

Richard Griffiths, Cornwall Croquet Club

1) USE OF BISQUES TO SET UP A 4-BALL BREAK (at the beginning of the game as well as at later stages)

At the start of the game the player with bisques (and it might be that both players have them) needs to choose whether to get underway or to allow the opponent whatever opportunity he can seize. You need to come to a view, if you can, as to how well your opponent is playing. If you have reason to think that he is not playing well it is sometimes best just to let him play, hoping that he will use his bisques to less than their full potential. If this is what you have chosen you then place your balls in corners 2 & 4 to make it difficult for him.

However, you often don't have any information on which to base an opinion, and then it is a big risk to let him play, as he may do well, and this can be quite discouraging. In any case, with bisques available it is mostly best to get on the lawn first, especially if your opponent is nominally the better player.

Playing with bisques means that you can take on shots that you could not risk without having a bisque to use if you miss, and you can take the innings at any time (not just at the start) by using one bisque, either by trickling up to a ball if it is out in the lawn, or by a good strong shot if it is near a boundary, and you might even save using that first bisque by hitting in. You should then aim to set up a 4-ball break using one further bisque. If you have a half bisque, use it first, followed by a full bisque.

Let's review the procedure to get a 4-ball break going at the start of the game. For simplicity let's suppose you have won the toss and have put opponent in. You go on 4th turn with your second ball, and you shoot at a ball so that if you miss you land up near it, so that you can take a bisque and easily hit it in the next shot. Now what to do? On the assumption that the balls are not fortuitously already in their desired places, the thing to do next is to croquet the ball you have just hit, sending it to be the pioneer at Hoop 1, getting striker's ball to a position from which it can roquet another ball. You then croquet that ball to one of the other two desirable vacant positions (these are, a pivot out in the lawn and a pioneer for Hoop 2),

getting to the 4th ball and roqueting it. In the subsequent croquet shot with 4th ball you must get striker's ball back down to Hoop 1, placing the croqueted ball in the other desirable vacant position. You then have a 4-ball break position set up, and you take the second bisque to allow you to roquet the Hoop 1 pioneer, and away you go. If any ball is already well placed, it is still usually worth visiting it to adjust its position to be even better, and to get the benefit of shorter steps by using all the balls.

If you can get round to Rover on half of your bisques and do a good leave, you should be able to win, even if your opponent then uses some of his bisques to do the same. With the other half of your bisques you should be able to get the second ball round to Peg, doing the Rover Peel on the way, and you then win. Against a very good player you should go to Peg with the first ball, as he could easily Peel you through Rover if he wished to peg you out.

2) HOW TO KEEP THE 4-BALL BREAK GOING

Follow this procedure, selecting the correct shot (stop-shot, drive, and the various roll shots) as needed. Practice them if you have any doubt about what the ratios are for each shot.

- 1) When you have run a hoop, roquet the reception ball. It will often be a gentle roquet that is needed, and other times a harder hit to rush it to a useful spot. Choose carefully which one is needed; don't hit hard when the result makes the next shot more difficult than if you had hit gently (e.g. needing a long take-off instead of an easy short one, and for no significant advantage). Hitting too hard for no gain or an even poorer position is a very common failing.
- 2) Send the roqueted ball to be the pioneer at the next-hoop-but-one, using an appropriate CROQUET shot to place it accurately, and getting the striker's ball near to the pivot ball that is awaiting somewhere, hopefully in a good spot out in the lawn where you placed it in anticipation. This croquet shot is of tremendous importance, particularly when the bisques have gone (see Section 5).
- 3) Unless there is a very good reason for it, do not do take-offs that leave a ball in a position that is not useful to you subsequently (such as on a boundary when you want it in the lawn). Use all the balls, and

don't leave a ball behind unless it is unavoidable. The croquet shot that would put it somewhere useful is just as easy as the take-off. If you do have to leave a ball behind, you should have a clear idea as to when you are going to bring it back into play. Of course, if the croqueted ball is already in or near a useful position, an appropriate take-off is the right choice.

3) USE OF BISQUES DURING THE BREAK

Each time you use a bisque you are entitled to take a total of SEVEN shots if you use all the balls; it is a terrible waste to use a bisque to take only one shot. Nonetheless, you will often see players misapproach a hoop (usually by doing a roll shot and making the striker's ball travel too far, another common failing), and do exactly that, not even looking to see how to take advantage of all seven shots. Let's examine the right and wrong things to do in this situation. The player had hoped to use the continuation shot to run the hoop, but had got into a poor position.

- ⌘ The worst thing to do is to use the continuation shot to take position in front of the hoop, then take a bisque and run it. This is wrong because the taking of position often does not work (too hard or too soft a hit), and even if it does work, you have only got one shot out of your bisque.
- ⌘ Not quite as bad is to play the continuation shot into a position that gets a short rush on the nearby ball, back to the hoop. This is slightly better because it utilises three of the available seven shots, and the position needed to get a rush is less precise than that needed to run the hoop, so it is more likely to succeed.
- ⌘ The best thing to do, by a long way, is to look at the other two balls, which need to be in ideal pivot and pioneer positions up ahead, and probably need some re-positioning. Use the continuation shot to get near one of them (usually going to the more distant one first), then take the bisque to roquet it and position it with the croquet shot, getting to the other ball, roquet and position it, coming back to the ball left at the hoop. (i.e. Exactly as for setting up the 4-ball break as described in Section 1). Roquet that and make the hoop. All seven shots are used, and an easy break layout is restored.

In the unlikely event that both of the balls up ahead were already perfectly positioned then there is no need to adjust them, and then the second option above is appropriate. However, this is rare, and even if only one of them needs tweaking it is probably going to be easier to get to it by visiting both of them. In any event, the first option above is always the least beneficial. Tell yourself this and DON'T DO IT!

Once you have a break set up it is easy to keep it going with bisques used judiciously in this way to keep it tidy, so you should always be assessing the tidiness of the layout, and using a bisque to tidy up when the need arises. How can you tell when to use a bisque to tidy up? If you get into a situation where you do not have an adequate pioneer for the next-hoop-but-one, it is time to use a bisque, probably visiting all the balls and recovering the tidy position. However, remember that two balls close together are as useful as a good pioneer, since you should be able to get to one, and use a croquet shot or a take-off to get a rush on the other one to your hoop. You should be able to carry on that position successfully without using a bisque. In general, do not wait until things have gone wrong; timely use of a bisque will give you a tidy 4-ball break position, whereas delaying until a mistake has been made often means you have used a bisque and still don't have a good position. If you apply this thinking, the bisques will be used to greatest effect, and not simply to mend mistakes such as blobbed hoops.

4) WHEN TO GIVE UP

Of course, in spite of having a good layout for the 4-ball break, you will blob hoops. Players often walk off the lawn at this point, especially if they are with partner ball at the blobbed hoop. In this case they are judging that opponent has a lengthy roquet to do, and may not succeed, or that even if he has bisques and is bound to have the opportunity to get in, he may not do much from that layout. This is not sound reasoning, because it fails to consider the full issue, which should include consideration of what can be gained by the use of a bisque. Bearing in mind that you would happily spend two bisques to set up a 4-ball break, it is sound investment to use one bisque to keep a break going, provided balls are reasonably placed up ahead. Also, you are not then handing over the innings, which is an asset

that is too often undervalued. If you have been unfortunate enough to land your ball on the upright, so that two bisques will be needed to continue, it may still be worth it, depending on (i) the forward position, and (ii) what you would be handing to your opponent if you give up. In my opinion many players tend to give up too easily in these situations.

Another common situation is that you miss a roquet during the break, landing up a long way from the target ball. This is a much trickier decision, because you may well miss the roquet again, and find yourself "windscreen wiper", squandering many bisques. If you decide to continue, first look to see if there is another ball closer than the one you missed. That might be your best choice. Whatever you decide, it cannot be necessary to spend more than two bisques to get the break back. Look at the full situation. You could just trickle up to the ball you have just missed, and then you are sure to be able to get it with the second bisque. However, you should recognise that you could use the two bisques to carry out the equivalent of the setting-up procedure that we looked at in Section 1, and in this case if you have kept things tidy some of the balls will already be well placed, so examine the option and decide whether that might be better value.

5) WHAT TO DO WHEN THE BISQUES HAVE GONE

Once you have run out of bisques you will have to work much harder to build your break. You can no longer just grab the innings at any time (though your opponent can if he still has bisques), and you will now have to hit in to gain it. With no bisque to bail you out of a bad shot, success now depends much more on TACTICAL choices to select the right objectives, followed by correct SHOT SELECTION and deployment of the TECHNICAL skill to execute the shot successfully.

Consider the tactics first. If you hit in and can get to two balls that are near each other, use them productively – roquet one of them, probably gently, so as to have an easy take-off or croquet shot that gets you a rush on the second ball to your next hoop. Look for opportunities to bring all 4 balls into play, building the break as you go. Think about when it is appropriate to roquet gently, followed by a gentle croquet shot (perhaps just a take-off), and when it will be better to roquet harder so as to get the room

needed to gain best advantage of the croquet shot.

It is now even more important not to leave balls behind with take-off shots. Even if you can only get the ball out two yards from the boundary, it will be much easier to get to it after the next hoop, and bring it further into the game.

Turning to the technical side, you will gain greatly if you can run hoops with control, getting in the right position to rush the reception ball (i) to a hoop, (ii) to a good position to play the next croquet shot straight instead of split, or (iii) to the boundary or to the vicinity of another ball so that the subsequent croquet shot adds to the the objective of getting all the balls back into a 4-ball layout, probably taking several hoops to achieve it.

In order to run hoops with control you must be running them from in front and no more than about 15 inches away. In order to get such good hoop approaches you need good pioneers, and they in turn demand that your placement of pioneers is done with carefully aligned croquet shots. The croquet shot referred to in Section 2 item 2 must be done with great care, and you should line it up carefully (not quite as demanding as say a long peg-out, but needing to be aimed at a target position rather than just the general vicinity of a hoop). Ability to execute a good croquet shot is one of the most important technical requirements. It is the name of the game, after all.