

Building a Croquet Community

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Build it and they will come is what they say.

I built my new croquet lawn on what had been our old lavender field and had previously been, during the time of Mrs. D's granny, an apple orchard and goat pasture. Lynda's grandparents bought the five acre farm in 1910. The bulk of the trees were Kings of Tomkin County, New York, introduced in the late 1800's, with a row of Wealthy down the middle as pollinators. The family story is that when the orchard started producing by WW2, apple boxes were more expensive than the apples, so only the goats eventually got the benefit of the apples. The old goat shed had collapsed long ago and become a composting experiment by the time we moved onto the farm. We dug out some old tools and hung them on a wall for fun and some folk art whimsy, and occasionally reflected on what kind of life style needed five foot long two man hand saws, axes and boxes of stumping powder.



The Toolshed

shaft and no head, and I sent them off to find some Hollywood corn field and maybe a different ball sport.

Then these croquet ghosts started turning up through the hedge and demanding Jaques balls made of cork and boxwood, and damn these Bakelite monstrosities. And why is everyone dressed so slovenly in their underwear or some such thing. Where is your jacket and tie boy? And stop showing your ankles young lady.

Some guy who had crashed through the hedge started berating everyone for the way they held their mallets, and another guy was pleading with players to read his new book about classy new and complicated ways to play croquet, while this dazed and confused guy is trying to interview everyone for his online croquet magazine. The book guy is pleading with the centre peg to read his book. The centre peg is covering deeper into the turf, crying that he is just a pawn in the game of life, and the interview guy wants to interview the centre peg about his experience. Someone shouts for Solomon to get a grip

My current daily ritual is to sit at the end of the new lawn looking over it northwards towards granny's long gone house, under the huge arbutus tree, and give my thanks to her for giving us the land. More recently I have been looking at the cedar hedge running along the west side of the property, to the left, imagining it was the cornfield in the movie 'Field of Dreams'.

The first ghosts of croquet players that showed up through the hedge with Shoeless Joe had the weirdest and mostly useless croquet mallets, all

and for Wylie to stop being so wily. And Bob is told to stop trying to be all man. (I know...it is a groaner. Sorry Bob Alman, and RIP 2022)

I had actually asked Bob if he would accept an article I had recently written on building a new croquet lawn and he said sorry but it was too late for that, as his deadline had apparently recently passed. (This is actually a true story, admittedly with some artistic license!) And anyway, he said, he already had an appointment to interview the corner flags.

This was not what I had hoped for and was despairing on how to get rid of these guys when the dinner bell rang from the house (or did Mrs. D text me...?). Meanwhile there was another ghost on the edge of the woods: Mrs. D's granny was watching from the background of the Douglas firs and the previously mentioned huge arbutus tree and perhaps wondering why she left the land to her granddaughter and her feckless husband. She started wagging her finger and her tongue at these hysterical, lost and sad croquet souls. She said to stop bothering the living as it was already hard enough for them the way things were these days.

So she shoed them all off to out player land and, now back on planet earth, I realised I needed a new strategy.



Granny

The Real World

I mentioned this to Mrs. D during dinner and she says Granny would have been thrilled to see us getting so much joy out of the farm that she left us. Still, it is a pity she can't hold a croquet mallet. Granny, that is.

So Mr. Kinsella, will they come if I build it?

I started to come up with some new events for the croquet community in Victoria to bring needed visibility to my new lawn. I needed an open house to start with, and then some AC workshops or competitions for A flight players and B & C flight players. Then maybe I could offer the farm as a place for some of the out there groups to come and play their version of croquet on a competition lawn. Update- the Windsor Park Nomads have agreed to a date to come to the farm and teach me their rules in late June.

Once I had decided on what kind of events I wanted on the farm, I needed to get local croquet impresario, Pierre Dunn, to post them in his quarterly newsletter, "6 Hoops Northwest" and I needed his help to avoid conflict with dates chosen for other clubs events. I had also decided to write several articles about developing a lawn and a club.

I set up a date for an Open House, got some help making a poster which was posted to all the local croquet clubs, and to Craigslist and Kijiji and Used Victoria on their events pages

The next thing I needed to do was to improve the web site. I added articles, more info about membership, upcoming events, some new photos of the lawn renovation... Done, done, done. Next on the list...it all felt so breathless...



Open House Flyer

I couldn't find anything local on the internet to post to and I thought I would probably get arrested by the neighbourhood watch for walking around the local neighbourhood putting fliers in people's mail slots, if they even have them these days in their front doors. (Research project- Go and take a look to see if houses in your neighbourhood have mail slots these days). Then my web guy came through with an offer to post the open house info on two Facebook sites he uses to post local community events, so that helped me to focus the potential audience locally.

This felt like it was starting to happen organically in the same way the lawn building project took on its own momentum.

I once thought I could have put a poster at the local corner store, and then asked myself if I wanted the kind of people who go to the corner store for smokes, beef jerky and a cola to come to my club. Possibly not, I wondered...then I wondered more...why? ...Could I be a snob? Yes, I might possibly be a snob ...Ouch, I thought. And I realised it has actually only been seven years since I bought my last smoke from the corner store, and I could have invited all those customers over to play and stood next to them while they smoked so I could have got some brief moments of second hand smoke joy. Still, even the most feckless vegetarians rarely eat beef jerky, so there was no attraction there.

The open house came to pass in fine weather without conflicting with all the lawn bowling clubs open houses, and with about a dozen guests, none of whom were drawn from the media postings. They were all friends from other clubs. We had fun and my ego was stroked with lovely comments about my lovely new lawn and all the effort it must have taken and how level and short and fast it was, how fit and clever I was, and what a humorous article I had written about it. My friends really know how to play me... like a violin... a violin that badly needs a tuning and an overdue varnish job. And possibly some new sheet music. Though the praise may have been true it was difficult to let in sometimes. I am always looking for perfect pictures. Watch this space for another article!



Open House

meet, for sandwiches and gin and tonics and Golf Croquet while the lavender is in bloom. Invites have now been sent out and we will have upwards of twenty guests playing GC on two 3/4 lawns.

I have also added two tournaments to the local community- an Advanced AC B&C Flight, and an Advanced AC A flight, with both immediately selling out. I had decided to offer large prize money as a different attraction, but failed to realise that players want food too. This means the prizes will need to be reduced so I can offer the entrants some food. This still has to be worked out, and the entrants don't know this yet. At least not until this article is published.

I have no detailed plan yet on how to offer coaching in AC for the small but keen AC B flight community, but it is a high priority as no one else seems to offer it regularly, and it will be something I will coordinate with Pierre Dunn, the local croquet go to guy.

Everyone knows I will never build a pulsating and vibrant club based on AC so it is clear to me, as it is to all clubs, that GC will need to be the draw too.

I have been seduced by AC for years after going through the traditional route recognized by many players of setting up 9 wicket garden croquet with the kids, with maybe a side trip into extreme croquet, onto to US rules, and finally to AC rules, which is where I have settled my rump as I play the out player to players far better than me and who offer me an inspiration to practice and do better.

I was a reluctant GC player and just followed the herd for a simple game that is social, quick, easy to learn, and that drew in new members to the club I belonged to, Canadian Pacific Lawn Bowling and Croquet Club, CPLBCC, which is the Mother Ship of croquet in Victoria. So for years I drifted into some imagined smash clear, smash hoop 'What would an Egyptian do?' kind of method, until COVID happened. Then I found myself in isolation with too much time on my hands, and I discovered all these new Livestream videos on YouTube from NZ AUS and UK of videos of GC tournaments with live and expert commentary (mostly expert-do your own research!). It was then that I learned that GC has levels of complexity in strategy that I had previously had no idea about. So now we happily play GC at my club

For all that effort I got no new feet on the croquet lawn. I got old feet on a new lawn but no new feet. The questions I ask are: Would I do it different next year? Would I do the same? Would I even go to all that effort? And I don't yet know. What I do know is that the exercise has obliged me to imagine what kind of club I want, and I will come back to that. So hold that thought.

Next steps

Coming up on July 10th is the Lavender Croquet Picnic, an event that I have held for over 12 years with the original intention of mixing up several different clubs who would never otherwise

and discuss strategy as we play, as we have all watched the same videos and are beginning to understand the deeper nuances of the game.

I just realised that I haven't even considered playing 9 wicket garden croquet on my lawn. That has stirred my grey matter...

At the time that Snake appeared I said to whoever would listen (mostly just my mallet, and my Stan Smith tennis shoes) that you can't make checkers (GC) more interesting by tweaking one little rule- it is still simple and stupid. GC is checkers. AC is chess. That is what people say. You either have a checkers brain or a chess brain. But I was wrong, as GC doesn't need to be improved since it is already more interesting than many of us realise (probably like checkers, but that may be a stretch). Yet I am still not sure I want flocks of GC players jamming the parking lot and the lawn at my club...so that part of the future is still fuzzy.

Link to WCF GC final 2019 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DGtuDrHvBPE>

Part of my plan is to set up an annual GC Open for the Fall. Sadly all the new players at all the new clubs locally have been seduced by Snake Croquet, which they are introduced to after a five minute snooze intro into GC without learning those deeper nuances of GC first. It is a strange thing to realise that although my stated mission is to save AC from obscurity, in Victoria as it happens, it is GC too that needs to be saved from obscurity. Naturally there will be a sign at the gate saying "Snake Free Zone". After all, who could resist the temptation!



Front Gate

The Existing Community and how to mix it up

After the Mother Ship, CPLBCC, croquet is played at about five other lawn bowling clubs, and there are also two clubs that I know of that play on public parks and two on private land.

Locally there are an abundance of versions of play: AC, GC, Ssssssnake, Windsor Park Rules, Quimper Park Rules, Government House Extreme Rules and Tudor Avenue Rules (home of Vancouver Island Croquet Club established 1946), and then there is Happy Valley Croquet Club that naturally just wants to please granny.

GC existed when she was farming the

land and she could have put in her own lawn, flashed some ankle, and enjoyed turning the eyes of her husband and the members of the Metchosin Farmers Institute and the Metchosin Women's Institute at the annual strawberry tea festival held on the farm in the 20s and 30s.

Link to British Film Board GC video <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hrfqXtzdBGs>

The Vision

My bigger vision starts to become clearer. AC is my passion and the main focus, so I can offer club play, coaching workshops and tournaments. GC in a bizarre way needs to be protected from disappearing in Victoria, perhaps with an open invitational event, and then comes supporting all the different rules in town on my lawn. The reason for supporting these different clubs is that the players already have technique down after years of play, and all I need to do is put it in the AC strategic framework to get them into sanctioned tournaments. That is the plan. It is now public and in print. And anyway they can still play their hybrid rules on my lawn and I get to show granny, standing under the aforementioned (huge) arbutus tree, all the happening action including lots of ankle and more besides.

AC Coaching Rant

The club approach to AC has to be dramatically changed. My hackles rise every time I hear someone say that they hate AC because all they do is spend time sitting on the bench being slayed by better players. I have been there and there is no joy in watching your senior opponent parading around the hoops with effortless superiority, (Hi Chris...) when you could be on the lawn practicing your weaknesses. This needs to stop, as AC can be as social as GC with all players on the lawn at all times. In club play there can be:

- Alternate stroke play with two three or four players. Thanks to Gary Anderson for that idea.
- Alternate turn play with two three or four players especially with passing on the clip after making a hoop (which prevents experienced players taking off and hogging the game-talking from experience Chris...),
- Play first to hoop three to practice openings, as after making hoop three you should have a four ball break. Thanks to Carl Uhlman for that idea.
- After making hoop one, put partner clip on 4-Back. One day I realised that my club AC protégé never gets to play the end game, so after making hoop one putting the partner clip on hoop 4 back gives him that opportunity, and the experienced player gets the opportunity to practice peels (not me by the way). Thanks to Brian Wasylyk for that idea.
- Forget bisques. I have tried to get new players to learn how to use bisques productively and am now giving up. I have only had one player understand that when your hoop approach fails, taking a bisque run to the furthest ball on the lawn, and grooming everything back to your old reception ball at the hoop which is now your pioneer is a winning strategy. And I have never received a bisque, but it still seems obvious to me. Instead they use ten bisques shooting backwards and forwards trying to hit a three yard roquet.
- In all the above forms of play, when a novice does an error, let's do a few make overs so the novice gets a chance to understand their weaknesses and practice them later or at least feel the pleasure in succeeding to keep the break play going.
- Three players can play two games double banked when they get their heads around it. Once all eight balls are on the lawn, when someone breaks down the third player jumps in, and so it goes on...think about it...it makes sense quite quickly once you get started. Thanks to Brian Wasylyk for that idea.

Club play is not about winning. It is about supporting new players to improve their game enough to beat you in a tournament. I still have Brian Wasylyk's voice in my head from when I started going up to his place in Campbell River for a weekend of croquet joy: "What the frigging heck were you thinking Michael? Do it again!"

Naturally we come finally to tournaments and this is where we learn lots of new things about the game and ourselves (All readers at this point, who have ever been in a tournament, know that this is a huge understatement!).

So we need tournaments too and we need to experience being the out player for all its rich emotional content! Ouch.

And end of rant. Breathing in and breathing out.

So...

I am still wondering how to get the locals to walk around the corner into the farm and hit a few balls. I suppose that a poster on the notice board of the local corner store. "Croquet- Beef Jerky and Smokes Welcome", would be a start.

And what does granny say? She says get some goats and save money on gas for the mower, and if you want to get the grass down to 3/16 ", you may need to get some sheep.

"And well done for making the farm a beautiful and welcoming place"

Thanks granny, and by the way, you have lovely ankles.

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