

How to get OUT of the B-League!

by Sue Mackay

Playing croquet is like waiting for a bus; you wait eleven years for a trophy and then several come at once! This time last year I wrote an article for SWAN recalling ten years in the B-League and my seeming inability to get off a 20 handicap. Well I won't be playing B-League this season, having finally got my handicap down and picked up some long overdue silverware on the way. I shall be in the Intermediate League as of right (as opposed to being sent in to bat off 18 by a desperate team manager!) and may even play in some Federation matches. So if I can do it, so can YOU!

"Oh look out, here comes the professional 20," cried Hamish Hall last season as I arrived with the Longman Cup team at Bristol and we beat them 5-0. Yet on two occasions I had been prevented from going down to 18 by being trounced by Bristol players in the B-League!! Club handicappers have a problem when dealing with perennial B-League players. Many of them are not CA members, rarely play on full size lawns and only play a handful of competitive games each season. Most of them also play croquet of which Aunt Emma would be proud. At Dyffryn Chris Williams has always insisted that even non CA members keep a handicap card, and all B-League games are included, as otherwise high handicap players would never come down. Unfortunately, however, a lot of high bisquers get trapped by constantly playing each other and swapping the 10 points back and forth like yo-yos.

Every season for the past 11 years I have also entered our Dyffryn Cup and All England qualifier, and have occasionally had some good wins in the early rounds by dint of using my bisques well against low handicapped players, but more often the bisques would run out and I would lose by a narrow margin. Also my inability to hit roquets was my undoing. During breaks I would squander bisques see-sawing round the pivot, and when I came across Aunt Emma I could never get the innings back.

So what changed? When I started at Dyffryn my son was four and I had to get a babysitter to play a match, so I never joined the CA. I was not particularly competitive and played croquet for enjoyment, so I didn't think I was a tournament animal. When James started to play I enrolled him as a junior CA member and drove him to Nailsea and Cheltenham to play in weekend handicap tournaments. I found myself sitting around all day getting nervous on his behalf, and realised that I had played a good number of the competitors in past B-League seasons, so why wasn't I playing myself? At least then James couldn't complain that I was putting him off! So I joined the CA. Good move!

Last season we braved the Easter blizzards at Cheltenham and went down to Southwick for the Spring Bank Holiday. I played 14 games in these tournaments as a 20 and won 7, lost 7, so my handicap was right, but instead of coming in cold to our club competitions in May these tournaments allowed me to play myself in, with the result that I reached the final of both handicap competitions at Dyffryn, and qualified for the All England Area Finals. I also won our short croquet competition and then went on to win the National Short Croquet Finals at Solihull.

My dramatic improvement is due to a number of factors. I had 40 games on my card last season, as opposed to 10 or less in previous seasons. I also addressed the problem of my inability to hit roquets; I had never been able to hold the mallet with both hands on top and develop a wristy swing, but Bo Harris at Cheltenham put me on the right track by suggesting that I bring the top hand down rather than the bottom hand up, and that I do it an inch at a time until I felt comfortable. I had improved my hoop running by hitting the ball gently and 'stroking' it through, and I discovered that standing forward over the ball and using the same technique for short roquets was very effective.

James meanwhile continued to improve too, and I took him to a silver gilt coaching course given by Colin Irwin as well as to several Junior Squad coaching sessions given by Chris Clarke. There is definitely something to be said for watching the best players, and I learned a lot from being a spectator. On the full size lawns at Dyffryn, which are notoriously slow, most of my breaks broke down because I couldn't hit the cross-court shots hard enough and then missed the pivot. I have finally twigged that it is not written in tablets of stone that the pivot ball should always be in the centre of the lawn, and that I don't NEED to do long split shots if I can perfect my rushes and stop shots.

Most importantly I have stopped selling myself short, and now believe that I am good enough to get my handicap into single figures. I think I used to convince myself I was going to miss before I even went on to the lawn. I only actually played in three handicap tournaments last season, two of which I could reach daily from home. The atmosphere is good and you will have fun even if you don't win. There are handicap weekends in the CA fixture book covering the whole South West region, and even if you don't want to join the CA there are high bisquer tournaments open to all comers, some of which are advertised in this newsletter.

My advice to all high handicap players is to go forth and play. NEVER refuse to take part in a competition because you think you are not good enough. You might be soundly beaten, but in my experience the better players are only too willing to give you help and encouragement, and you will never get better if you keep playing the same people again and again in friendly games. Part of the reason I spent 10 years in the B-League was that our team manager had the greatest difficulty in persuading our beginners to take part. Remember that B stands for beginner. If you are a beginner, you should be taking part. If you've been at it for 10 years, it's time you joined the CA, started playing in small tournaments and using your bisques to build breaks.