

Wicket

The lawns of the stately old Park-McCullough mansion in Bennington are the scene for some high summer sport

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Custom-made mallets for the discerning croquet player

Topics of aliveness, deadness, and being in a state of grace sound like snippets of a conversation you'd expect to hear outside the Pearly Gates. However, it's also what you might overhear being vigorously discussed on a warm summer's evening on the lawns of North Bennington's historic Park-McCullough House, as these are also terms from the lingo of croquet.

Every Thursday during a ten-week period from June to August, the Victorian mansion is host to the Bennington Croquet League. What began as a way to attract interest in, and support for, the historic mansion in North Bennington has become an annual tradition eagerly anticipated by the league's 64 members. This summer the league celebrates its 14th season of serious but friendly competition.

Longtime league member Phil Viereck's personal croquet story is not untypical. "I'm not an athlete," he says, "but I'm not a spectator, either. I like to be active. I heard about the Park-McCullough group and went to watch. It seemed like a nice thing to do, so I got a neighbor interested. We formed a team, and started playing at the beginning of the season." He likes it, he says, because "if you practice, you can get good at it. It's a pleasant way to be outdoors with other people and be part of a friendly competition." When he started playing, Viereck says he had a classic case of beginner's luck. He recalls one of his first shots. "It was about 80 feet," he says. "My ball went to the end of the field, hit another ball, bounced off it and went through the wicket." It was so spectacular he hasn't been able to live up to that shot in subsequent games, he says. But he keeps coming back for more (along with team members Dave Aldrich and Alexandra Eckhardt, known as the Ricochetters).

Another player, Bob Howe, started with the league in much the same way, but he's taken his interest a step further—Howe makes his own mallets. "When I joined the group, a league member, Paul Bowers, was making mallets and made some for a few of the members," says Howe. "I bought one from him. Then I did some research. I'm a woodworker anyway, and I became interested in what makes a difference in the performance of a mallet—studying the physics of the exact 'moment of inertia' and trying to figure out what keeps a mallet going straight became fascinating for me." So far he's made about a dozen mallets, using cedar or

FUN!





Play is serious (but friendly) and follows the rules of the U.S. Croquet Association

pine, with a veneer of rosewood or zebra wood. He may drill holes in the handles to lighten them up to a weight of about three pounds. Despite their eccentricity, his mallets meet the minimum regulations: both ends of the head are flat, and the handle is set perpendicular to the head. Last year was the first time he used his mallets in season play. Asked if his game improved, Howe says with a chuckle, "My game was a little better."

The weekly games begin at 6:00 p.m. Players gather on the mansion's veranda for food and drinks—a lush spread that includes pizza, fruit and hors d'oeuvres. This serves a practical purpose because those who have just come from work can take the edge off their suppertime hunger. They also get the "Word of the Week"—tips, special instructions, answers to questions and reminders about rules, says Barbara Hoar, who comprises the "Triumvirate" governing body of the league along with Nancy Feinberg and Dan Boepple. Actually, players say that one of the attractions of the game is getting together with other people; it's a very social game, and beginning play with a social gathering enriches that aspect. The mansion's sweeping veranda certainly encourages such conviviality.

At game time the players, many decked out in the traditional croquet whites, descend to their spots on the lawn with balls and mallets, score cards and strategies. Play begins with the ringing of a bell and ends precisely one hour and fifteen minutes later. Then it's back to the veranda to sit and rehash the game until it gets dark.

Play is serious, but not dead serious, competitive but not cutthroat, say league members. The rules booklet even states that the "Bennington Croquet League is a 'fun league' for the enjoyment and recreation of its associates," although it follows the rules and guidelines of the U.S. Croquet Association "fairly closely." Some of the team names reflect the group's friendly ambiance: Talking Malleheads, Legal Eagles, Wicket Wives, Simply Wicket, It's Wicket Fun, Blame Canada, Phoebe's Belles and Lawn Tractors.

Although croquet was once an Olympic sport (before being eclipsed by tennis), it isn't based heavily on physical prowess; anyone can play and get good at it, says Viereck. "Unlike other sports, you don't have to have muscles or be fast. With practice, an older person can play just as well as a younger person," he says. "You can have croquet stars at most any age, and



Alexandra Eckhardt (a member of Team Ricochetters) lines up her shot

gender doesn't matter, either."

It's this inclusiveness that Nancy Feinberg appreciates about the game. "There's a natural balance for gender, age, and all walks of life. Everyone is made to feel welcome." Indeed, a game called "Crookey," brought from Ireland to England in the 1830s, rose quickly in popularity because it was the first outdoor sport that could be played by both genders on equal footing. "Croquet is for everybody, and every style," says Feinberg. Not to say there are no threads of competition, however. "We play at a leisurely pace, but if players become too laid back, they get the word to keep the game moving."

According to Hoar, the league has some "super serious" players who practice and study techniques and strategies. Some are even rumored to watch videos or attend "croquet school" during the off-season. Others are not so serious. And some are hackers, who don't play so well, but don't care. They are there simply because they enjoy being part of a friendly, outdoor competition on a warm summer evening. Members often will help each other out: "If you

join the league as a novice, people will coach you along, and by the next year you can see that your game has improved significantly," says Feinberg. "Our members never get to the point where they knock their opponent's ball off the court."

The Bennington league plays American six-wicket croquet for three players, plus substitutes to keep score or fill in for absent members. They now are at capacity with 16 teams who play on eight not-necessarily-official fields. "We play on rough country lawn," says Hoar. "We have humps and bumps and trees and leaves, but it's well-groomed. We are, after all, playing on the same lawn the McCulloughs played on. We're carrying on the tradition." In fact, two descendants of the McCulloughs—Allen McCullough and his son, Angus—are members.

Teams compete according to a partial round-robin scheme and at the end of the summer, a play-off decides the top teams. Winners are recognized at the season's grand finale, a banquet. Serious awards are given to top winners, but other achievements are recognized as well, in keeping with the fun aspect: the "Girls Just Want to Have Fun" Award or the "Razzle Dazzle & Pizazz" Award for the team with the sexiest mallets (won last year by Bob Howe and his team, Pete's Pals). Awards are provided in part through donations from local businesses.

Howe appreciates the intelligence required by the game. "It can be complicated," he says. "The rules are set,

Park-McCullough House

The Park-McCullough House in North Bennington is a 35-room Victorian mansion built in the French Second Empire style. One of the finest and best restored Victorian mansions in New England, it was built in 1864-65 by attorney and entrepreneur Trenor Park. Park's oldest daughter, "Lizzie," married John G. McCullough and later bought her siblings' interest in the house. Direct descendants lived there until 1965.

Besides the mansion, the 200-acre property includes a play house in the style of the mansion, a carriage barn and formal gardens. It was listed on the National Registry of Historic Places in 1972. Currently it is owned and operated by the non-profit Park-McCullough House Association which offers tours and opens the house for weddings and special events.

The house is host to several community events throughout the year, including the Haunted Mansion, the Victorian Christmas, and, of course, summer croquet.



A fine spread of hors d'oeuvres helps take the edge off suppertime hunger

but within that, there are many strategies. It's definitely a 'thinking game'. Strategies can cause you to win or lose."

Today, some 10,000 men and women of all ages in the U.S. and Canada enjoy croquet. For some, it can be very competitive and serious, like the 22-year rivalry between St. John's College and the U.S. Naval Academy. The annual five-game croquet match between the Johnnies and the Middies is played each spring in Annapolis, Maryland. Even when the competition is serious, however, the game invites competitors and specta-

tors alike to have fun, enjoy the sun, fellowship, food and drink, all decked out in their finest spring attire.

While it's not the Johnnies and the Middies, overall, Bennington croquet is fun, good food and being part of a large family. It means relaxing and enjoying the loveliness of summertime. And it's a way to support the Park-McCullough House. Says Feinberg: "We are very proud of the house. It's an important resource for our community."◇

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