

# Croquet the American Way

*by Jon Diamond*

February always seems such a cold and dreary month, so Florida just seemed too good an idea, especially as a Cruise brochure featuring the Caribbean and starting in Fort Lauderdale dropped through the door in November.

Anyway the logistics all worked out, so after delivering my mallet to John Hobbs to be part of the glorified mallet "coffin" that went with the main party, Barbara and I flew off for our mid-winter sun at the end of January. (Even with the mallet head being detached we didn't have any luggage large enough to take the mallet handle and the airlines don't allow them to be taken as hand-luggage any longer!)



The cruise complete, we drove gently up Interstate 95 to West Palm Beach, stopping at an obligatory Quilting Shop (a self-organised element of the 'spouse programme') and 'people watching' the 'parade' up and down the Palm Beach equivalent of Bond Street. We were expecting to meet the rest of the 24-strong party in the bar at the Hilton, which was to be our base for the Croquet week, at about 6:30pm. Unfortunately they

had been caught up with USA Immigration queues and delayed for a mere two hours, so were rather more tired than expected when they eventually rolled up. Happily, the hotel had laid on a Wine and Cheese reception, so there was at least some welcome from the USA on the starting Saturday!



The Hilton was ideally located and, according to veterans of these trips, much better than the hotels in the previous two years. It provided free shuttles to both the National Croquet Centre (about 3 blocks away) and to the Shopping/Dining location of City Plaza on request, in addition to several 'special requests' from those on the spouse programme.



The weather dawned the next day mainly sunny, but warm, and after a briefing from the Hotel Manager, a local Tourism Officer, our very own Nicky Evans (Tour Manager) and Richard Hoskyns (Tournament Manager) we were off to the NCC for an intro and practice to be greeted by Mike Jenner (CEO of the NCC). His accent definitely showed his English origin, but he seems to be gradually slipping into American by the minute.



Off we go to the lawns for a bit of practice and to meet up with a number of the Americans. They've got a couple of classes in progress with about 30 people learning the game, so we're confined (!) to only 5 lawns. Most of us manage to meet up with some Americans also practising and use the time to do a bit of education in the Association game.

I ran into Dick Knapp, who I played last year at a Surbiton tournament – he still remembers pegging one of my balls out, but my struggling around with a





three-ball break and winning. Unfortunately, he'd fallen over in the car park, so we couldn't complete a full game and he eventually had to retire home with a blood injury.

The lawns seemed in excellent condition, a bit fast but holding well and very flat almost everywhere. Also, the grounds seem to have recovered well from the hurricane last year, with only a couple of defunct gazebos being the obvious damage.

Sunday was Super Bowl day and the majority of US citizens take the opportunity to party. Not wishing to be left out, the NCC had organised an Open Buffet that evening. The food was excellent, the alcohol flowed and, despite the jet-lag, a number of us decided to participate and an excellent time was had by all, even those not watching the game on the three big screens.

Having rested and relaxed the next day was something really different – croquet, but in real American style. We were all bussed the 15 miles to the PGA (Professional Golfers Association) National Resort and Spa for an introduction at their club to the American Rules



game. Although the main focus of the resort is obviously golf, they have a *mere* 5 croquet lawns, so providing another really good environment for the game.

After an introduction to American Rules we were paired up with the Americans to play three fun doubles games. It's certainly a different sort of game and also, perhaps surprisingly, uses a different range of shots. For example, thin take-

offs are much more frequent and rolls appear to be almost non-existent.

We certainly needed our partners to tell us what strategy we should be using, but after the three games I feel that most of us had at least a grasp of some of what we should be doing. I'm not sure that I'd like to be out on my own for a real game though.....

There are clearly some advantages to the American game – games typically last no more than 90 minutes and, given the automatic rotation of the balls and usually shorter breaks, almost no time for sitting out. However, the *deadness* of balls after a roquet takes a lot of getting used too, even when the display boards on each lawn show the current status. (Three balls deadness is a disastrous situation.)

Not being able to roquet a ball on the boundary from a distance, since it's placed not a yard but only 9 inches in **and** if any ball goes out it's end of turn, makes a hell of a difference. There's a **lot** of strategy related to this and quite a few times we had all the balls on the boundaries in two pairs.

These differences appeared to me to make the game too complicated for beginners to keep track of the state of the game, and therefore work out what the strategy should be, and probably too defensive for the better players. However, it's still a fun game and I shouldn't really make definitive pronouncements after only one day's exposure. It is interesting to note that during the rest of the week we had quite a few Americans say, unprompted, that they preferred the Association game.



The accompanying golfers in the group decided that the rates at the PGA were rather extortionate (I heard a figure something like \$350 being bandied around), but did manage to find another of the almost 200 courses in Palm Beach County to play on. I believe they also found several others during the week whilst we had our heads down at the croquet.



Tuesday dawned brightish again, but this day was 'at leisure'. Retail or any other kind of therapy was permissible, even relaxing by the outdoor swimming pool! In the evening we were entertained by one of the locals and a number of the other players for a drinks party at her flat overlooking the Intercoastal Waterway, separating the island of Palm Beach from West Palm Beach where most of our activities took place.



Richard had been beavering away in the background organising at the NCC, so promptly at 9am on Wednesday we started play in the Handicap Event, with 6 x 2 ½ hour games over the two days. A little help had to be given to some of the Americans who, although familiar with the rules of Association, were not quite as familiar with the tactics. Nevertheless, there didn't have to be too many calls on the Referees to sort things out.

Although the timing should have allowed play to cease at sunset (just after 6pm), at least one game went on well after dark, at almost 6:45pm with the extra last-turn. I don't know about the players, but I couldn't see which colour ball was which from the side of the lawn. But since they were playing the secondary balls we could just about see where they were because of the white stripes! [Unfortunately a photo wouldn't do justice to this.....]



The Thursday dawned, dare I say it, a bit cold. Not only that, there was a chilly wind and even 10 minutes of rain, especially nasty since I'd left my rain gear at the hotel! However, we all played through it in true Brit style and completed the games on time. Dick Knapp won this event with John Kennedy as runner up.

You might be wondering how the 8 spouses not playing croquet occupied themselves. Diplomatic Travel (in the form of Nicky Evans) had set up a number of options, tailored to people's interests. I am reliably informed that one of the more enjoyable outings was to The Breakers (a famous old hotel on the beach) cocktail bar in the middle of the afternoon! One drink – a Ferrari – unusual, but despite to order it could not be Always ready to ultimate sacrifice, of play Nicky Breakers (on the motorbike, but that is another story) sampled said Ferrari and came back with the recipe, to be successfully mixed by the barman at the NCC.



was particularly several attempts elsewhere it replicated. make the on the last day returned to The back of a



The Class Events were played on Friday and Saturday in the expected warm and sunny weather, although one Brit had to retire due to over-exposure to the sun. The A-class event was won by Keith Jones (USA), the B class by Jim Taylor (USA) and Deirdre Duggan in the C class (Handicap).



Sadly, despite a late change to the playing schedule at the request of the Americans to allow for playing over the weekend, the dinner remained on the Friday evening. Nevertheless a prize



giving did take place on the final Sunday!

The Fun 14pt Doubles on Sunday allowed for mostly Brit/American pairings. Unfortunately, we had to leave early to catch our plane back from Miami so didn't participate in the last round, but Les Kershaw and Tony Whateley proved the ultimate winners (two Brits paired together – shame). Finally, the main tour ended with a day



and a half at leisure with many people visiting the Space Center at Cape Canaveral and others visiting the Everglades, and even some just relaxing!



Thanks to everyone for making this another successful foray by the Brits to America. Perhaps we'll do better with the results next time?

Ah, I almost forgot, you were wondering why the é in the title? Well, the Americans stress the second syllable of the word in a rising tone. So to make us understood when we were asked in elevators, shops, hotels etc. what we were doing in Florida we had to learn to speak American.....

Our Tunbridge Wells team enjoyed themselves and say "Have a nice day!"

