

# WITH MALLET TOWARD ALL

by Glen Evans





Anybody who runs around yelling "Croquet is dead" knows little of what may be the world's most one-uppish sport. Out there on either side of the George Washington Bridge—in the great, crabgrassed backyards of the midlands and on the manicured courts of New England as well as in certain parts of Beverly Hills—croquet is very much alive. We do not mean that it is alive in a mild, causey tea-party sort of way. We mean it is alive and kicking and, in fact, enjoying a revival of interest that almost merits the cliché "explosion."

Not since Abner Doubleday tossed the world the first padded baseball have so many Americans afforded themselves the opportunity to test their skills at a field game. There are more than twenty-two million lawns and backyards available to both urban and suburban tyros throughout the land. I would like to give you a brief idea of what can turn you or your next-door neighbor from a placid Dr. Jekyll into a maniacal Mr. Hyde.

Croquet—an adaptation of bowls—can be, and usually is, a tension-packed game of insult and naked aggression. Writer Peter Maas (*The Valachi Papers*) describes the game as "...nothing less than the intellectual equivalent of chess on grass, requiring great physical coordination, considerable stamina, iron nerves and a resolute spirit." For example, during a particularly vicious game of croquet between novelist/screenwriter Max Shulman (of *Dobie Gillis* and *Rally 'Round The Flag* fame) and actor David Wayne on the latter's lawn, Shulman said as he slammed his host's ball almost out of Connecticut into Long Island Sound, "This croquet, you know, is a great game for frustrations. Pure hostility on the lawns."

Indeed, something does seem to happen to the nicest people the moment they get into play. They become panthers, stalking their opponents the moment they wrap fingers around their mallet shafts. Wives and mistresses wring their hands and cry out in anguish as their husbands and lovers metamorphose from mild-mannered executives into single-minded machines of destruction. Players compete only to win. A Darien, Connecticut, man got a legal separation from his wife by explaining that she was "not aggressive enough in croquet mixed-doubles." And it makes no difference whether it is singles, doubles or what is laughingly termed a friendly backyard practice round between buddies. "Shoot the other guy down"

is the name of the game.

The late playwright Moss Hart expressed it well in alluding to producer Darryl F. Zanuck's (he was known as the terrible-tempered "Mr. Bang" of the game) approach to croquet: "Darryl has the true croquet spirit. He trusts no one but himself, never concedes—no matter how far behind he may be—and hates his opponents with an all-enduring hate."

Calculated malice seems an essential part of the game. One longtime apostle observes: "There is no other field sport that compares with croquet as a test for good temper, forbearance and fairness." It's a test that few participants pass. In my meanderings about the mushrooming greenswards of Darien, New Canaan, Westport, and Norwich, I concluded that croquet brings out the worst. Whatever your flaw of character, it will surface sooner or later in croquet. It emerges ultimately, as Maas has said, "in the awful stress of play, in the ignominy of defeat, the glee of triumph." If you are dominant, you somehow become more overbearing; if a coward type, more dastardly; if a cheat, more of a knave.

The geographical centers of croquet activity in the United States today are the Long Island Hamptons, Beverly Hills, the Connecticut suburbs, Massachusetts' Nantucket, and Palm Springs, where "Mr. Bang's" croquet field has added to international misunderstanding and croquet folklore.

The Westhampton Mallet Club on Long Island, the Eastern equivalent of Sam Goldwyn's Beverly Hills circle, probably has done most to revive interest in croquet in this country. Now nine years old but still quite exclusive (fewer than fifty members), the Westhampton outfit allegedly came into being when its founder wrested a toy mallet and ball from his six-year-old daughter, thereafter spreading the spirited game virus to his friends and neighbors. Westhampton in 1966 started what may turn out to be the America's Cup of Croquet when they played London's ancient (nearly one-hundred years old) 5,000-member Hurlingham Club. They pulled off a tie playing American rules. Down Southampton way, under the aegis of the Duke of Marlborough (with his shirt that lights up the word "DUKE" when he is winning), they still play English rules exclusively. So far, though long a focal point of Long Island croquet, Southampton has refused all Westhampton challenges on the ground that "the American-style



game is rather contemptible."

Which brings us to the difference between the British and American games: British croquet fields run 105 feet in length and 84 feet in width with one "peg" in the center. Croquet/USA calls for a 150-foot by 60-foot field with a "stake" at each end. The British favor manicured greenswards, while we often make do with courts best compared with your neighbor's lawn, dandelions, ruts and all.

A top-seeded Hurlinghamer, Douglas Strachen, a long, lean Scot and champion of Ireland, wrote of still another difference in an article referring to competition between his club and the Westhampton Mallet Club. "Not for nothing," he said, "do the Westhampton members point out that in the British game you can defeat your opponent, while in the American game you can *destroy* him."

### American Croquet

A quick peek at the startling rules for lawn Croquet/USA shows the American game is always played in sequence. The order of play is Blue ball first, Red, Black, and lastly Yellow. At the beginning of the game each player in turn places his ball one mallet head (more on this violent weapon later) from the first wicket. The object from that point, in theory at least, is to move that ball through nine wickets, a total of fourteen times before staking out at the home "peg" or "stake," along with your partner's ball, for a victory.

Actor Louis Jourdan, who is regarded by most devotees as the best croquet player in America, is so good that he regularly moves around the entire court in one turn, a feat of cool skill and concentration exceeding the most ecstatic dreams of your run-of-lawn players. In an effort to stymie Jourdan, George Sanders once devised a series of sandtraps on the Goldwyn course. But all they did, Sanders observed, was to "slow Louis up about ten minutes."

There are two views as to what striking another ball with your ball should be called, but the most vehement players term this a "roquet." The word "croquet," they insist, is a vestigial reference to the curled end stick first used by the French at the Court of the Sun King, Louis XIV. A more direct line to the term can be traced to the north of France (croquet once meant "club" in French) where peasants as far back as the Fourteenth Century were bashing balls with rude

mallets through arches of bent willow.

A word of explanation concerning equipment: We refer not to the adolescent croquet variety, a Milquetoast diversion, but rather real hairy-chested big league croquet. The game played with passion and punitiveness using unyielding iron wickets that barely leave a quarter of an inch leeway; with sand-weighted balls of boxwood root, and mallets by John Jaques & Sons, Ltd., White Heather Works, White Horse Road, Thornton Heath, Surrey. (Available in the U.S. through Abercrombie & Fitch in New York and Kerr's in Beverly Hills.)

These mallets have brass-bound heads most commonly shaped from *lignum vitae*—with a hardness and weight that makes a cop's nightstick cotton candy by comparison—and handles from whiplike Malacca cane, tailored to the player's specifications for heft and size.

Extreme caution with the mallet is always the word while executing certain shots, among them the tigerish "destroy shot," which not only sends your opponent's ball slamming off a half-mile or so, but is therapeutic for you in that it alleviates your distemper and infuriates your opponent. Another tricky one is the "tight croquet shot," in which you place your foot on your own ball before driving the enemy away. William O. Harbach, the television producer, once swung a mighty blow, missed the ball, clobbered his foot and spent six weeks on crutches.

So good, you say, but would the man who brings vicarious thrills and chills to every sports fan in America—would *George Plimpton*—play croquet? As it happens, the ubiquitous Mr. Plimpton was invited once to play on the croquet grounds in Beverly Hills, maintained (at a reported cost of over \$14,000 a year) by Sam Goldwyn.

Plimpton got off to a poor start that quickly became worse. A man of mild words, despite his heralded feats, he was soon reduced to exploding—"Oh, shoot, I *am* sorry about that one!"—as with chagrined expression he blew shot after shot until the game was called under a pretext. A Beverly Hills regular, who prefers to go unnamed, told it this way: "Poor old George. He may have pitched for the New York Yankees, boxed with Archie Moore and worked out with the Detroit Lions, but he choked up at Goldwyn's."

The volatile quality of croquet is legendary and all sorts of people—creative folks, bankers, brokers, poli-

ticians, corporation presidents—are turning into devotees during the game's current resurgence. But few could anticipate participating in such a friendly match as the historic and titanic game back in the Thirties between Herbert Bayard Swope, Sr., and Alexander Woolcott, where the winner was to receive \$10,000 from the loser. The battlefield was the critic's summer retreat, Neshobe Island in Vermont's Lake Bomoseen. Repeated arguments over rules and regulations took their toll, and the fierce bout was never concluded, but their conversations with each other ceased forevermore, a sad end to a close friendship.

### Croquet Politics

Today one of the game's great controversies thunders about the tinted glass ziggurats of Manhattan, where New York Croquet Club members—including such luminaries as W. Averill Harriman—are engaged in battle with certain watchdog groups—all over croquet, specifically croquet in Central Park, and whether local buffs can play on a tiny postage-stamp of land on the East Side around Seventy-ninth Street, adjacent to the Rambles, a favorite spot for bird-watchers and muggers. Though the New York Croquet Club has offered to donate \$10,000 to get the field into shape, and city fathers have agreed, the Park Association of New York City and the Council for Parks and Playgrounds have screamed "pre-emption" of public parklands to "special interest groups." The *New York Post* blasted the Croquet Club editorially and querulously wondered how many "devotees" of the sport there were; to which club member defender Maas answered sharply in *New York Magazine*, "I'm one, and I thought the *Post* was a bastion against the tyranny of the majority."

That's how it is with croquet devotees. They become especially irked by anyone who does not understand the true spirit of that mystique, which is very nearly a religion to them. It is not unusual to find the game's addicts banging away after twilight with the assistance of backporch spots and automobile headlights. Termination of the croquet battles depends as much on car batteries as the glare blindness suffered by the savage mallet wielders.

Croquet brings out the worst in you. That may be why it's a great game for your frustrations, even if your wife or your opponent doesn't think so. Just play and see.