

Nottingham Croquet Club – Occasional Advice Papers #3

Entering your first AC tournament

What is tournament play?

A croquet tournament is an occasion – often a weekend, sometimes more, rarely less – when people from different clubs come together for organised competitive play against a variety of opponents and also to enjoy the social ambience. Places are limited so there is a booking procedure. The host club may offer hot and cold drinks, lunches, teas etc with any profits supporting that club. Tournaments usually end with a presentation of trophies to the winner and maybe to others.

Are you ready to play in a tournament?

In a tournament you cannot be sure you'll have the same level of support you might get in a club friendly. Most players are of course welcoming and friendly to an opponent who's in their first tournament, but they may want or need to be doing something else (e.g. refereeing, catering duties, doing the crossword) during your turn. Therefore you need to be conversant enough with the game to play a turn correctly without normally needing to ask questions.

It's also worth being familiar with when and how to call a referee, and the normal refereeing process. More on this in a future Advice Paper.

Double banking is used in almost all tournaments, and you don't want to be perceived as inconsiderate, so it's worth getting familiar with double-banked play. Again this is the subject of another Advice Paper.

You also need to have an up-to-date handicap card and know how to complete it.

At a practical level, you will need to be comfortable playing for 6 or even up to 9 hours in a day (2-3 full length AC games). You may also need to continue playing in inclement weather, so don't confine your practice / club friendlies to perfect conditions. You need a mallet; if you don't have your own, our club mallets may be used for home tournaments. Finally most tournaments expect players to wear "predominantly white" clothing and flat footwear, so ensure you have suitable clothing. Waterproofs may be needed too. (The "predominantly white rule is generally relaxed for rainwear).

Choosing and entering a tournament

A great intermediate step towards tournament play is the Beginners' Tournament for the Derek Blow Shield usually held in September, which is a 1-day event with shortened games and only our own members, but is an excellent first step into tournament-style play, and may whet your appetite for the broader tournament circuit.

As a Nottingham Croquet Club member you are also a member of the National Governing Body, the Croquet Association (CA), and you may enter tournaments the CA promote at clubs around the country. The list is on their website at <https://www.croquet.org.uk/?p=tournament/caCalendar> or alternatively you can purchase the CA Fixtures Book - an annual publication. There may also be some tournaments at our club which are mainly for our own members and do not appear in the CA list.

It's worth discussing with a more experienced club member what tournament might be a good first choice. If you choose an away tournament, it may be particularly nice if you know another club member who will be going to the same one.

Key selection criteria will be:

- Dates – of course
- Location. Different “away” clubs may mean expenditure on travel and accommodation.
- The type of play – whether it will be handicap or level, ordinary play or advanced etc. If it’s your first tournament it’s likely you will want a handicap singles (or doubles) tournament.

The CA online calendar includes a mix of AC and GC tournaments and other events such as training courses. A filter system (labelled “Display Options”) lets you screen out events of no interest. The table has a column called “Type” with all sorts of arcane abbreviations to describe the tournament. Some of these restrict the handicap range (e.g. “20-”). Some tournaments have more than one “event” within them; e.g. singles and doubles, or handicap and level. The closing date is the date by which you need to enter. The allocation date is the date when entries will be accepted and confirmed.

Up to four tiny icons (pictured), the size of a pinhead, are provided which when clicked give:



- A text description of the tournament format – easier to understand than the “Type” column
- An opportunity to enter online
- Details of who has already entered
- Inactive icon which – if present – indicates that lunches will be available

If you prefer not to enter online, the text description usually includes the name of the host club’s tournament secretary who you can send an application form to.

Tournaments aren’t generally straight knockouts, else some players would get only one game. They typically have a format which allows a winner to be decided fairly but also allows everyone – even if they no longer have a chance of winning – to continue to play against various opponents. The formats are described with terms such as “Flexible Swiss”, “Draw and Process”, “Egyptian”, etc but often they will say “AMD” (“At Manager’s Discretion”). You don’t need to understand what these mean. Some specify a target number of games they will try to give each competitor. Whatever they say, it’s in every host club’s interest to make sure everyone gets a good number of games.

Before a tournament

Ensure you have suitable (and maybe mainly white) clothing, flat-soled footwear, whatever headgear you wear for croquet and a waterproof. You may need money or a chequebook for catering, bar etc. Remember to take your mallet, and some markers for double banking, and a book of laws if you have one. Some tournaments have time limits for games, so if you have a suitable timer it’s worth bringing. Most mobile phones can serve this purpose. Some people take a book / newspaper / tablet to read if the opponent is playing a long break; others prefer to watch.

You may or may not be free in the evenings (play can sometimes continue to dusk), so if you’re playing away it’s worth having some ideas for the evenings.

At the tournament.

It’s best to arrive in good time (20-30 minutes before play starts). Your first duty is to identify the manager (who will be organising play) and report your arrival. If it’s your first ever tournament, you may like to tell them. Please read any notices, as the manager doesn’t want to answer the same questions 20 or 40 times. Notices will cover issues such as lawn numbering, type of games, time limits, names of referees, catering and bar arrangements, payments, etc.

The Manager is in charge of who plays whom, where and when. They notify players of their games using a written order or play and/or verbally.

Before your first game of the day, there may be a warm-up period of 10-15 minutes allowed. It is wise to use this to the full to get used to the lawn speed and to calm any nerves and get any early-day misses out of your system. A separate Advice Paper will cover the best use of warm-up time.

Start of a game

When you have a game scheduled, you need to identify your opponent. If you don't know them, ask around, or if necessary ask the manager. Then the two of you can head to the prescribed lawn. If it's a handicap tournament, then normal etiquette is that the stronger player will determine how many bisques they will be giving, find the bisques and plant them in the lawn near where they plan to sit. Then (again, normal etiquette) the stronger player will toss a coin, and the game begins.

During the game

Play proceeds as normal. Try to observe good double banking etiquette throughout. If your opponent is playing a long break, it's quite normal to chat to other out-players if they're happy with it. Most players like to be social but some like to remain completely focussed, "in the zone" and not chat, so please be sensitive. Remember that it is not allowed to give or receive advice during a game.

End of game

When your game finishes, it is important to clear your balls and clips from the lawn promptly (without disturbing double bankers), vacate the area (without leaving a trail of lost property) and report the result to the manager promptly. By convention the winner usually reports the result. Some people after winning a game like to offer their opponent a drink from the bar (if there is one), but this is entirely up to you. Please be sensitive to the fact that some players do not drink alcohol, and some may not have funds to offer drinks and may prefer not to accept them either.

Depending on the availability of lawns, other waiting players and the constraints of the tournament format, the manager may ask you to start another game straight away or may ask you to wait a while. If the latter, this can be another occasion to socialise over a coffee or drink, or even - if you're feeling generous - offer to buy the hard-working volunteer manager a drink.

End of tournament

Generally at the end of a tournament there will be an award of trophies or prizes to the winner and possibly runner-up. It is polite for players – where convenient – to stay and applaud the winners rather than leaving straight after their own last game ends.

Playing away

All of the above applies whether you're playing home or away. When playing away, be aware that some clubs have much firmer soil than ours which makes hoop running more challenging. Take more care to get in front of the hoop, and more care over aiming for even easy hoops, and use plenty of follow-through, else you'll keep giving your opponent easy starts.

Finally, winning or losing, enjoy yourself. ☺

See also <https://www.croquet.org.uk/?p=tournament/first>