

The Rules of Lawn Billiards

James Masters, 2007

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Lawn Billiards, also known as Troco or Ground Billiards, is an old English game with a history that goes back centuries. Thought to have been brought to England by Charles the 2nd on the restoration of the monarchy, Lawn Billiards enjoyed a craze amongst the aristocracy for the next twenty-odd years. It declined markedly during the 20th Century and eventually the last known Lawn Billiards court at the Freemasons Arms in Hampstead was covered over in with a car park in the 1970s or 1980s. This area has now become a garden patio and the old shape of the court has been outlined in the tiles over the old court.

Judging from the books referenced, the game remained virtually unchanged from the 1880s for a century. The only significant difference is that game described in 1880s was apparently played on any small area of lawn, the shoe and apron being unnecessary. It isn't clear if the game evolved to require the specially laid court with a shoe or if the court at the Freemasons was unique or special for some reason – perhaps The Freemasons Arms was the Lawn Billiards equivalent of Wembley Stadium! One theory advanced by the Woolston society is that a skilled player could quite easily put the ball through the ring from the edge of the carpet, and that a path that led to the pitch was brought into service as part of the playing area. In any case it adds a unique aspect to the layout of the game and makes one work for the extra point scoring from the shoe.

Pitch and Equipment

The 21st century pitch at the McCombs' Memorial Lawns is keyhole shaped. The circular part, called the carpet, is 10 metres across with a flat rectangular area called the apron sticking out 5 metres from the carpet incorporating a perpendicular wooden strip, the shoe, 2 metres across from whence the balls are initially played. In the centre of the carpet is the trochus, a brass ring, 200 millimetres in diameter, standing on its edge, and mounted on a pole embedded in the ground so that it can swivel smoothly with the bottom of the ring at ground level.

The cue is a wooden staff around 1.5 metres long with a metal hoop at one end and this is used to direct heavy wooden balls – at the Freemasons these were made from *Lignum Vitae*, in Woolston they are made from a variety of hard woods chosen for their durability and 'spring'. The cue hoop is slightly smaller than a Lawn Billiards ball, and ideal for players to push or scoop the balls around the court.

Rules for Play

The game is played as singles, each person playing their 2 balls strictly alternately, or as doubles, each player controlling a single ball. The objective of the game is to be the first to score a set number of points, typically 21. Points are scored viz:

- 1 point propelling the ball directly through the trochus
- 2 points propelling the ball directly through the trochus from the shoe (the starting strip).
- 2 points propelling the ball through the trochus off a cannon either first striking another ball or going through the trochus and then striking another ball. This only counts if the 2 balls involved start at more than 1 cue length apart.
- 3 points propelling the ball through the trochus and then striking two balls in succession; either before or after passing through the trochus.
- 4 points as above, but striking three balls in succession.
- 5 points as for 4 points above, but beginning from the shoe.

To start, each ball is played from the shoe into the playing area and the balls continue to be played in the same order, thereafter. Each player, after the start, must go on from the place at which his ball was left after the previous stroke.

Your ball shall be deemed to be in play when it leaves your cue until it comes to rest.

Any interference with other balls or the trochus when your ball is in contact with your cue shall be deemed to be foul.

Contact with the trochus by your cue shall be deemed to be foul.

A foul shall result in the adversary receiving an immediate point.

You can't cannon while holding the ball in your cue.

You can't pass the ball through the trochus while it is still in your cue.

You *can* propel the ball either by a lift and throw or a fair push with your cue but as soon as the ball leaves contact with your cue, that ends your turn.

No contact between your foot and the ball is allowed.

The winning points must be scored via a cannon.

Each game of 21 points is called a chukka and a trucco is the best of 5 games.

Strategy

Lawn Billiards is a game of great skill and strategy. Players will just as often attempt to knock adversaries' balls to an awkward position as try to score themselves. A good shot might score a point but also knock the trochus so that it turns to prevent the opponent to scoring next turn. Players employ top and side spin and through careful accuracy and a flick of the cue, can manage to bumble the ball through the ring from seemingly impossibly acute angles. If one player "snookers" another by putting their own ball between their opponent's and the trochus, an experienced proponent can still play a "drop cannon" from height to score 2 points.

Etiquette

As stated in the Constitution of the Woolston Lawn Billiards & Bat-and-Trap Society:

3.0 Purposes of Society

3.1 The Purposes of the Society are to:

- (a) Promote Lawn Billiards & Bat-and-Trap as Sports and Genteel Pursuits;**
- (b) Promote Gentility, Politeness, Elegant Attire, the Taking of Tea and other Delicious Beverages, Gaiety, Fun and Civil Society;**

Hence players must respect one another as gentlefolk, and the game as a genteel pastime. Therefore appropriate dress is de rigueur, fair play and sportsmanlike conduct are priorities and Having A Good Time is essential.

Turn order is decided by a coin toss by the umpire if one is available. An umpire is the final authority and disputing calls is very poor form. The scorekeeper keeps the record of each chukka and trucco and may inquire upon a scoring and/or foul stroke.

If no score keeper is available, the umpire must keep score. If no umpire is available, players must call their own strokes fairly and honourably and must collaborate on keeping score.

Balls must be played where they lie, and but for fair swivelling for balance and direction, feet once planted must not be moved, i.e. when fair contact between cue and ball is made, your feet must stay where they are within reason. It is perfectly permissible to place your feet, scoop the ball and swivel your feet to align yourself with the target, but no stepping is allowed.

Good-natured harrying of your opponent is encouraged. We draw the line at abuse, unless it is particularly funny.

Abuse of the equipment, pitch or worse yet, the Delicious Beverages is strictly prohibited.

Play must proceed briskly but leisurely. If chat contributes to conviviality, then by all means go for your lives. If it holds up proceedings to the unnecessary annoyance of your opponent, waiting players or spectators, do play on, won't you?

References

- Cassell's book of Sports and Pastimes, c.1888
- Pub Games of England, Timothy Finn, 1975
- The Guinness Book of Traditional Pub Games, Arthur Taylor, 1992
- Played at the Pub, Arthur Taylor, 2009