

Rothman Three-peats at the 2011 Desert Classic

25-29 January 2011

Mission Hills Country Club, Rancho Mirage, CA

by Ben Rothman



While snowstorms were building and ravaging the higher latitudes and rain soaked our Floridian friends, Rancho Mirage, California, proved to be the idyllic setting for the Desert Classic. Mission Hills Country Club hosted the fifth annual Association Laws purse tournament, attracting some of the best players in North America. Team USA members Jim Bast, Danny Huneycutt and Ben Rothman were favored by Vegas oddsmakers despite players from New York, Wyoming, Idaho, Hawaii and Canada entering the fray. Some were escaping the cold, while others made the trip for the challenge of a high-level money tournament. A portion of each player's entry fee and a generous donation from Leeds & Sons Jewelers of Palm Desert, California, contributed to the more than \$3,000 in prize money.



Early block play showed that while many players in the Challenger Flight were scraping out single digit victories (5-1 after two hours), Peter Bach was not messing around. In his perfect block performance (7-0), Peter averaged over 22 points per game and pegged out in five of his victories. Championship Flight lacked luster; with only seven completed peeling turns (triples or better) in the 30 initial block games. Top-ranked players Rothman and Huneycutt were attempting something

more difficult -- the elusive sextuple. While both claimed the sextuple peel was only a winning tactic for three or four players in the world (and admittedly, not a winning play for themselves), the top players were striving to improve through experiencing difficult and interesting scenarios of failing peeling turns and the repercussions.



Only one sextuple was completed in block play by the "savant" Ben Rothman on day one. Ben's sextuple began the easy way, with the peelee ball already jawssed in the one-back hoop, allowing for two quick peels before the break was under way. The difficult attempts did take their toll; Ben lost a game to Mike Orgill and Danny fell to Stuart Lawrence and Brian Cumming (otp). The top three players from each Championship block progressed to the Medalist block for three cross-block games to determine seeding in the knock-out ladder. With a 3-2 record, Danny was cast into the bubble block, a three game cross-block from which only two players emerged into the best-of-three playoffs.



As the players prepared to get down to business in the playoffs, the tournament director focused on the business of getting down. The mid-week toast and tally party was held in Rothman's courtside condo. Thanks to the generous help from Genie Hendry, Susan Stiff, Susi Wall and the Mission Hills Croquet Club, the party went off without a hitch. Players schmoozed and retold tales of glory from the lawns while enjoying heavy hors d'oeuvres and the occasional glass of wine. After the playoff pairings were announced and lamented (as in the case of the first round match-up between Bast and Huneycutt), Ben Rothman urged any generous parties to donate to the Y.A.C.H.T. fund.

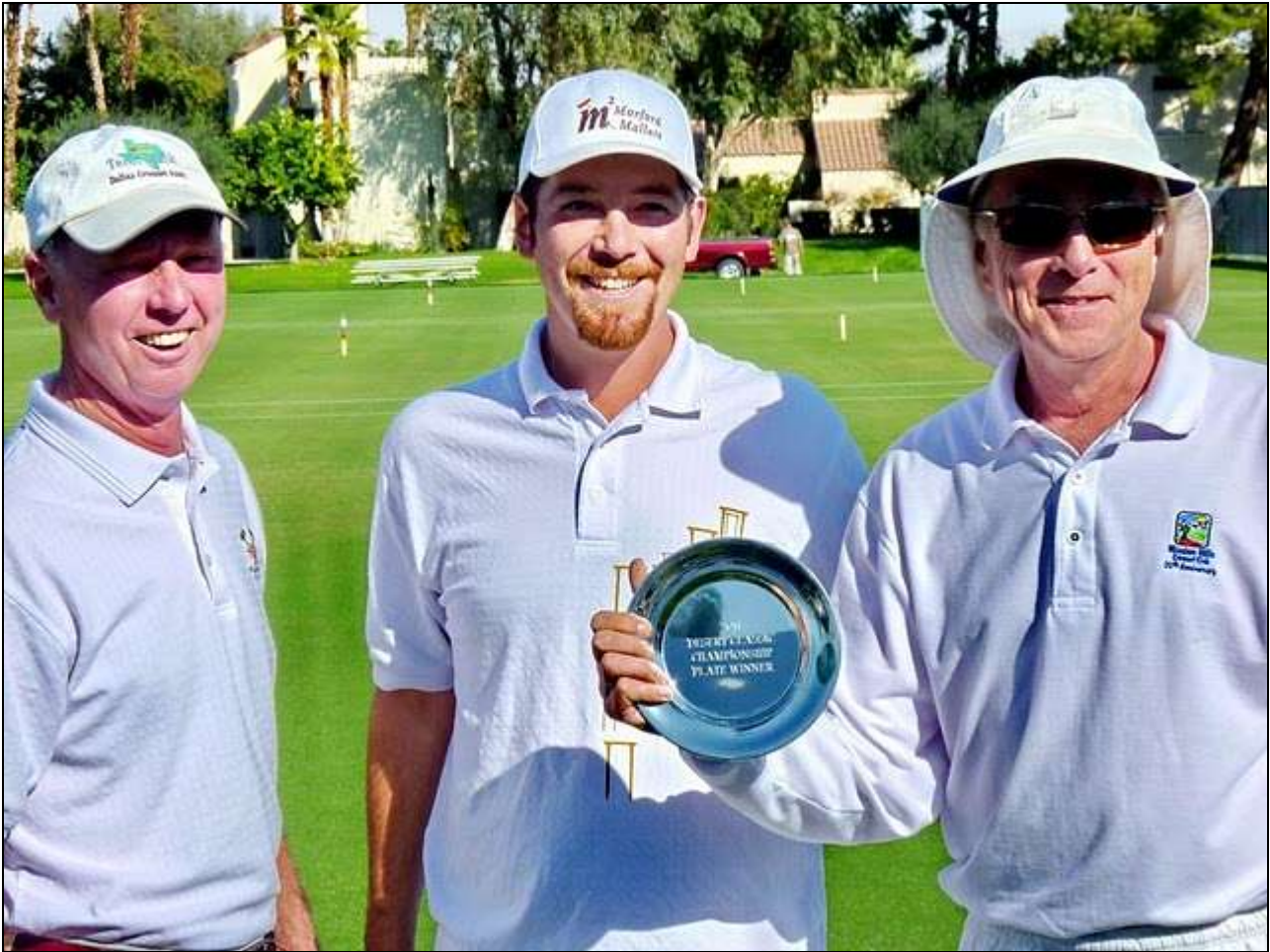
This was not a fund for Rothman's own croquet yacht, but a tax-exempt non-profit branch of the Denver Croquet Club (thanks to Rich Lamm) that will support the Young American Croquet Homage Tour (YACHT). The fund will subsidize some travel, lodging and tournament entry fees for young croquet players attempting to play on the USCA circuit while in the awkward fiscal situation so common to young croquet players during and after receiving their higher education. The small committee of young players (including several rookies of the year and recent national champions) hope the 2011 tour will take place in May and June around New England and possibly the Carolinas. Generous donations from the Mission Hills Croquet Club members and participants in the Desert Classic have started the ball rolling. Future donations may be sent to the Denver Croquet Club, contact Croquetpro@gmail.com for more information.



In the last stretch before the playoff ladders, the field was separated between clutch players and those who had experienced some early tournament good fortune. Danny Huneycutt went 3-0 through the bubble block with two triples in preparation for his difficult draw in the knock-out. The final spot in the playoffs was determined by the last game between local champions Ron Hendry and Mike Orgill. The back-and-forth opening faded in the dust of Ron Hendry's speedy break play as Mike could only watch his playoff hopes drift away in the calm breeze. After seven rounds of play, there was a three-way tie for third place in one of the Challenger blocks. With only four players making the playoffs from each block, Toni Kemp got the nod with her gross point total (thanks to her final round romp against good friend, Elaine Kennedy) and left her rival Karen Comeau to compete in the Challenger plate event.



Each flight featured a single elimination plate event. While the Championship plate started with four players and inserted four more defeated quarter-finalists, the Challenger plate was a simple eight player ladder with no drop-ins or byes. The slighted Karen Comeau was the top seed in the Challenger plate, but to no avail as she lost to visiting Bayfield Croquet Club member Patrick Waters from Ontario, Canada. But even Patrick could not survive the late-blooming Karl-Heinz Kempfer. The Oakland, California, based Kempfer enjoyed renown in Rancho Mirage at the Golf Croquet National Championships last November, yet he has had little time to practice during the San Francisco bay area's rainy season. After a mediocre block experience, Karl-Heinz began playing to his ability in defeating Cindy Bagby, Jean Engebretson and eventually Patrick Waters in the plate final.



The Championship plate was a series of hurdles for the four players who missed out on the best-of-three knock-out ladder. Sonoma-Cutrer alumni Mike Orgill and "Sandy" Bob Van Tassell beat out Arthur Bagby and Bruno Amby, respectively, and continued to knock out all four of the drop-in players from the quarter finals! Most notably, "Bad Bob" Van Tassell knocked Jim Bast out of the tournament with a fifth-turn triple peel. Lady Luck was just not on Jim's side this week. In the plate final, it was the master beating the precocious pupil as Mike Orgill showed "Sandy" Bob that there are still a few tricks up his sleeve.

The Challenger ladder moved along according to seed for the most part. The only exception was the tenacious eighth seed, Mary Rodeberg. The display of control was impressive as Mary scored an average of seven points in her five block wins. Much like a cold weather football team plays the field position game and relies on defense, Minnesota Mary was the Queen of ball control as she separated opponents and managed risk in every game. Undaunted after drawing the perfect Peter Bach in the first round, Mary stuck to her game plan and watched as the number one seed squandered his opportunities with missed hoop shots and roquets. After two hours, Mary moved on with her fifth win with ten or fewer points defeating Peter 9-6. Fellow Minnesotan Dick Engbretson shared success by defeating the feverish Steve Mossbrook 12-8, but the third game of the day was too much for Dick. Mary broke another break player with her defensive game and earned a spot in the finals.



The lower half of the ladder went entirely according to seed. Marvin Salles showed he has made great strides by defeating Sheri Foroughi, but he could not outplay the number two-seed Rich Schiller. The San Diegan turned up the offense in the playoffs with his two highest scoring games (19 and 20 points) but could he get the upper hand against marvelous Mary? In the Challenger final, both players played for control. Rich managed a few more hoops than Mary, but it was only 7-4 after one hour and 45 minutes. Mary recognized the dire situation and built a break starting at hoop four. The rare break chance did not last long, but having stuffed hoop 5 with partner nearby lessened the damage. Rich chose to shoot into the fray at hoop five from corner three and hit the 80-foot shot! In the remaining time, Rich beat Mary at her own game with defensive spreads and great ball control to win 7-5.

The best-of-three Championship ladder was a much higher level of play than the previous blocks would indicate. In 20 games, there were 11 triple peels and a quad peel (Huneycutt). Danny's quad came after a +26tp effort in round one against Jim Bast. The opportunity for the quadruple peel presented itself after a failed sextuple peel and a wrestle for control between the team USA doubles pair. Rothman scored a couple of politically incorrect triples to defeat club president (and Ben's de facto boss) Ron Hendry in round one. Stuart Lawrence showed his mettle with a +25tp effort in the rubber match against Leo Nikora. Brian Cumming followed a 26-22 scare with a +26tp game against Jim Butts. Rothman and Lawrence endured a three game battle in the semi-finals. Ben took game one +26tp, but lost a drawn out ending (-5) caused by Stuart's missed 5-yard peg out after completing all three peels. Game three had its hiccups as well with a failed

triple (Rothman) and difficulties with hoop one (Lawrence) leading to a messy +10 finish for the young pro. The Huneycutt-Cumming match-up was a much cleaner match after Brian took game one 26-8 and Danny rallied with two spectacular +26tp finishes in which Brian failed to take croquet! The third place match would be a novel scenario as Stuart Lawrence broke into the top of the ranks, but the final match was a familiar one.



Danny Huneycutt and Ben Rothman have been the two most active and accomplished players in North America over the last three years. While they have been teammates and roommates during most team USA matches, they have battled it out in the finals of many tournaments in that time. The 2010 Association Laws National Championship came down to the two of them, as did the Peachwood Classic, the Arizona Open and the 2009 Desert Classic. Pushing each other to new heights has become a staple of the duo's dynamic while pursuing a friendly rivalry that will hopefully usher in a new level of play in North America. For all of their accomplishments, neither could hit on the opening rotation of the finals. Danny took the first break around on fifth turn with a nice diagonal spread leave. Ben took the short shot, from A-baulk, and hit in. Rarely one to triple the opponent, Ben's only peel was to put Danny through hoop one and set a nice diagonal spread with the forward ball tight to the peg, so it could not be rushed to hoop 2 (now Danny's hoop). The balls on the East boundary were carefully placed so they were wired from the edge of A-baulk, leaving Danny a 70-foot hit in. Danny took his time and cried out in agony as his stupendous hit hilled off and missed by less than an inch. Ben played cleanly and finished game one +16tp.



One court away, the croquet gods manifested a familiar fate as Stuart watched Brian miss a trivial peg out in game one. Just as before, all three peels were finished; only this time, the missed shot benefitted Mr. Lawrence. It seemed too little too late as Brian pegged out from a distance a few turns later and took game one 26-2. Game two was an entertainingly interactive battle with great hit ins and spectacular misses to keep it close. Stuart was able to even things up 26-19 and setup an exciting game three, but Brian had other plans. Sometimes the biggest compliment a croquet player can get is that their play is boring and Brian made game three very boring. The +25tp went beautifully and assured that Brian would have to make a large currency exchange before he went back up North.

Game two of the finals started out sputtering, just like game one. Both games consisted of super shot openings, on court responses, and a laughable series of third and fourth turn misses. This time Ben took the break around on fifth turn, but he had trouble digging out the fourth ball. No peeling of the opponent or sextuple leaves came about and Ben set a new standard leave with the East boundary balls in that same wired position from A-baulk. Danny knew his fate was on the sixth turn shot, and he knew exactly how the court would roll. He lined up another 70-footer and this time he played the break and hit in.



Having practiced sextuples all week, Danny set the standard sextuple leave near corner three with Ben cross-wired at hoop one. Ben took the 90-footer and watched closely as he missed by less than an inch. Danny's sextuple started with a flurry of shots that would make Fulford blush with envy. After rushing to 12-foot position at one-back, Danny rolled his partner through the hoop and halfway down to the next while getting a perfect rush to hoop one. Danny proceeded to make hoop one with pace and get a 6-foot rush on his partner back to two-back! With an easy peel attempt at two-back before making hoop two, Danny was on pace for a standard quad (which he already completed once this tournament) and a delayed triple finish. Sadly, the simple peel wound up in a tough position and Danny was lucky to rush it through two-back after making hoop two. Some careful break management later and Danny had made one-back with only two peels left. The audience was buzzing as the sextuple neared completion, but the crowd nearly lost it when they saw what happened next.



Unsure whether to cut rush his 10-foot roquet or not, Danny swang before he had finished considering his strategic options. Mid-swing the National Champion knew it would be bad, but tightening his grip in response only made it worse and he missed. With all the balls on the North end of the court Rothman's only difficulty was rushing to hoop one. With a longer take-off than expected, Ben was through hoop one and away on a rather boring seventh-turn triple. This was Rothman's third consecutive Desert Classic Championship and his second against Danny Huneycutt.



With the tournament matches finished and a wonderful court side brunch buffet at the ready, the Desert Classic participants celebrated the fortunate weather and wonderful venue at the Mission Hills Country Club. The Hawaiian tag team of Leo and Bruno began taking all comers in golf croquet to entertain the crowd and Bruno graciously made keepsakes out of imported coconut palm fronds for the victors. The wine flowed and the music picked up as the drinking club with a croquet problem got into full post-tournament party mode.