

# History of the Mission Hills Croquet Club

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In 1989 Pat Apple attended a charity event at the Mission Hills Country Club (MHCC) to have tea and cake and watch a player from the United States Croquet Association (USCA) demonstrate American Rules Six Wicket Croquet. When it was over, the MHCC Manager asked her if she liked the game. She said that it was very interesting because she had played backyard croquet but the game the gentleman played was very interesting because it appeared to be more difficult, and required a great amount of strategy in the play. She was then asked if she would start a Croquet Club at Mission Hills. She was a little reluctant at first, knowing very little about the big sport of six-wicket croquet, but when two other people at the event that day, Nancy Deupree and Dick Pierce, immediately volunteered to pitch in and help, she agreed to do it.

Pat received much help and cooperation from the MHCC, particularly from Tommy Tucker, then head of tennis, and David Johnson, then head agronomist at Mission Hills. An area of lawn behind the sports and tennis clubhouse was mowed down to be like a golf green. A standard croquet lawn is 35 yards long and 28 yards wide and is supposed to be flat and level. This new croquet lawn was full size and cut short and maintained like a golf green but there was no particular attempt to make it precisely flat or level. The Mission Hills Croquet Club thus was formed and dues and donations were collected from members to purchase equipment.

After about a year, a second croquet lawn was added at Mission Hills next to the first one. At that time, the long dimensions of both lawns were oriented in the northeast to southwest direction. They were to be rotated 90 degrees later when the third lawn was added.

In 1990, Pat and Nancy took a trip to Phoenix to watch a world-class six-wicket croquet tournament. There they met the best of the best, including Stan Patmor, then head of croquet in Phoenix. Stan offered to come over to Mission Hills and help out and teach the game, etc. He taught both American Rules and Association Rules Croquet. He continued to come over on a regular basis for some time and was instrumental in getting croquet started at Mission Hills.

In 1992, Dick Tucker, a croquet player from New York moved here and joined the Croquet Club. Dick, who would become the second Croquet Club President (after Pat Apple) in 1996, soon recruited his friend and croquet player Ellery McClatchy (of McClatchy Newspapers) to take a winter home here and join the Croquet Club. Ellery (later to be inducted into the Croquet Hall of Fame) provided a great deal of financial help to the Croquet Club, served on the croquet Board of Advisors for many years, and

contributed significantly to the development and national recognition of the Mission Hills Croquet Club.

In the early years, when Pat and Nancy were beginning to hold tournaments here, Mike Gibbons (then CEO of Estee Lauder, and now a member of the Croquet Hall of Fame) helped greatly and offered "when you do a tournament, call me and I will send you what you want". Later Mike also contributed 300 bottles of perfume for the President's Award Dinner held here in conjunction with the 2005 USCA Nationals Tournament.

In 1993, the Croquet Club built an equipment locker adjacent to lawn 1. Cost: \$600.

In the mid-1990s, the club started to invite croquet players from around the country to come to Mission Hills to play in croquet tournaments. With the two croquet lawns, plus using the lawn tennis courts (there were only two lawn tennis courts at that time) they could set up three croquet lawns at Mission Hills (only one full sized croquet lawn would fit on the two lawn tennis courts). At that time, there were two croquet lawns at the nearby Indian Ridge Country Club, which they were able to use for larger tournaments with five lawns. It was also about this time that the U. S. Open began to be held here every year in December and the Mission Hills Invitational every year in March.

In 2000, the existing lawn was extended into the lower elevation area and a third croquet lawn was created. This time Dave Johnson took care to level the new lawn area but he did it by hand using shovels and a lot of labor. He did not use a laser-leveling grader but did a pretty good job as he had done years earlier when building the two original lawn tennis courts and as he had done in grading many golf tee boxes over the years. This third lawn was much better than the first two, which had a significant slope falling off in the southeast direction. This was to be fixed later.

In 2001, the Country Club installed two small shade tents, one by lawn 3 and one by lawns 1 and 2. The one by lawn 3 blew down in a wind storm last March and has not yet been replaced.

In 2004, lawns 1 and 2 were laser leveled. This was a major undertaking since there was about a 1 foot slope from one end to the other on these lawns. The grass on lawns 1 and 2 was rolled up and set aside and 175 tons of sand trucked in, spread out, and leveled with a grader with a laser level controlled blade. Then the grass was replaced on the leveled sand. The Croquet Club paid for the laser leveling --- \$2,300.

Later in the summer of 2004 two more croquet lawns were added in the area to the northeast of the clay tennis courts. Sand was brought in and laser leveled and new sod was laid down. The Croquet Club asked its members for voluntary contributions and purchased an additional equipment shed and sunshade and paid for part of the new sod. The monetary contribution from the Croquet Club was \$7,300. These new lawns were sized to be 120 feet long, a little bit longer than needed for a croquet lawn. This was done so that the lawns could eventually also be used for lawn tennis although no tennis net hardware or backstops were installed in 2004. However, in the spring of

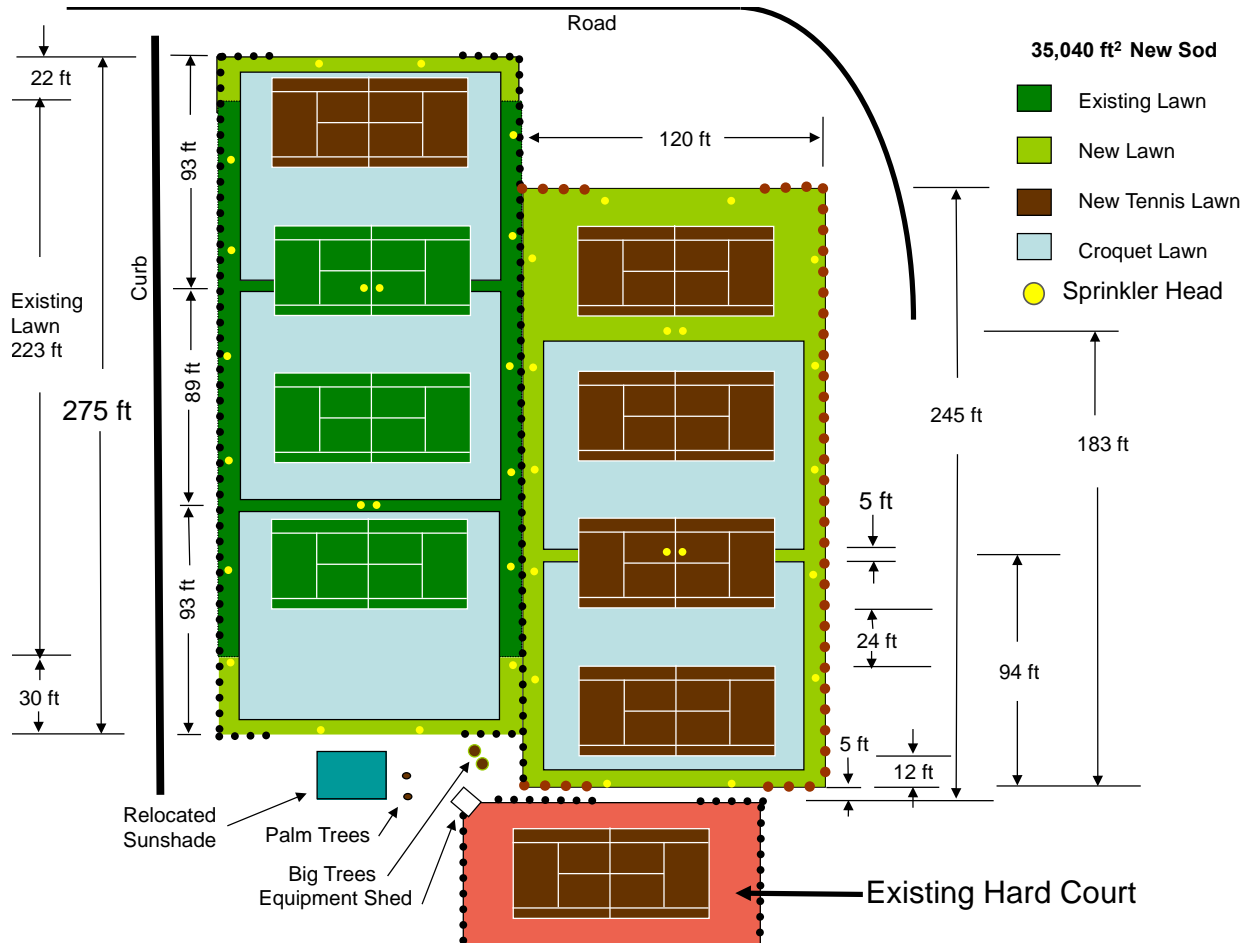
2005, a 5,000-seat grandstand was erected in this area and one of the quarterfinals of the Davis Cup was held on this new lawn.

In November 2005, the USCA National Championships were held for the first time at Mission Hills. Many croquet players from around the country wanted to attend this event to see the new croquet venue they had heard about at Mission Hills. We had to limit the attendance to 75 players, and even with that we needed 9 lawns. We used the 2 croquet lawns at the Indian Ridge Country Club and the lawn at the Marrakesh Country Club in Palm Desert. For the ninth lawn, Dave Johnson mowed down a reasonably level area in the grass area adjacent to Mission Hills Drive near the Dinah Shore Drive entrance gate. This was a very successful week-long tournament with three flights of singles and doubles play and several parties at the country club. The USCA Mission Hills food and beverage bill for this event was \$21,000.

In 2007 another lawn, now lawn 4, was added in the area of the first three. This involved a large amount of labor and expense because the transition between grade levels that now exists between lawns 2 and 3 had to be moved about 20 feet and a sidewalk had to be moved. This lawn, like the other 3 in this area, cannot be used for lawn tennis because it is not long enough for tennis. The Croquet Club paid the total cost of this addition, \$18,000.

Also in 2007, the existing sun shade adjacent to lawns 1 and 2 was replaced with a much larger, stronger, and more wind-resistant shade structure.

In 2009, the lawns northeast of the clay tennis courts were expanded to the current layout. This involved extending the existing lawn to the northeast 22 feet and to the southwest 36 feet, adding 28,800 sq. ft. of new lawn to the southeast, taking out a very large tree, moving the existing sunshade, laser leveling everything, and adding tennis net post hardware and backstop fences. The Croquet Club contributed \$12,000 to this final expansion. A member of the Croquet Club provided engineering drawings for this expansion and for all of the lawn additions beyond lawn 3. These drawings included detailed layout for sprinkler heads to achieve proper coverage, to avoid any heads on a croquet lawn, to allow the individual lawns to be moved two feet in the width dimension to allow for alternative wicket position placement, and to allow for at least 5 feet separation between all croquet lawns. The drawing for the 2009 expansion is shown below.



*Drawing for 2009 Lawn Expansion*

We now have 4 lawns that are used for croquet only and 6 lawns that are shared with lawn tennis. Thus, we now have the capability to set up 10 croquet lawns. Lawn tennis now has the capability to set up 10 lawn tennis courts, 8 more than in 2004. This final expansion is about as much lawn building as can be done in the tennis area without removing some of the existing parking area or removing some of the existing hard or clay tennis courts. It would be possible to squeeze in another croquet lawn next to lawn 9 by extending the existing lawn to the northeast by about 20 feet, but this would require filling in part of the lawn with sand and building a retaining wall close to the curb along the corner of Wimbledon and Racquet Club Drive, which would be relatively expensive and might not be permitted by the city of Rancho Mirage. The current layout of the croquet lawns is shown in the Google Earth image below.



*Google Earth Image with Croquet Lawns Numbered*

The croquet facility at Mission Hills has become known as one of the best in the world. We have many tournaments here including the USCA National Championships in American Rules, Association Rules, and Golf Rules every other year. The Solomon Trophy, an Annual International Croquet Event between Great Britain and the USA similar to golf's Ryder Cup, was held at Mission Hills in 2005 and again in 2010. In the spring of 2017 we hosted the prestigious MacRobertson Shield competition which is held every 3 ½ years and is like the "Olympics" of croquet, a 17-day event involving competition between England, New Zealand, Australia, and the United States. David Hay, the agronomist here at Mission Hills took a special interest in this event and kept the lawns in such superb condition for the duration this event that we received many comments that this was the best MacRob venue ever! Croquet players from around the country and around the world come here to play in tournaments and when they see our wonderful facility and the surrounding environment, many have moved here.

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## **Present Day**

## **Membership**

1. The Club finished last season with 107 members.
2. Membership Fees
  - a. A prerequisite to joining the Croquet Club is that members have at least a Tennis level membership. Last season, there were 67 Tennis memberships which were actually croquet players. A significant number of these “croquet” members do not use the tennis or sports facilities, but they pay the tennis membership fee anyway, just to play croquet.
  - b. Croquet Club members make frequent use of MHCC F&B services as part of the many social aspects of Club membership, e.g., Happy Hour on Tuesdays after croquet play, season opening and closing dinners, etc. We are generally recognized as being among the most social of clubs, running relatively high F&B charges.
3. Attracting new members
  - a. History shows that once people new to the game are exposed to croquet and the social aspects of the game, they become hooked on the sport and eventually join the Club. Some enjoy the game and the quality of the lawns at MHCC so much that they relocate here from other parts of the U.S. and Canada.
  - b. In the 2016-2017 season, we attracted over 40 new members, a 60% increase over the previous season. These new members received significant instruction prior to joining at no personal cost.
  - c. We attract new Club members by providing:
    - i. Free weekly beginner lessons to MHCC members;
    - ii. A mix of free and low-cost clinics;
    - iii. Opportunities to observe tournament play by leading national and international players; and
    - iv. Opportunities to participate in Club social events.

## **Tournaments**

1. As previously stated, MHCC enjoys a reputation for having among the best croquet lawns in the world. This is key to attracting prestigious tournaments and new members.
2. Last season, 11 croquet tournaments were held at MHCC. One single event, The MacRoberson Shield, provided \$21,781 in F&B revenues to the country club.
3. Next season, we have scheduled one international and three national tournaments that will generate about \$20,000 in F&B revenues and approximately \$7,600 in lawn usage fees. We also have scheduled ten Club-sponsored tournaments that will generate more than \$20,000 of additional F&B revenues to MHCC.

## **Club Operations**

The Croquet Club is run by volunteers and we manage ourselves, i.e., we:

- self-schedule daily lawn usage;
- run clinics and provide lessons for new and experienced players;
- work with tennis in scheduling tournaments to avoid conflicts in lawn use;
- run 8 or 9 tournaments each year;
- send out tournament notices/invitations and process the entry forms and fees;
- schedule tournaments and provide tournament directors and managers;
- maintain the web site with the current roster, calendar, etc.
- reset hoops and repair hoop holes typically once per week (we get CC staff help on this);
- schedule many private parties at Mission Hills Country Club; and
- travel extensively to other croquet tournaments and promote the MHCC.

We purchase and maintain our own equipment:

- wickets cost \$116 each and must be stripped and powder coated periodically;
- balls cost \$130 each and must be replaced periodically;
- about 1/3 of the balls have stripes which must be repainted annually;
- we use electrical boundary string winders which require continuous maintenance;
- deadness boards must be repaired/repainted/replaced periodically;
- we have ~ 30 mallets for croquet schools and for new players;
- dead blow hoop hammers wear out and must be replaced regularly;
- chairs and umbrellas must be replaced/repaired;
- corner flags are stolen and fade in the sun and must be replaced regularly;
- each September, 84 corner string tie downs must be pulled, repainted, and broken ones replaced; and
- purchase and maintain string winders, timers, clips, batteries, chargers, etc.

All of these tasks have been performed by many volunteers from within the Club over the years and amount to thousands of hours of volunteer effort each year. These activities have been managed by our Club Presidents:

Pat Apple	1989 – 1996
Dick Tucker	1997 – 2003
Jim Butts	2004 – 2010
Ron Hendry	2011 – 2012
Mary Rodeberg	2013 – 2015
Nick Gray	2016 – 2017
Steve Mossbrook	2018 –