

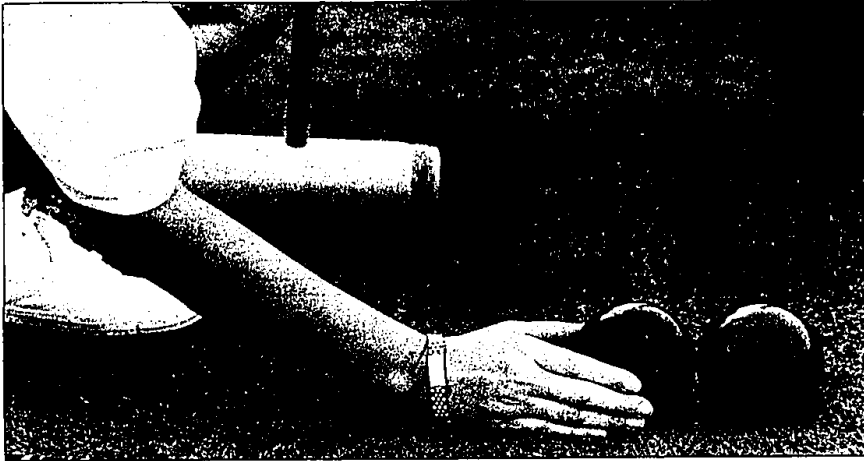
## Suburban Life

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photos by JIM JAGOFFELD/fall photographer

## A wicketly good game

### Croquet makes a comeback

By Sue Mason  
staff writer

**R**ODNEY WILLIAMS AND Vincent Carter aren't in the best of spirits. Granted, the girl watching is great, but the two Southfield bachelors are a tad gloomy about their less-than-stellar athletic skills.

"The strategy was totally unknown to me," Williams laments. "I was just trying to get through the hoops. I was way ahead and I ended up losing."

"You always come up short, big guy," Carter comments.

On this evening, Dead Strategy has come up dead last.

Across the way, the J&Hers are packing away mallets and balls. Victory has come easily to the six-member team. The challenger, Uncle Pete's, is a no-show.

"They beat us soundly the last time," said Lynne With of Livonia, savoring the win.

"Forty-two points is nothing to sneeze at," adds teammate Ruth Walker of the Plymouth-Canton area.

It's Wednesday evening and the sound of mallets whacking wooden croquet balls echoes across the lawn of the River Place Athletic and Croquet Club in Detroit.

Whack. Martha Lyford sends her ball skittering across the green into a ball belonging to her partner, Walt Thiemann.

"Hey, everybody watch. . . Martha's going for a double stakeout," he shouts.

All eyes turn toward Lyford, who nestles her ball against Thiemann's. Whack. His ball shoots forward, hitting the striped stake, followed close behind by her ball. Think. The win and 14 points go to the twosome. Team Rhino is on the move.

IT'S CROQUET the six-wicket American way, but not quite your backyard variety.

Six wickets resembling miniature Arc de Triomphe are positioned in a box shape around the playing field. In the center is the striped stake, beckoning to players like a lighthouse on a stormy night. The balls are softball-size and the mallets look like fugitives from the strength-testing booth at a carnival.

The goal is the same as the backyard game — first

to hit the stake is the winner — but it's how you get there, the strategy you use, that takes it a cut above the nine-wicket game.

"You try to advance yourself" and your partner, explained Mary Pittman, athletic club director. "By planning ahead you can advance well across the court. The idea is to roquet and croquet around the court."

In league croquet, teams have six members and the game is played in groups of four. Two members from each team face off to start and once clear of the first wicket, the next foursome starts. On the average, a entire game takes about 45 minutes.

PLAYERS ADVANCE their balls through the four corner wickets before moving to the two center court. A good player can take three to five shots a turn using a roquet (striking the ball of your partner or opponent) and earning two more shots.

The game can really heat up after the sixth wicket, when players can either peg out and finish the game or become a rover, wandering the playing field and striking the other balls pretty much at will.

"The strategy is just so different than the backyard game," said Scott Burgess, who along with partner Brian Rooney won their match for the Rhinos, sponsored by the Rhinoceros Club. "It's incredibly challenging. The technique is pretty simple, but the strategy involved is like a chess game in that respect."

The croquet field is one of three sanctioned by the U.S. Croquet Association. The other two are in Kalamazoo and on the lawn of a bed and breakfast inn in Lewiston.

Blue-collar and white-collar workers and even CEOs show up at the athletic club to play as word of the game has spread. Twenty-six teams signed up for the summer league and Pittman expects 32 to fill the fall roster.

"AFTER ONE game, people become fanatic; they can't get enough of it," she said. "It has the precision of billiards, the strategy of chess and takes less time than golf."

Jay Hansen organized the first Johnson & Higgins Inc. team last year. He recalls people asking to try out for it. Now, J&Hers has a core group of six players with backups. Hansen, who has since retired, commutes from East Lansing when the team needs a sub.

"Here, there's nothing strenuous, but there's a lot of competitive sport, but it's really a fun game and really relaxing."

Easy to say for a team that has won by forfeit. Across the way, Terri Mielack of Canton, a sub on Dead Strategy, waits for her partner, Laura Mysliwiec of East Detroit, to catch up. It's the third time she's played and is planning to sign up for the fall leagues.

"I watched everyone else play and thought it was something I'd like to get involved in," she said, throwing in a "yes" as her ball scooted through the wicket.

Teammates Lori Davidson of Canton and Joan Hardy of Detroit watch from the sidelines as the twosome work their way around the court. Like their partners Williams and Carter, they're none too pleased with losing their respective games.

DAVIDSON, Mielack, Williams and Carter are employees at Adult Career Training in Farmington Hills. They think the game "is worth the drive."

"It's a fun team," Davidson said. "That's what's made us stick together and go out afterwards. That's like the frosting on the cake."

"I had no idea there was any strategy to croquet," said Hardy. "I was stunned and amazed. But this is a great way to make friends."

Williams and Carter zero in on a young woman playing tennis at the athletic club. They exchange sly looks and nod.

"This is a good game and a good Wednesday evening activity for us," says Carter.

"We'll return in the fall with our own team," Williams adds. "We're in to win."

## The ABCs of croquet

"You have to sit or stand while someone literally treats your ball, and therefore you (Make no mistake; when you play croquet, you are the ball.), in incredibly shabby, mean, spiteful, sometimes insulting and sometimes even inexplicably nasty ways. All you can do is wait."

It's been called a gentle sport and the lush green court and traditional white dress plays up to the image, but as author Christopher Hease implies in the quote from his book "Croquet: The Gentle But Wicket Game," croquet is anything but gentle.

Official croquet courts are 84 by 105 feet of bent grass, the same grass found on golf course putting greens. Six wickets, 18 inches high and just a mere quarter inch wider than the balls, are set up — one at each corner set in 21 feet from the boundaries, and two in the center. The four-color stack, called a peg, is placed at the center of the court.

The mallet has a nine-inch long head and a 36-inch handle. There's two ways to swing it — golf style in which the mallet is swung from side to side and the pendulum style in which the mallet is swung from back to front between the legs.

Knowing the jargon helps in understanding the game. You need to know that you're alive when you roquet so you can get the croquet and continuation strokes. And at the end, you have to choose between being a rover or pegging out.

Just knowing that a stroke is a swing of the mallet and a shot is a type of swing for a particular outcome is a big help.

Here's a sampling of croquet terminology:

**Alive** — When you're alive on a ball, you can hit it and earn two additional strokes — a croquet stroke and a continuation stroke. In American croquet, you have to pass through a wicket to become alive on a ball you have already hit.

**Deadness** — That happens when you hit another ball. In short, you are dead on the ball your ball hits until you pass through the next sequential wicket. After that you're alive on that particular ball.

**Roquet** — The term used to describe successfully making one ball hit another ball.

**Croquet stroke** — The stroke that follows making a roquet. You use it by placing your ball next to the ball you have hit and then hitting your ball in such a way that both balls move.

**Continuation stroke** — The second stroke earned as the result of a roquet. It is used to continue play after the croquet stroke.

**Pegging out** — That's when you hit the final stake and go out of the game. Your pegging-out shot is your final shot of the game.

**Rover** — A ball that has cleared all the wickets but has yet to peg out is a rover. A rover ball is never dead but instead live on all other balls. The rover can, as the name implies, rove from one ball to another and hit on anyone.

**Wicket** — The basic arch through which the ball passes is the wicket. You are considered through a wicket if you can run your mallet down the side without having it touch your ball. But, alas, you are wicketed if you get caught in the wicket.

And last, but not least, is Aunt Emma — the name given to a boring, unadventurous, conservative player who usually takes no chances and simply tries to progress cautiously from one wicket to the next.

It's too late to sign up for the fall leagues at the River Place Athletic and Croquet Club, but not too late to sample the game.

The croquet lawn is available for bookings 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday-Friday and noon to 5 p.m. Saturday and Sunday. Cost is \$5 an hour for club members and \$7 an hour for non-members.

Players can take advantage of croquet singles games from 10 a.m. to noon Sunday. The cost is \$5 per person.

And people interested in a different kind of party can rent the club — croquet lawn, pool and tennis courts — between 6 and 10 p.m. Friday, Saturday and Sunday.

The club is at 1400 River Place, Detroit. For more information, call 259-1166.



Joan Hardy of Detroit coaches partner Vincent Carter of Southfield on his next shot, a croquet stroke.



Lori Davidson of Canton opts for the pendulum swing in making a shot. Below, Walt Thiemann watches as his opponent, Vincent Carter, clears the wicket.

