**A Brief Introduction to One-Ball**

This is the time of year when lots of people ask me: “What exactly is One-Ball?” Of course, this is because the many heats of the One-Ball Championship are being organised, so it is a frequent topic of conversation in clubs the length and breadth of the country.

If you were to turn up to a club and saw OB being played you would be forgiven for thinking that it looks like something half-way between AC and GC. This is one great attraction: it appeals to players of both codes and a typical game will last about 30 minutes.

Each player has one ball and the object, taking it in turns, is to get your ball through twelve hoops and onto the peg before your opponent. So, in this respect it is more like AC than GC (in the latter, both players, once one of them scores, move onto the net hoop).

However, most shots in the game comprise either taking position or shooting at opponent’s ball - which is very GC-like.

What GC players might find most different is that when they hit opponent’s ball they pick up their own ball, place it next to the other and they ‘take croquet’ (which is where the name of our game comes from). That is, both balls are moved, hoping that the striker’s will come to rest in front of his next hoop. Then the player has a ‘continuation shot’ and if it successfully negotiates the hoop then the other ball can again be hit (‘roqueted’), croquet is taken and there is a further continuation shot. Low and behold, this is the beginning of a break, like those in AC or snooker.

Basically, that’s it and everybody who has read this far can now play OB. Furthermore, almost all OB is played on a handicap basis. If you have an AC handicap then you use it (though if you are an A-class player it is reduced a bit more for OB); if you are a GC player there is a handy, and well-tried, conversion method: to multiply your GC handicap by 2.5. The full handicap method is:

Your OB handicap is the lowest of:

your AC handicap

2.5 times your GC handicap (if it is positive; otherwise it is left)

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The higher handicapped player will get bisques equal to the difference in OB handicaps, divided by three, then rounded to the nearest half. (for instance, if a 10 plays a 5: 10 - 5= 5; divide by 3 = 1.66; therefore 1.5 bisques.)

There are one or two other rules of which new players need to be aware. Foremost among these are:

* The winner of the toss can elect either to start first or go second (and usually chooses second).
* Balls are played onto the lawn from a ‘baulk-line’ (usually the ‘south baulk-line’, which is half of the boundary, from corner one to mid-way towards corner four).
* When in a croquet stroke (only) either ball goes off the lawn then it is end of turn. Balls that go off the lawn are replaced on the yard line.
* A more complicated rule that you need to be aware of is called ‘wiring’. After croqueting opponent’s ball you must not hide behind a hoop or the peg; you must leave your opponent a full ball to aim at. If you don’t then he is entitled to lift his ball to either baulk (north or south).

There are several other laws, including those dealing with errors and faults. If in any doubt ask a referee.

Most OB events last no more than one day, and often just half a day. At my club, Surbiton, we have five ‘Winter One-Balls’ between December and April. We typically have a couple of dozen players (though the record, one sunny Spring day was 42!), who start between 9.30 and 10.00. Using the ‘Swiss’ format, there are at least six rounds before a late, warming lunch.

Most players who are new to OB begin to develop a good sense of the tactics after about three games. Here are a few hints to get started:

* Most turns begin with a decision whether to be attacking or to make a defensive play.
* The higher handicapped player’s use of bisques, in attack or defence, will be key to his/her chance of winning.
* In particular, try to use your bisques to make a break and score a few hoops in one turn. If you get well ahead of your opponent, then he/she might find it very difficult to catch up.
* If you are in receipt of bisques and you find yourself not in a good hoop-running position but your opponent is in front of his, then consider taking a bisque (or, better still, a half-bisque), to aim at his ball softly, so that if you miss you can take your extra turn to knock it away and then take croquet.
* If you are one hoop behind your opponent and you are next for an odd-numbered hoop (1, 3, 5, etc.) try to get tight in front of it so that you can run it hard all the way down to opponent’s ball, so you can roquet it and take croquet.
* If you are well ahead; don’t give your opponent an easy opportunity to hit you and begin a break. Instead, go further away - even into a corner - and bide your time.

Last but not least, remember that OB is a fun game - there are no World Championships, or even silver cups; it can be played by anybody and OB is invariably played on a handicap basis, so everybody has a good chance of winning.

Indeed, the most prestigious OB competition is our own Charity One-Ball Championship, so please consider playing in your local heat and, at the same time, support a very worthy charity.