

WOMEN'S WCF WORLD ASSOCIATION CROQUET CHAMPIONSHIP

Melbourne, Australia 21-28 October

Report by Beatrice McGlen & Ailsa Lines

Southern Hemisphere women going from strength to strength, so where are we going wrong?

The issue of women-only Association Croquet events in the UK has attracted much discussion in the past. One of the unique characteristics of our sport is that men and women can compete on an equal footing and there is a strong body of opinion in this country that women-only events will inevitably lead to men-only events and so the slide down the slippery slope to a separated sport begins. Attitudes on the other side of the equator are very different and it was in response to enthusiastic pressure, particularly in Australia, that the World Croquet Federation decided to hold the inaugural Women's AC World Championship in Melbourne on 21-28th October.

My reaction to the invitation to apply for selection to the 1st Women's AC World Championship was why would I want to spend all that money travelling to the other side of the world to play in a tournament that could be to the serious detriment of the game? So, why did I end up playing in Melbourne in October? Firstly, I was rather shocked to find out in May that, despite strong interest from New Zealand and Australia, only one person from the northern hemisphere had entered this inaugural competition. Secondly, Ailsa Lines, a fellow member at Nottingham Croquet Club, was equally embarrassed by the lack of support so we decided to make enquiries about taking leave from our respective employers and then put our names forward. Despite the late entry we were both accepted and on October 20th we arrived at the Victoria Croquet Club in Melbourne to find the most splendid facility with 12 flat, fast lawns; a huge pavilion complete with showers and a commercial kitchen; floodlighting around the four central lawns; 48 players; and numerous supporting husbands, partners and family. At the opening ceremony the Australians were wearing their national blazers and tournament shirts and the New Zealanders were in their all-black kit. The three English girls improvised with Team GB Olympic shirts (since there was no representative from Scotland, Wales or Ireland we felt Team GB was appropriate). We bought these just as a bit of fun but at the opening ceremony where everyone else was dressed in their national kit we were glad we had something to identify us as part of a team.

The first day of play dawned bright and warm. We were divided into eight blocks of 6 so we played 5 single games in the first two days – the lawns were quick and the hoops required accurate play so the three hour time limit for double-banked games meant many games went to time. The bottom two people in each block went into a plate event and the remainder went forward to the knockout. However, several blocks required tie-breakers to determine the qualifiers which meant play continued under floodlights on the second day until after 10pm (a long day considering play began at 8.30 every morning). The knockout stage was best of three matches. By this time the weather in Melbourne was living up to its reputation as it had become extremely windy. The combination of fast lawns, tight hoops and a ball that never stopped moving was making life difficult and the number of games that pegged-out dropped dramatically. The climax of the competition was contested in sunshine, with mercifully no wind, by Jenny Clarke of New Zealand and Alison Sharpe of Australia, with Jenny winning the Charles Jones Memorial Trophy and becoming the first Women's AC World Champion. It was particularly fitting that Jenny won this



English entrants L to R: Ailsa Lines, Frances Ransom and Beatrice McGlen.

trophy since Charles Jones had been a personal friend who officiated at her wedding and she accepted the trophy from Charles's sister with tears in her eyes.

Full results of the Championship including consolation events can be found at <http://www.croquetscores.com/tournaments/49>

Knockout results:

Jenny Clarke (NZ) bt Jane McGill +26 +25, Kathie Grant (NZ) bt Marion McInnes +10 +9, Judy Wembridge (Aus) bt Creina Dawson (Aus) +12 +18, Margaret Melville (Aus) bt Kay Chynoweth (Aus) +1 +19, Tricia Devlin (Aus) bt Judy Evans (Aus) +2 +14, Alison Robinson (NZ) bt Ann Sharp (NZ) +9 +10, Lizzie Bassett (Aus) bt Megan Reynolds (Aus) -4 +2 +9, Rosemary Graham (Aus) bt Rosemary Newsham +12 +25, Alisa Lines (Eng) bt Kay Seary (Aus) +20 +20, Wendy Dickson Dickson (Aus) bt Kathleen Colclough (Aus) +1 -5 +3, Pauline Reid (NZ) bt Anna Miller (Aus) -1 +11 +21, Chloe Aberley (Aus) bt Pam Gentle (Aus) +22 +17, Sue Beattie (Aus) bt Heather Ross (Aus) +1 +7, Jannine Hawker (Aus) bt Marga Podnieks +26 +11, Liz McLay (NZ) bt Beatrice McGlen (Eng) -15 +2 +6, Alison Sharpe (Aus) bt Leah O'Neil (Aus) +7 +23.

Clarke bt Grant +26 +16, Melville bt Wembridge +1 -8 +5, Devlin bt Robinson +10 +1, Graham bt Bassett +8 +3, Lines bt Dickson +3 +8, Aberley bt Reid +14 +19, Hawker bt Beattie -5 +16 +21, Sharpe bt McLay -10 +24 +17. **Q-finals:** Clarke bt Melville +11 +18, Graham bt Devlin +19 +9, Aberley bt Lines +8 +7, Sharpe bt Hawker -19 +21 +21.

Semi-finals: Clarke bt Graham +3 +17, Sharpe bt Aberley +11 +16.

Final: Clarke bt Sharpe +9 +25 +26.

So has my view of Women's croquet changed? Unequivocally yes. The Australian and New Zealand women are competitive but remarkably supportive of each other. Some of the contestants had fairly high handicaps but they had been encouraged to participate and given the coaching and support of their fellow team members; consequently they nearly all performed above expectation. Talking to many of the ladies, it was apparent that they could not understand the reluctance of female players in the UK to enter the only women's event remaining in our tournament calendar and were surprised at how few female tournament players we have. Perhaps it is time to have a rethink about this.

At Nottingham we have 113 members of whom 40% are female. When those who are CA members are analysed the percentage of women drops to 26%. Looking at all the entrants to the Nottingham AC tournaments 17% of the contestants in handicap events are women and only 9% in level/advanced. In order to see if this is representative of the total croquet playing community I requested figures from Bowdon, Budleigh Salterton, Cheltenham, Hurlingham and Sussex County, as well as Nottingham. These are six of the larger clubs and they are geographically spaced round the country. The figures supplied are given in the following table:

	Nottingham	Sussex County	Cheltenham	Bowdon	Budleigh	Hurlingham	Total
Total membership	113	148	200	150		138	749
% female	40%	52%	42%	50%		40%	45%
CA members	62	65	107	69	69	64	436
% female	26%	28%	27%	27%	33%	31%	28%
AC T'ment entries	132	81		93		98	404
% female	12%	19%		16%		15%	16%
AC handicap events	53	17		43		74	187
% female	17%	37%		23%		15%	21%
AC level events	79	64		50		24	217
% female	9%	12%		10%		17%	11%

It is clear that at every stage in the development of a player we are losing proportionally more women than men. By the time you get to the highest level, the top 100 rankings in the UK contain just 5 ladies (and one of these is Australian!). Interestingly, the four women in the top 100 who learnt their croquet in the UK have all played in the mixed doubles and women's singles in the Men's and Women's Championship and in the now defunct Barlow Bowl or Longman Trophy competitions, so they have all regarded women-only events as at least a stepping stone at some time in their croquet career. Many of our advanced level tournaments now only have one or two female competitors at best. If we leave things as they are there is a serious risk that many tournaments will become men-only by default so perhaps the time has come to make a particular effort to encourage the development of women players before we lose the very feature of croquet we are trying to protect.

How can we start this process? Clubs are attracting men and women in roughly equal numbers so the problem is probably not one of recruitment. However, more than twice as many of the men become members of the CA than women. The CA could investigate why there is this discrepancy but I suspect that most people join the CA initially because they are interested in playing in tournaments and the women are not being attracted to AC tournament play. So perhaps clubs should be looking out for their members (both male and female) who are clearly getting the hang of the game and encouraging them to enter club competitions and then handicap tournaments at their home club. Some coaching sessions on the tactics of playing when conceding bisques rather than receiving them would be particularly helpful to the improving player because many people find that transition difficult to overcome. In our club, women in particular seem much more likely to stay in the 16-20 handicap range because they win their games when they have plenty of bisques but lose all their confidence, and their games, without that security blanket and so their handicap just fluctuates.

The second stage is encouraging players to enter 'away' tournaments because the experience gained by playing a variety of people in a variety of settings is essential in the learning curve. I have heard many women saying that they do not like going away on their own so they do not enter tournaments at other clubs. It is difficult to know how to overcome this. Maybe it requires two or three women within a club to decide they are going to enter a particular tournament and arrange travel and accommodation together, or maybe female club members offering accommodation to lone female visitors would help. Once you have been to a club, got familiar with the area and know a few people the apprehension

of going on your own diminishes.

The third step along the development road is playing level/advanced tournaments. Women clearly lack the confidence to take this step, particularly if they think they will be the only female playing in a competition. Building confidence is the key, so coaching is important, as is encouraging all club members to enter internal level competitions whether they are A, B, C or D class. Experience of playing without bisques, of making leaves, of different openings and learning from better players all help build that confidence. Mixed doubles is a great way to step into the world where the men dominate and there is always a shortage of women prepared to play. If every club had an internal advanced mixed doubles competition perhaps the men could encourage the women to play and this would then feed through into the tournament scene.

The final stage is national and international events. In Australia and New Zealand the women have a structure that supports them. Crucially the interstate competitions in Australia and the trans-Tasman competitions require teams containing both men and women so the development of female players is important at the higher tournament level. Introducing a requirement to have at least one woman in each of the teams in the Inter-Counties in this country could have a similar effect. In the Women's World Championship both the Australian and New Zealand teams had team kit – this instantly gives a feeling of belonging and pride of representation. The two contingents had met up as a squad prior to the tournament and received some coaching covering topics such as openings, leaves and one-ball endings. When they arrived at the tournament they already felt part of a team and they provided huge encouragement and support to each other. The English representatives were left entirely to their own devices and it was quite scary.

This inaugural Women's World Championship was a really enjoyable event, but for it to be a continuing success it will need much more support from women in the northern hemisphere. For that to happen, fundamental changes in the attitude of women in croquet are required. This is not about turning shrinking violets into strident feminists, but of fostering the belief and self-confidence that is apparent in the Antipodes so they can blossom. Hopefully the debate about the best way to keep men and women playing association croquet on an equal footing starts here....

Acknowledgements: Contributors of opinions and photographs include Ailsa Lines, Rosie News, Rosemary Newsham, Keith Aiton, Chris Clarke, Marion McInnes, Chris McGlen, Wendy Betteridge and others. Thanks also to James Death, Klim Seabright, Clive Hayton, John Saxby and Brad Grimmer for providing statistics