the prospects after that are not quite so good? And what if you miss? Is there a safe exit? Can you go softly and keep your balls together as a threat or must you shoot hard to avoid leaving a gift to your opponent?

Hoop, set up the lawn or break up opponent balls – which first?

Once again all the usual factors are here to torment you. The most important is to keep control of the lawn, but you also need to make hoops. If you are already well placed to make a hoop then it is often best to make that first. If you always break up an opponent's balls first you may run the risk of playing Aunt Emma style and this is not a generally game to enjoy – more a war of attrition. But what is “well-placed”? A certain hoop (though under pressure is anything certain?) ...? A 90% chance of success? An 80% chance of success? What is your appetite for risk? Where are the other balls?

Alternative Openings.

This is an area where some experiment is worthwhile and using an unusual opening can sometimes put an opponent off their game and let you in early. These are worth discussing and exploring with more experienced players so that you have something extra in your armoury and are also not yourself put off when faced with an opponent who springs something different on you in a tournament.

The Exit.

Whether your turn has broken down and you are looking for a safe leave in a particular situation or you have completed your nine hoops (!) and are able to construct one of the standard leaves (designed to give your opponent only one, very difficult, shot after a long time off the lawn) this is also an area worth exploring. The original simplistic concept of leaving opponent's balls apart and your own together remains a good guide. But as your game progresses (and you have the skills to execute different options) the questions to ask include: Where exactly should I leave my opponent's balls? A good idea is often as pioneers for the hoop (or hoops) you next wish to make (but be careful if it is also the enemy hoop too). This tactic might reduce the freedom of options for your opponent who may now be obliged to play one particular ball rather than have the choice of either. And: How exactly do you set your own balls up together? No longer the simplistic "together" just to ensure a roquet, but with a pre-determined rush set up and consequent threat of play at your next turn.

A word of warning...

After a lot of tactical thought and effort and several shots getting into position to run a hoop it is maddening to then fluff the hoop. It is especially maddening having given in to the temptation to run it after a sub-optimal approach shot leaving a strike position to run the hoop which is not as good as you would have liked. So make sure you practise running hoops (!)

Finally....

The problem (and of course the delight) with the game of croquet lies in the infinite variety of situations and options you can face. And yet there are some broadly similar patterns that regularly emerge in play. The ability to make a 9-hoop break is a great achievement and requires considerable skill - and is a method of practice that many players use.

Technical practice is good and greater skill opens doors to more tactical options and longer breaks; but in the end the object is to play a game. Fortunately this is also one of the best ways to learn about tactics and this can be especially fruitful if you play doubles and talk about the options and the shots with your partner as you go along. That partner can be more experienced, of a similar standard or less experienced; you will still learn from other people and how they would approach the particular situation you face on the lawn together.

So now get out on the lawn and play.....

Skill Drills

At this stage there are some levels of basic skills to aim for and practice is usually the only way to achieve this. Familiarity with these shots is an essential part of the skill set of the experienced bronze player and the basis from which the next level of handicap is reached. The full roll and the pass roll should be well established in the armoury by now. Here are some suggested target levels to aim for.

Single shots [target percentage shown e.g. 8 out of 10 successful = 80%]:

#1 Hoop:

Run a hoop from straight in front: 1 ft out [100%], 2 ft out [95%], 3 ft out [85%], 4ft out [70%], 6 ft out [50%]. Ideally the approach shot should leave you within 4 ft....!
Also, same distances at a small angle [deduct 5% from each target success rate].

#2 Roquet:

Roquet a ball: 2 yds away [100%], 3 yds away [80%], 4 yards away [50%]

#3 Rush:

Straight: With two balls 1 ft apart, rush non-strike ball to within two yards of some designated spot anywhere on the lawn [80%] and try three different distances (short, medium, long). With balls 2 ft apart, same exercise [70%] and 3 ft apart [50%]
Cut: With balls 1 ft apart, cut rush the non-strike ball at an angle of approx 15 degrees to a distance of 3 yds [85%] and same at 30 degrees [70%]. Same exercise with balls 2 ft apart [80% and 60%]. Repeat with distance of non strike ball 5 yds.

#4 Various Croquet Shots:

Drive:

Straight drive: designate two final spots, suitable for your natural ratio and get each ball within two yards of target [80%] – and try three different distances (short, medium, long).

Split Drive: same exercise as straight drive but with a split angle [70%]; also from two yards in front of a hoop and one yard to the side, play an approach shot as a split drive [90%]

Stop shot:

Repeat exercises as for Drive above.

Take off:

Thin take off to place strike ball within two yards of some designated spot anywhere on the lawn [80%] – and try three different distances.

Thick take off, as above but move the non-strike ball a designated distance.

Rolls:

Half roll: e.g. from hoop 2, load hoop 4 and leave strike ball at the peg, each to within two yards of target position [80%]

Full roll: e.g. from peg, roll both balls to hoop 1 and set up for next turn [80%]

Split roll: e.g. from hoop 1, strike ball to reach existing pioneer at hoop 2 and non-strike ball set up as one for hoop 3, each to within two yards of target position [80%]

Split approach: from yard line level with hoop 6 (assume you have roqueted a tice), roll the strike ball to make hoop 1, non-strike ball well into the lawn as receiver [70%]

Hoop Approach:

From anywhere round the clock and any distance out to, say, two yards, play the approach shot: take off, drive, stop shot, roll, split etc. depending on the position and distance [90%].

Practice with Purpose – Sequences of shots.

#1 Make a break of at least four hoops.

This remains one of the very best practice routines. Making a break uses a variety of shots and helps to set standard patterns in the cell memory.

Set the lawn up at your own choice and one Mulligan allowed [80%]. This can be with a central pivot or a moving pivot. Moving pivots to be considered. Choose an awkward start point as a challenge.

#2 The Strickland Four Ball Puzzle.

This exercise encourages a player to think of how to make space and to move balls into positions that facilitate subsequent shots.

Starting Position: Place four balls as if at the corners of any quadrilateral shape (with diagonals up to 2 yds in length) in an area roughly between peg and line between hoop 1 and hoop 2.

Exercise: Choose any ball to play and then make hoop 1 and hoop 2 [80%]. the square defined by hoops 1,2,3,4. Extra: Make a break of three hoops [70%]. Repeat with the four balls anywhere inside the square defined by hoops 1,2,3,4.

#3 Classic opening break.

These are not easy sequences but worth trying; success here can give you an edge in a game both in hoops and psychologically.

The Blue / Black sequence:

Start position (tice missed): Blue / Black together on East yard line (Black South of Blue), Yellow on West yard line between hoop 1 and hoop 6 (a former tice); Red in corner 2 (missed the tice). Blue / Black to play.

Play:

- (a) Play Black and rush Blue towards hoop 3 (ideally a cut rush);
- (b) Take off to Red (and improve Blue as pioneer for hoop 3 if possible);
- (c) Roquet Red;
- (d) Thick take off to Yellow (to nudge Red a bit into the lawn towards hoop 2 and not send Black beyond Yellow);
- (e) Roquet Yellow (and if suitably positioned rush it into the lawn and more towards Hoop 1);
- (f) Approach shot to hoop 1 (generally a roll will be required);
- (g) Make hoop 1 (hooray!);
- (h) Roquet Yellow (or if possible rush it to a better position of your choice).

Take a deep breath and see where you go from here.

A 50% success rate would be good....

The Red / Yellow sequence:

Start position (tice hit): Blue / Black together on East yard line; Croquet shot to be taken (playing Red ball) from West yard line, say half way between peg and hoop 1 (assume Yellow now marked in).

(a) Take off from Yellow to Blue / Black (do not go out – have the confidence to make a longer roquet if necessary...!)

(b) Consider which ball to roquet in order to best get into position to rush the other to hoop 1 – then roquet that ball (say Black)

(c) Use the croquet with Black to get Red into a rush position on Blue; this might be a take-off or a split shot (to bring Black more into play for later), but be careful not to block the rush line for Blue.

(d) Rush Blue to hoop 1

(e) Approach shot to hoop 1

(f) Make hoop 1 (hooray!)

And off you go; make a break or set up the lawn or whatever.....

#4 Cannons

These are useful set pieces and worth having in your armoury.

Sometimes these are necessary to dig one or more balls out of a corner; on other occasions a deliberate cannon set up in a corner or on the yard line might be tactically the best option.

#5 3-Ball breaks

Making a 4-ball break is an excellent practice routine; making a 3-ball break is a skill frequently needed in the early stages of a game and may also occur at other times.

Here is a series for the typical croquet shot to be made after running a hoop in a 3-Ball break. 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).

As you work through this sequence you may find that this standardised start point is not the best; you can then work out something better for your style of game or for some particular hoop. There is a specific commentary on hoop 1B later in this practice note.

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

Split shot, AP halfway between H2 and H3, $\frac{3}{4}$ roll.

After H2: LOC to H4

Split shot, AP at H6 (= approx. halfway between H3 and H4), $\frac{1}{2}$ roll

After H3: LOC to H5

Split shot, AP halfway between H4 and H5, full roll.

After H4: LOC to H6
Split shot, AP halfway between peg and H5, drive.

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

After H6: LOC to H2B
[set receiver ball 1yd to left (or right) of the line between peg and H6]:
Split shot, AP on the line between H1B and H2B and level with halfway between H6 and peg (walk to look at this spot), stop shot.
This is an awkward shot and is why a pioneer for H2B is often set after H4 or H5. But here are two possible ways to avoid that awkward shot:

Move the pioneer.

Rather than set the pioneer two yards in front of H1B, set it two yards behind H1B, with a view to rushing it in front of the hoop later. Working back from here, the croquet shot after H5 is now a $\frac{3}{4}$ roll with an aiming point closer to H1B. The croquet shot after H6 is now a much easier shot to load H2B and get behind the pioneer for a suitable rush back.

Move the receiver ball.

On exit from H6, rush the receiver ball out to the boundary in order to take the croquet shot from there. From this angle an easier stop shot will load H2B and get in position for the H1B pioneer (originally set two yards in front of H1B).

Thinking through these two options is a good example of how to make subsequent shots easier with some forethought earlier in the break - and also as an illustration of how there is often more than one perfectly good solution to a problem....

#6 Some other roll shots / stop shots:

These sequences are often the ones that get you successfully started on a break in the early stages of a game.

- #1 Full roll from medium distance to any hoop and set up a rush for next turn.
- #2 Approach shot from South border approximately in front of H1 ($\frac{1}{2}$ roll) and run H1.
- #3 Approach shot to H1 from South border (say anywhere along baulk line) or West border (say up to level with H6) using various rolls - and then run H1.
- #4 Assume a pioneer at H1, try various starts as for #3 above (West border only up to level with H1), use a stop shot to set a pioneer for H2 - and then run H1.

#7 Context for Take Off and Rush shots.

The Take Off and the Rush are essential skills to move around the lawn and to set up for subsequent shots. These sequences keep those skills in good condition.

#1 Taking croquet from a pivot ball (B1) near the peg, take off to a poor pioneer (B2) 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.

#2 Taking croquet from a pivot ball (B1) near the peg, which is one yard from another ball (B2), get position for a simple rush to set B2 as a pioneer for a designated hoop and then make the hoop.

#3 Taking croquet from a ball marked in (B1), set up a rush on another ball (B2), also marked in and one yard away to set B2 as a pioneer for a designated hoop and then make the hoop.

#4 Try #2 and #3 above with B1 and B2 two yards apart etc.

Observation: Consider the rush line. When setting up for a rush, aim to take the preceding croquet shot as a take-off along the line of the proposed rush, or at worst as a minimal split shot. Think of positioning for a rush effectively as a hoop approach with the rush line as the direction straight through the hoop.

Some References to explore

A Book

An excellent book on croquet is: "Complete Croquet: A Guide to Skills, Tactics and Strategy" by James Hawkins. This takes you through the essentials to reach a high standard of play.

A Website

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