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 supreme, 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 'milked fortunes' we were experiencing at the evenings' pizzazz 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 seasonally scorching temperatures of the Ukraine, raised no spirits but many umbrellas. (Was it coincidence that our referee was nuclear safety officer R. 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 a mighty 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 red/blue/white). 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 a hoop had been run (by promptly falling off it), and so introduced a mischievous factor 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 6th, 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 unknown 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. So was Richard Wright's turn. Step hel held together to take his backward ball round, finally needing a half-jump peg at rover. 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 6th, 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 the staunch crisis will be as original as ours was to this? The sight of Thatch, 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 unbeatenn.

Nigel was already establishing himself as the character people could love to hate, not only by playing the game far too well for his countrymen (or rather everybody else's) good, but also by being a 'spoilsport' - depriving 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 Cardocation for their commentary, to Elton Welsby our linkman, to Liz Taylor, our scorerlady, 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 we. Fortunately his honest face soon gained him a release!
Publicity for the tournament was well spread, including an article in the 'Guardian' which contributed to mis-spell peed – 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.*

**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 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 Welby but puckish Lord Oakesy, 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 lolly 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 Oakesy, 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 quash, 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
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 handicap 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 never actually wins a tournament 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 fulfill 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 judgement based on a responsible 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 patriarchs of the CA not denied me that right: ‘ . . . I would like to use this time to denote the recent action by the Handicap Coordination Committee (HCC), which I believe we might describe, in croquet terms, as a ‘miss’. Misjudged, miscalculated, mistaken, and if we’re lucky, it might become missed!’

Press Cuttings

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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 limited 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 mystery 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. ‘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 Cordinley... 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 Grandaland. ‘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 crackle 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...