

# Croquet anyone ???

David Rance

The Internet has revolutionised the access to information and powerful search engines have replaced the slow and painstaking research chore of checking index cards in some remote library. Despite all this, it can also be frustrating. Some searches unexpectedly return thousands of "hits" or a warning that "you must be over 18 to enter this site". I have often followed a promising link only to end up down a "blind alley". But you can also stumble upon little gems – like the **Croquet Circular Slide Rule**.



Fig. 1: **Croquet Handicap Step calculator sandwiched between a handicap card & a copy of the Association rules**

For two weeks at the end of June, world attention turns to London's SW19 and the hallowed grass tennis courts of Wimbledon. The A.E.L.T.C. hosts the famous annual tournament but it might come as a surprise to many to learn that its full name is the: "All England Lawn Tennis and Croquet Club" - see Fig. 2.

Croquet is thought to have arrived in England from Ireland around the 1850's and it had its first headquarters at the Wimbledon club. However, in 1877 the club foolishly started converting their croquet lawns to tennis at the rate of one croquet lawn to two inferior tennis courts. So sadly these days, the Wimbledon club can only boast a single undersized croquet lawn – restricting play to club level tournaments at best.



Fig. 2: **the famous gates at Church Road, Wimbledon SW19**

For many, croquet has the “colonial feel” of a bygone age. In truth it is a flourishing international sport that requires both skill and tactics. Common analogies are “snooker on grass” or “a cross between golf and chess”. A full-sized croquet lawn or court is 28 x 35 yards, with 6 strategically placed hoops and a multicoloured peg in the centre of the lawn. Grossly oversimplified, in Association rules croquet the idea is to run your balls (in singles each player has two) through the hoops in a specified order, going through each of the 6 hoops twice and then hitting them against the finishing peg (to “peg out”).



Fig. 3: **types of hoops, coloured balls & a multicoloured “finishing peg”**

The first player to complete this simple feat (extra strokes can be gained by hitting the other balls on the court or running your next hoop in the correct order) with both balls wins the game!

The simple sounding goal of the game, like its chess namesake, maligns a game full of skill, strategy and tactics. For example: (i) the hoops themselves are only marginally bigger (2.5 mm) than the balls, (ii) a scatter shot (a "roquet") from your opponent can quickly put you yards out of position or even off the lawn and (iii) the speed of each lawn (measured in "plummers" or "nels") is important – quick lawns are very challenging. These and many other cunning factors make each game (and each opponent) different and a new challenge.

Perhaps surprisingly, croquet is highly progressive and non-sexist. In croquet, unlike most sports, men and women are ranked and compete together. It is also one of the few sports where the players decide if the referee can join them on court! Some weird and wonderful variations (e.g. "Extreme Croquet") are played but there are just two main forms of croquet: (i) Association (or International) Rules Croquet and (ii) Golf Croquet Rules. "American Rules" croquet is a variation of the Association rules and ironically, is the version that is closest to the games' original 19<sup>th</sup> century roots.



For many years (think about the Olympics) in most other sports, any remaining distinction between "amateurs" and "professionals" is largely a sham. Not so in croquet. Its unique handicapping system (not even golf can touch it) means members of either sex, players of any age and of any ability can play each other in a fair and challenging match.

The handicapping system is a genuine leveller – so much so that a novice can play and beat an international player. Official handicaps (see Fig. 4) run in predefined bands from -3 (extremely good) to 20 (novice). For the negative handicaps, the bands are progressively further apart and non-linear. Sometimes the scale is extended down to 24 or even 28 for local club use. An initial handicap is set after a novices' play has been assessed by an official Croquet Association handicapper. After that, 10 index points can be won or lost in each handicap-based game played. By keeping an account of the running index total, a player's handicap is automatically adjusted as soon as he or she has reached (or dropped down to) the index total corresponding to the next higher or lower handicap.

Hcap	Index		Hcap	Index		Hcap	Index
-3	3050		2	1800		9	1300
-2½	2800		2½	1750		10	1250
-2	2600		3	1700		11	1200
-1½	2400		3½	1650		12	1150
-1	2250		4	1600		14	1100
-½	2100		4½	1550		16	1050
0	2000		5	1500		18	1000
½	1950		6	1450		20	950
1	1900		7	1400		22	900
1½	1850		8	1350		24	850

Fig. 4: **table of handicaps and corresponding automatic "trigger points"**

Basically the handicapping gives the less skilled higher handicap player extra turns – known as "bisque turns". The number of extra turns is the difference in the players' handicaps. So a 14 handicap player playing a 8 handicapped opponent can call upon 6 extra turns ( $14 - 8 = 6$ ) during the match. These extra turns can help the less skilled player make a good run of the hoops or possibly spoil the lower handicapped players' superior positional play.

Having no amateur and professional split also means there is no "class distinction" in croquet between the novice, the good club player or the international. However, it was found that the standard handicap system discouraged some players from learning or experiencing the finer or more complex aspects of the game. Too often (especially with the top players) a good start or missing one key shot meant a runaway game for one player. Also for the lower handicap player, the extra bisque turns changed the dynamics of the game and what was tactically feasible. For example, the lower handicap player has to take into account that his or her opponent could use a bisque turn to make a hoop(s) from an otherwise tactically impossible position. So after extensive trials, "Advanced Play" was sanctioned and introduced in 1946 for the top players.

Oversimplified, Advanced Play imposes greater restrictions and introduced the new concept of "lifting a ball" when a particular positional setting of the balls prevails.

It falls outside the scope of this article (and the extremely scanty knowledge of the author) to describe Advanced Play in any detail apart from how handicap index points are now won or lost.

Despite the simple attractiveness of the most widely used difference handicapping, in Advance Play no player gets any extra turns and the standard 10 index points are no longer won or lost. Instead the index points won or lost are different and calculated according to the respective and relative handicap of each player. The result is a much more complex non-linear points table. However, a player's handicap still automatically changes when they have won or lost enough index points to be promoted or demoted to the next higher or lower handicap rank.

To avoid possible mistakes in interpreting the complex Advanced Play index points table, Dr. Ian Plummer, a minus handicap player, devised and copyrighted a highly unusual and unique 13 mm circular slide rule. The *Handicap Step Calculator* is a foolproof way of calculating the index points won or lost in Advanced Play:

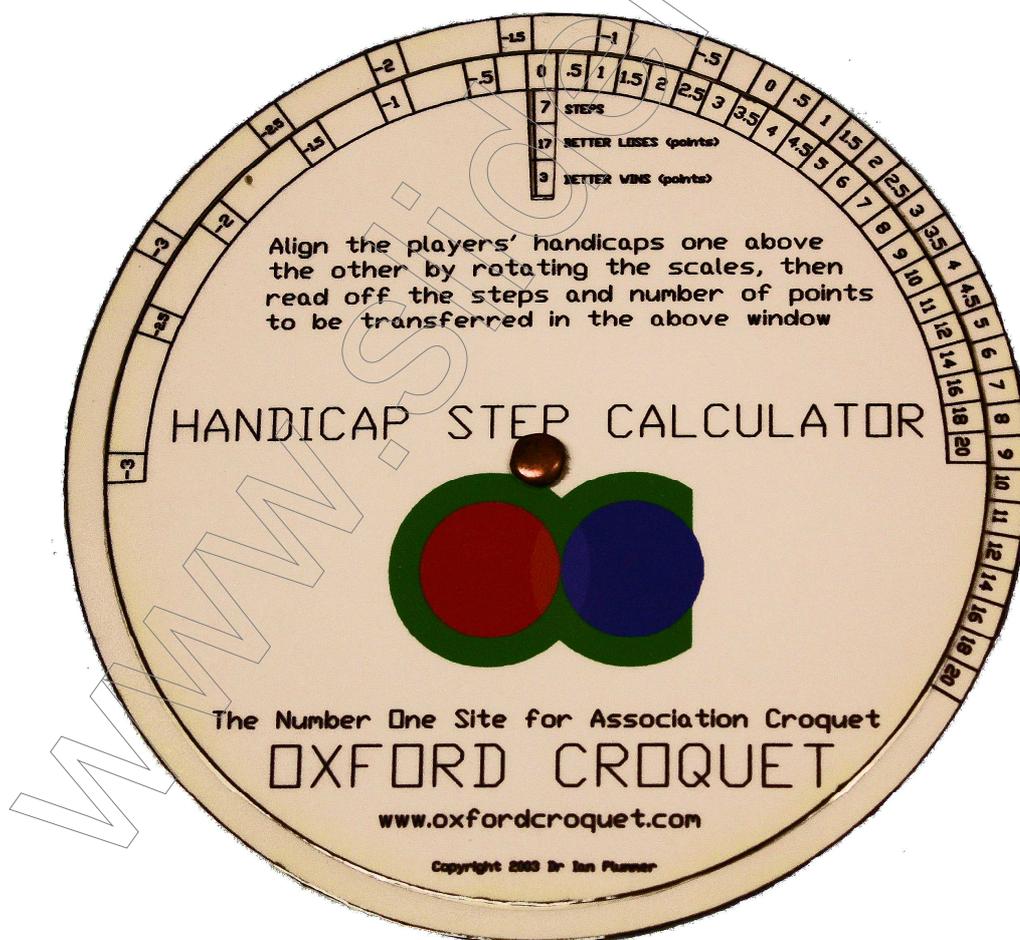
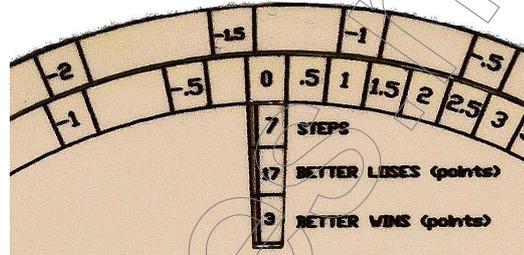


Fig. 5: Handicap Step Calculator slide rule - © 2003

First the handicaps of players are aligned using the outer and inner scales. At the top of the "cut-out" window the number of steps (1 step = 50 index points) between the respective handicaps is shown. But more importantly (and the really clever bit) it then shows the index points won and lost if the better player (more skilled/lower handicap) loses or the index points won or lost if the better player wins. The enlargement shows the setting if say a -2 handicap player was playing a -1 handicap player or a -1 was playing a 1 or a -0.5 was playing a 2.5. In all these cases the steps between the respective handicaps is 7 and if the better player had lost, he or she would have lost 17 index points and their opponent would have won 17 points. Conversely if the better player had won, only 3 index points would have been won and lost.



For the slide rule purists, the two partial logarithmic outer and inner scales means the *Handicap Step Calculator* qualifies as a slide rule. True, it does not share the complexities of the French APOULLOT circular slide rule but it surely makes up for this by being one of the most diverse ways Oughtred's invention has been used? It deserves to be part of any slide rule collection. Fortunately, any one can download a template of the two parts needed to construct the croquet circular slide rule in laminated paper or plastic, etc. – see: <http://www.oxfordcroquet.com/coach/nomogram/nomogram14.pdf>

## **Beware - keep your croquet mallets safe!**

This article shows just how marvellously diverse slide rules can be and how, over the last 400 years, they have been used in ways Oughtred could never have dreamed of.

However, this article is also intended as a warning to all croquet players. In his presentation to the IM2008<sup>1</sup>, the esteemed artillery and gunnery expert, John Hunt snr, announced that he believed that the heads of antique croquet mallets could be an ideal source of the seasoned boxwood he needs to make a replica of a Nolan rangefinder calculating disc!



Full Contact Croquet.. a game for real men.

(c) 2000 by Jeff Larson. All rights reserved

<sup>1</sup> 14<sup>th</sup> International Meeting of Slide Rule Collectors, Royal Leamington Spa, England.

## **Finally, with thanks**

I am extremely grateful to Dr. Ian Plummer (and yes, "plummers" are named after him) for:

- his permission to reproduce many of the images and use information from his marvellous croquet website: <http://www.oxfordcroquet.com/>
- making sure my story had no major "croquet gaffes"
- rekindling a childhood memory of watching (but being thoroughly confused) teams of players playing croquet in the Reigate Priory park in the mid 1960's.

www.sliderules.com