

Short Croquet

Manchester: 7-9 May

The Royal Bank Nations Trophy

Report by John Walters

7th May, 1986, live from Stage 1, Manchester . . . not 'Coronation Street' nor 'Sherlock Holmes', but the UK's first televised croquet series: 'The Royal Bank Nations Trophy'. Three players from each country (England, Scotland, Ireland, Wales) would all play each other to produce one supremo, him to defend the honour of the team in a two-stage knockout.

Most players attended a meeting on the last day of the 'Coles' to decide what rules we would play. Short Croquet was finally agreed upon (with the proviso of a gentle-persons' agreement not to have any peeling of the opponent - since this encouraged defensive play, confusing to the viewers), and it was also decided that the play would be level, with each player having to complete three mandatory peels. In order that the winner would not be corrupted by the £150 prize money, the CA Council big-heartedly decreed that amateur status could be retained by donating anything in excess of £25.

Just to prove that being a croquet hero and mega-star commentator means nothing if you don't wear a jacket and tie, the Britannia Hotel's bar ('we don't serve pints, Sir!') politely ignored 'our Phil'. Later, as a diversion from the 'mixed fortunes' we were experiencing at the evenings' pizzaland meal, the conversation turned to the temperatures of 90 degrees C for the 1983 Opens and 107 degrees C for one of the last Tests in Adelaide. Unsurprisingly the only weather Manchester produced for us was rain, and the looming clouds' origin in the unseasonably scorching temperatures of the Ukraine, raised no spirits but many umbrellas. (Was it coincidence that our Referee was nuclear safety officer B. Keen?)

Having run the gauntlet of savage autograph hunters, we discovered a number of peculiarities. Firstly, in the large Granada complex, there was not a single television to be had where we might watch croquet's first TV broadcast (eventually we found a monitor to satisfy our vanity). Secondly, colours were decided not by the toss, but by one's shirt size! (Jaques had kindly provided 'purpose built' shirts, in yellow/red and blue/black). Thirdly, the introduction of numbered boxes on top of the hoops, that indicated not only the order in which hoops had to be run, but also when



Richard Hilditch scores a point in the Welsh 'shoot-out'



The two finalists: Nigel Aspinall, with the Trophy, and David Peterson. Centre is Mr H.E. Farley, Chief General Manager of the Royal Bank of Scotland, who presented the prizes.

a hoop had been run (by promptly falling off it!), and so introduced a new intricacy to our game - the mis-placed box!

The first match to be televised was Hope vs. Murray, notable by Andrew mis-placing his clip after running 5th hoop (so that his clips were on 5th and 5th, while he was really for 5th and 6th). When he peeled his ball through 5th (which was really for 6th) his clips became correct, but unbeknown to him,, he was a mandatory peel short. Fortunately none of this registered with our commentators, since the referee refused to believe that it had happened, and the fact that players didn't appear to understand the game would hardly encourage our fresh faced TV converts.

The first day also produced the match most likely to halt Nigel's predictable progress to the trophy. However, in the event, Eric Solomon instead became the only player not to take croquet in a particular game. Martin Murray was back for the final game of the day, needing a win to stay alive. Martin was for peg alone when time was called in Stephen Wright's turn. Stephen held together to take his backward ball round, finally needing a half-jump peel at round. Sadly, after such a valiant effort, this last shot went crashing into the wire, giving Martin victory and allowing him to hit a long peg - thus avoiding the ignominy of a win on time.

Our TV moguls were eager for a play-off situation, which would arise in the Scotch block if Stephen Wright could beat Andrew Hope. Stephen was for peg alone when Andrew reached 5th and 5th, needing two peels and faced with a peel through 5th of 2 yards at 45 degrees! A brilliant approach shot from Andrew placed partner in the jaws and himself 2 feet in front, and a good half-jump shot left him in a favourable position. A missed long shot from Stephen allowed Andrew his final peel. Constructing a final leave, Andrew croqueted Stephen's ball just two inches short of the 4th corner boundary! Now Stephen was certainly faced with his last shot, and to the delight of spectators, he hit the peg from 4th corner, thus forcing croquet's first play-off.

The local election results (received that evening) suggested a 3-way tie at the next

election and I wonder whether their solution to that constitutional crisis will be as original as ours was to this? The sight of Thatcher, Kinnock and Steel having a best of 5 shoot out at the peg would be the political highlight of the decade (and about as conclusive as an election)! The members of the Scottish team each contrived to miss their first two shots, but Martin demonstrated his international experience by hitting the last three, thereby taking a place in the semi-finals.

To summarise the other blocks, coincidentally all games involving Irishmen went to time (and only games including Irishmen). However their block was won outright by Fred Rogerson. David Peterson won the shoot-out for the Welsh block. Although John Walters was not scratched for being (more than 2 minutes) late to play his crunch match against Aspinall, he failed to pull off this major coup, so Nigel progressed to the semi's unbeaten.

Nigel was already establishing himself as the character people could love to hate, not only by playing the game far too well for his own (or rather everybody else's) good, but also by being a 'spoil sport' - depriving the TV people a shot of Richard Hilditch's orange juice and chocolate biscuits (they continued that particular 'character development' regardless). He experienced his toughest struggle against Fred Rogerson in the semi-final before meeting David Peterson in the final. Despite adopting the most peculiar defensive tactics (which might even have confounded Keith Wylie), laying up for rush peels more often seen in the Ladies Field than the President's Cup, Nigel looked untroubled on his way to victory in this final stage of the competition.

Thanks go to the Granada team for their professional approach, to Lord John Oaksey and Phil Cordingley for their commentary, to Elton Welsby our linkman, to Liz Taylor, our scorelady, who always looked splendid in her elegant outfits, and to Chris Hudson for organising everything.

Our hotel were so sorry to see us go that they attempted to prevent Eric from leaving, wrongly presenting him not only with his own bill but those of others as well. Fortunately his honest face soon gained him a release!

Short Croquet

Publicity for the tournament was well spread, including an article in the 'Grauniad' which contrived to mis-spell peel – peal, the sort of error which may 'ring a bell' for regular Guardian readers! The first evening's highlights of our up-and-coming sport were usurped by that out-and-going sport, football, (the European Cup match ran into extra time), and by the only man who looks more dour than John McCullough after he's stuck in a hoop – Clint Eastwood, who featured in a double-length film that could not be postponed.

The game's appearance on television seemed to be a successful one. The mood is of a relaxed summer sport (such as cricket) rather than the more usual comparisons with snooker (which has a constantly excited, highly-charged mood). Whether this will suit television viewers we have yet to find out.

RESULTS

England

Nigel Aspinall bt Eric Solomon +14
Eric Solomon bt John Walters +9(T)
Nigel Aspinall bt John Walters +13

Wales

David Peterson bt Richard Hilditch +10
Richard Hilditch bt David Croker +13
David Croker bt David Peterson +7
Shoot-out: David Peterson (3 out of 4)

Scotland

Andrew Hope bt Martin Murray +7
Martin Murray bt Stephen Wright +4
Stephen Wright bt Andrew Hope +2
Shoot-out: Martin Murray (3 out of 5)

Ireland

Fred Rogerson bt Terence Read +10(T)
John McCullough bt Terence Read +1(T)
Fred Rogerson bt John McCullough +3(T)

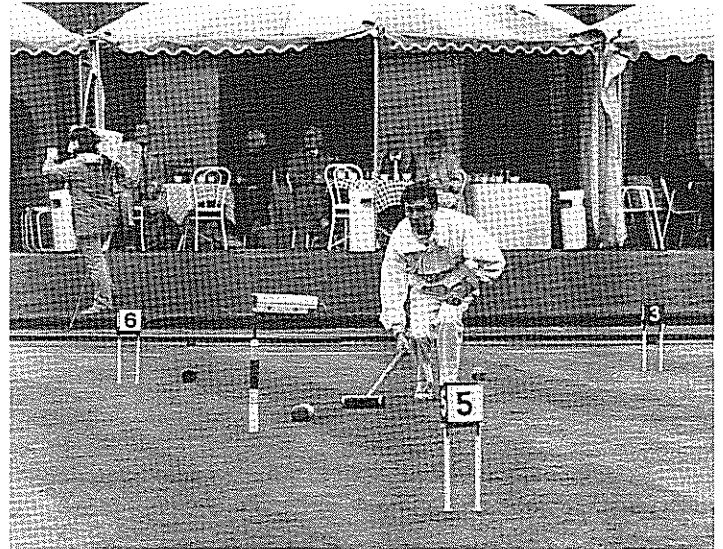
Semi-Finals:

Nigel Aspinall bt Fred Rogerson +6(T)
David Peterson bt Martin Murray +9

Final:

Nigel Aspinall bt David Peterson +12

Nigel Aspinall lines up the peg out to win the title.



Phil Cordingley (left) and John Oaksey in the commentary box

Press Cuttings

Daily Telegraph (TV Programme Notes)

International Croquet

Granada is attempting to tap the market for obscure sports with three days live coverage of Britain's first televised croquet tournament. Twelve top players from England, Scotland, Wales and Ireland are competing for the Royal Bank Nations Trophy, but, despite valiant publicity attempts to inject dynamism into the game, it is difficult to dispel visions of lazy days pottering about on the vicar's lawn.

Daily Telegraph (after the event)

Peter Simple's column – 'Way of the World'.
'It must not be'

... (Croquet) is the only outdoor game which, though it is one of pure skill, is leisurely enough to allow players to talk and even drink while playing it. A truly civilised game.

I am an erratic player myself, sometimes quite brilliant, sometimes a complete duffer. But at one time I was so keen that I would even play by moonlight in winter, with a light covering of snow on the lawn.

The thought of television getting its claws

on croquet makes me shudder. It will soon become commercialised, with huge prizes and 'personalities'. Its present 'tactical ruthlessness' will not be ruthless enough for its promoters.

They will want to speed it up and introduce an element of danger, with the players forced to wear padded clothing and visored helmets ...

The Manchester Evening News

Mr Manchester's Diary

(The whole diary was devoted to various aspects of croquet in the Thursday edition) ... Who should I find in the commentator's tent with Elton Welsby but puckish Lord Oaksey, the former leading amateur jockey and now better known as an ITV racing commentator.

You'd think he'd be all adrift with croquet terms like stop-shots, quadruple peels and split-rolls. And so he is, though he'll have to cope with them until the three-day tournament ends tomorrow.

'I know jolly little about it,' he said cheerfully. 'I'm here to ask the sort of questions ignorant laymen would ask.' ...

... He's been playing 'golf-croquet', a basic, one-hoop-a-time version of the game

since childhood, and still has a croquet lawn at home in Oaksey, Wiltshire.

From the Times Television hopes for hit with croquet, by Peter Davenport

'It may not have the crunching impact of American football, the hypnotic appeal of snooker or the bar room familiarity of darts, but croquet has become the latest sport to attract the television cameras ...

It is the first time a croquet tournament has been televised and Granada executives hope they can make it as popular as snooker and darts that sometimes seem to dominate the screen.

The tournament, involving 12 invited top players from England, Ireland, Scotland and Wales has been sponsored by the Royal Bank of Scotland and organised in conjunction with the Croquet Association. It is hoped it will become a regular television event.

The first prize however was only £150 plus a solid silver quaich, a Scottish drinking cup, a sum far removed from the £70,000 that snooker's new world champion, Joe Johnson from Bradford, picked up earlier last week ...

Continued overleaf

Your Letters (1)

Handicap Coordination

Dear Sir,
I have detected 'rumblings' about the decisions of the HCC in carrying out their task of reviewing handicaps for the 1986 season, and I write as a long time critic of the CA handicapping process who finds much to approve in the present regime.

Those affected by the 'arbitrary' handicap movements may feel aggrieved when hard-won reductions are reversed out of season. They should rather be reassured by the careful explanation of the review process which accompanied the adjustment. Each case (excepting minus players) reflects an overall measure of success in tournament handicap play, and is a significantly better option than the blanket changes of the 1970s. It also gives ground for hope that the consistently successful '66%' winner, who never actually wins a tournament event will be recognized by the HCC.

The principal cause for grumbling may be that national statistics may not reflect local rivalries if one regards a handicap as a sort of

order of merit. Unfortunately the system cannot fulfil two distinct roles adequately, and the option chosen seems to be the right one. 'A' class players will pay more attention to the annual statistical table produced annually with such care for the regular tournament players. The rest of us should be prepared to welcome a coordinating judgment based on a respectable view of statistical evidence. In two or three years we can judge by results; meanwhile we can always prove the HCC 'wrong' by going out and winning our new handicaps!

Martin Granger-Brown
Bowdon

Dear Sir,
What follows is a transcript of the speech that I would have made at the recent AGM, had the patriachs of the CA not denied me that right:

'... I would like to use this time to denounce the recent action by the Handicap Coordination Committee (HCC), which I believe we might describe, in croquet terms, as a 'miss'. Misguided, miscalculated, mistaken, and if we're lucky, it might become mislaid!

Press Cuttings

Continued from page 17

The Illustrated London News (Part of a 3-page article)

'**Croquet at its Crunch**', by J.A. Cuddon
... An energetic 'Forward Plan' instigated by the Croquet Association has stimulated a further resurgence ...

Whether croquet will become 'televisual' is debatable. Many think it will not. But many thought snooker would not attract television viewers when Pot Black was launched in 1969. On balance it does seem unlikely unless an acceptable abbreviated version can be devised. Normally a short game takes about 45 minutes; an average game two to three hours. Any kind of 'instant croquet' would be inimical to the character of a contemplative and cerebral contest in which precision and astute tactical thinking are essential and in which time should not be a controlling factor.'

Diners Card Magazine

Farewell to Flamingoes, by Simon Barnes
'Croquet is surrounded by more myths, misapprehensions and mystique than any other game. Cucumber sandwiches, hedgehogs and tales of vicious assaults among the vicar's rosebeds have all coloured the public view of this traditional summer sport. Now, with the croquet season beginning, it is high time some of this mystique was laid firmly to rest. There is a new spirit in the game, and the really serious croquet people, the young and dynamic players who are changing the image of the game, get awfully fed up with it all.'

'We have moved out of the cucumber sandwich area,' declared Stephen Mulliner, the 'Hurricane Higgins' of croquet, and Jan MacLeod, one of the top women players, agrees. 'As a matter of fact, we don't use hedgehogs,' says the rapier-slim girl in dashing white fencing trousers and a headband, leaning negligently on her mallet. 'Not even for practice.' ...

... The game is taking great strides in its effort to be taken seriously, and to grow in

stature as a competitive sport ... Now it is in the middle of a renaissance, as a hard competitive game. The cucumber sandwiches and the flamingoes have had their day.

From Today (Article by Alastair Campbell)

... Croquet came to television last week, courtesy of Granada TV's croquet-playing managing director, David Plowright. He reckons that if bowls and snooker can reach cult status, then the game of aristocratic house parties can make it too.

... The early signs weren't good. There were times when the 35-strong Outside Broadcast team, with their seven cameras, outnumbered Mancunian spectators by about 35 ...

... Croquet's new 'expert commentator', England international Phil Cordingley ... a computer consultant from Harrow, has enjoyed his break from work. His three-day stint earned him £300 - twice as much as Nigel got for winning the final 14-2. And as they're all gentlemen and amateurs he could keep only £25 for himself. The rest goes to the player's club or to the Croquet Association.

'There's no such thing as a croquet professional,' he said, a feeling echoed by Nigel, who is doubtful that he and his colleagues will become instant superstars following their arrival in Granadaland. 'You play for the fun, the trophy, the title and the honour of winning.'

The Mail on Sunday

Croquet set to be the next TV topper

For years, the only sporting sound heard around Granada TV studios has been the thwack of a dart in the Rovers Return.

Not anymore. Next month the genteel crack of mallet on croquet ball will resound around too.

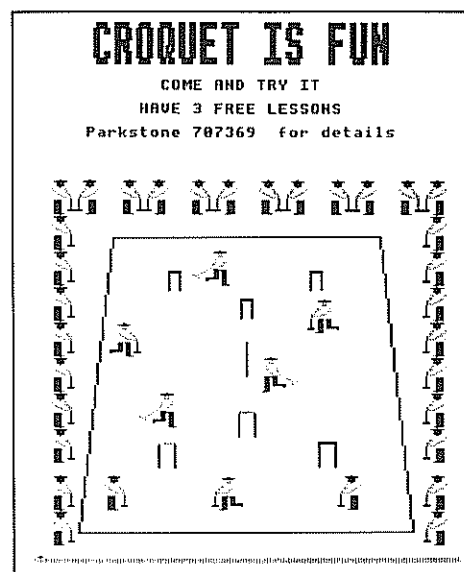
The Manchester-based company intends to turn the pastime of gentlefolk into a spectator sport - and they might just succeed ...

The centre-pin of the handicap changes is the computer analysis of handicap games, but such an analysis cannot produce conclusive evidence. A player may win a high percentage of his games by playing amongst people whose handicaps are too low. These people will win about half their games because they are equally mis-handicapped. The old computer adage 'Garbage in, garbage out' applies, and the computer mal-adjusts the correct handicap instead of changing the wrong handicaps. Thus this method produces a more subjective handicapping. Although computers may be helpful, their output needs to be interpreted, and a reasonable and experienced observer is still the best way.

What is needed is autonomy, not automation. The HCC itself is responsible for our current difficulties by their previous action of putting the brakes on low handicaps. Their reaction now is like an attempt to mend a Swiss watch with a sledgehammer.

It is true that a bias exists against high handicaps, but this is not something that can necessarily be redressed. Frankly some people (most especially some beginners) wouldn't win with 30 bisques (not that this for one moment means that they won't one day be good players), but they can still enjoy the game.

Handicappers have always used handicaps at this level as a carrot. A reduction from 16 to 15 is of little practical value, but it is invaluable as a source of encouragement to the beginner. A reduction gives a sense of achievement, whether you are 24 or minus 2. I'm sure my own beginners aren't the only ones to feel despondent and cheated at their raises. It is an undermining of confidence in players and handicappers alike. A note in the HCC's domesday book of handicaps to the effect that changes are not 'real' but adjustments for a new scale, is not enough.



Computer Posters - see Allen Parker's letter on Page 19

It is also correct that minus players tend to beat middle bisquers. What practical steps could be taken that wouldn't have the aforementioned drawbacks? The existing legal handicap range is -5 to 16. Our current lowest handicaps are minus 2, so there is 3 bisques room at the bottom end of the range. I have heard the argument against using that room - 'a minus 5 could never give a scratch player