

The Tea Lady Shot

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Brian's croquet was so immaculate that he never played at club sessions ever. He paid his sub and he practiced alone unseen. He did turn up at the beginning of season "do" and he did take his turn once a year in hovering the club rooms and making the tea but he never played or got to know any of the members.

Association Croquet has a reputation for being one of the most vicious games in the entire repertoire of sport. If the player is in the champion class it is possible that one's opponent will get two or three shots at most and have to sit and back and watch for the length of the game which is usually about an hour give or take.

Consequently some very fine players only have games for competition purposes. Champion croquet players play alone. It is not much fun in club sessions as all the opposition can do is sit watch and marvel.

Occasionally to qualify for national competitions the champion needs someone who will play those vital shots otherwise progression to the next round is barred. Byes are not given in croquet. Sometimes opponents are hard to find and although they only have to play three shots the time involved and the humiliation of sitting around and being thrashed is too much to cope with.

It was into this position Brian Brothers champion of the South England Croquet Association and member of the UK International team and champion of The Maidenhead Croquet Club found himself one sunny afternoon in May.

Brian had to play and win the Club Championships so that he could enter the competitions at the next level. No one else in the club was in his class or in fact was brave enough to face a championship game with him as they knew what would happen but usually the president or the club captain would brave it so that Brian could move on up and out of their hair.

The all important preliminary game was arranged for a Friday afternoon just after the grass had been cut so Brian would have a perfect lawn to demonstrate his Septuplet peel, the very pinnacle of the croquet repertoire.

Quick explanation of the game of croquet follows. Four balls, twelve hoops and one peg. Each player has two balls, blue and black or red and yellow. The player who gets both balls through the 26 hoops and pegs out wins. Good players can do the whole thing in one go and this got a bit boring so a few rules were put in place to make the game more challenging.

One can only take a ball through nine hoops before penalties allowing one's opponent to have a go, cut in but these penalties are no problem to players as good as Brian who just takes his first ball as far as he can before the penalties cut in, stop but leaves the balls in such a position that it is impossible for his opponent hit in. In other words his two balls at one end of the field and the opponent's ball at the other en diagonal to make the shot even longer and more impossible.

His opponent has to hit this one vital shot to get into the game and a very good opponent can occasionally do this once in a blue moon. Usually the opponent misses and Brian can continue on until the end of the game. This shot is called the Tea Lady Shot as that basic level of play is all that is required. Virtually anyone would do. The tea lady would be perfect, in fact.

For Brian that sunny Friday afternoon the problem was not the sextuplet peal but finding an opponent for his friend Fred had not turned up. In fact nobody Brian knew had turned up but the referee who on this occasion was the club captain who had just broken his arm and was incapable of holding a mallet let alone hit a ball.

"What the hell am I going to do?" said a worried and concerned Brian as Fred had rung in to say an accident on the M25 had delayed all traffic for at least four hours. This was the last day that he could qualify. Brian had left it a bit late this year he had suddenly realized.

"There must be some member that could play you" said the club captain, "I'd do myself but for this broken arm. There must be someone!" But after a few rings around various members it became obvious that unless a King's messenger arrived with a reprieve. Brian was going to miss out on this year's international competitions, as no one even slightly suitable was available.

At five o'clock Fred was still stuck in traffic and then it happened an elderly lady who both the club captain and Brian had never see before

walked in and introduced herself as Mrs. G. Prescott from Yeppoon, near Rockhampton, Queensland, Australia. She was spending five months with her daughter Tania and had joined the Maidenhead club for the Summer Season.

It seemed that Gloria, for that was her name, had played a little in the past a long time ago but had had to give it up.

“It was not possible for me to keep playing” she said with a thick homely Australian twang “ Illness meant it was hard for me to play. So I had to give it away. No balance but” Mrs. Prescott said passionately “I loved watching. That’s why I came down this afternoon to watch you play and make you a cup of tea. Am I too late? The traffic on the M25 is horrendous.”

Brian and the club captain looked at each other, each knew what the other was thinking.

“Have you played recently Mrs. Prescott?” The club captain inquired charmingly.

“No not for twenty years. I only played at club level and I think I only had about 25 games in total before I had to give it up.” Said Mrs. Prescott.

Brian and the club captain looked at each other again, and gave each other a knowing look.

“You are a paid up member of this club?” asked the club captain. He would have made her a member that minute if he could but rules are rules and it would look bad.

“Yes, yes! As I said I enjoy watching although after I stopped playing I never had the chance to see any games in Aussie, croquet is never shown on the Telly. I know so few people here I thought I might as well join and meet some friends of my own age. I am not that young these days” She joked. Gloria could have been Dame Edna Everage in person.

“So you know the basics of Association Croquet then. Did you have a bisquing?”

Both men waited to hear her answer with baited breath. Bisquing is the same as a handicap in golf. The higher the bisque the more inexperienced

the player. Brian's bisquing was -5 so it was with some relief that Gloria said clearly.

"Twenty, I never rose above a twenty" Twenty is about as low as it gets but it needed to be a twenty to play in a competition. If Gloria had been a twenty two Brian had had it.

"Mrs. Prescott, could you be so kind as to do us both the most incredible favour?" said the club captain using his best condescending manner which Oxford educated upper class men use when treating an inferior and they want something badly. "Brian has to play his qualifying match this afternoon and his opponent hasn't turned up. Stuck on the M25 I'm afraid. If Brian doesn't play he gets eliminated. Those are the rules and in Association Croquet we have to stick to the rules. No deviation allowed."

"I've never played in a competition" said Gloria quietly. "I hate competitions. I even find playing with friends hard as I dislike beating anyone. And I am the most hopeless roqueter. I left the sport because I couldn't hit a roquet in club sessions. I would miss and never get another turn. Even three foot ones sometimes."

"But you have played a bit of croquet and you have watched. You know what we want you to do. After the hitting traditional two balls at the start all you have to do is sit and watch till Brian gets his ball to one back, he wants to do a sextuplet peal and then when he has made his leave with one of your balls wired so you only have one shot. You try to hit in!

The impossible long diagonal! The one nobody has ever hit. It's the length of a tennis court diagonal. It would do us the greatest honour if you would so oblige and think you will have played a champion Brian Brother. Think of what you can tell your friends in Yeppoon, New Zealand." Then he remembered, "I mean Australia. Please!"

Both looked so worried and *little boy lost..ish* and British upper class men can be so enchanting when they feel so inclined that Gloria much to her surprise agreed. Fortunately she had on some flat shoes, she knew she was coming to a croquet club and she had her mallet a very old one she had brought with her just in case she felt brave enough for a game in the car. It was in two pieces from traveling but that was soon rectified and screwed together. It was very old.

After a cup of tea and a quick brush up of the rules the match commenced. Brian won the toss and went first. Gloria made one of the traditional openings.

“Thank goodness she’s remembered how to start” Thought the club captain as under the rules of Association Croquet he was not allowed to help or talk to Gloria.

Brian soon found himself around to one back and the leave for the sextuplet peal. The game had taken about quarter of an hour to this stage and Brian was enjoying himself immensely. He felt immensely confident. The qualification match was in the bag. He knew he had a tough time from then on.

The club captain sat and smiled encouragingly at Gloria, he too was relaxed. The club champion was safely through to the next round and hopefully a World title too.

It took Brian a few minutes to set up the sextuplet leave. He had to make sure one of Gloria’s balls was hidden behind a hoop so she couldn’t hit it and that his balls, the two Gloria had to hit were on the long diagonal. A shot of at least twenty to thirty meters. You practically need a pair of binoculars to see it and then satisfied that all was well for his next turn he left the field and sat down. A job well done!

His only worry was that Gloria might not be able to hit the ball far enough for him to make his sextuplet peal. In this strategy the player takes his first ball around at the same time as his second pealing his first ball through the last six hoops The president and Brian had explained to Gloria what she had to do but she was old and frail but no matter he was a -5 and could cope. To do a peal of this sort means making over three hundred shots perfectly with no mistake but then Brian never made a mistake.

The club captain could not resist whispering “Good luck Mrs. Prescott” as Gloria arose and took to the field for her third and final shot and winked encouragingly. By this time Fred and his wife had arrived and joined the club captain who was called Robert.

“Sorry” said Fred sheepishly “Held up on M25! I see you got Brian an opponent then. Who is she?”

“Don’t worry yourself” said Robert “Mrs. Gloria Prescott from Australia has courageously taken your place. She hasn’t played for twenty years. Bisquing twenty!”

“Oh!” said Fred “Well it really doesn’t matter for this game does it”

The first two shots Gloria had made to start the game had just been simple hits to more or less set positions. It was necessary from then on to hit another ball to get into a game. This type of shot is called a roquet. This even at short distances is incredibly difficult but as the saying goes “No roquet – No croquet”. Brian had left Gloria to roquet about the longest and most difficult roquet there is. That was the idea. Gloria would naturally miss and sit down. Game for her over and Brian would be on his way to become UK champion.

Gloria walked to her red ball, she was red and yellow, which was down in one corner nearest the club house and the spectators and she looked at Brian’s Blue and black sitting on the back boundary. way in the distance but instead of just hitting her ball at them as all had expected her to do Gloria took her time. She did the usual stalk up but then she put her club down in front of her ball, walked back six steps there was just enough room to do this and did a sort of knees bend and had a good squint. Then she walked back to her club and moved it a fraction of an inch and repeated the walk back and knees bend. She did this twice more moving her club a fraction of an inch each time.

“Why doesn’t she get on with it” thought Brian and Robert. All she has to do is to hit the ball over in the desired direction and let Brian finish the match and in no time we should all be home for dinner.

There are no time limits on shots in the rules of a championship game of Association Croquet as some peels take time to line up but normal shots take just seconds to an expert. The player can take as long as he likes but this was getting annoying.

The Robert and Fred would have loved to call out ”hurry up” as they would have done at a club session but as Gloria only had one shot and this was a championship match they had to hold their tongues.

Gloria was still doing her maneuvers but then she walked forward picked up her club put her head down, took her mallet back between her legs and hit. The red ball shot like an arrow in a dead straight line and before

either of the three men could blink she had hit Brian's Black ball fair and square.

Gloria Prescott from Yeppon Australia, the lady who had come to make the tea, the lady who had only played twenty five games in her life with a twenty year gap and a bisquing of twenty had HIT IN!

The men could not believe their eyes. They were in a state of shock. Although the shot had been magnificent it was not supposed to happen and it had caused a big problem. There was none of the usual applause that should accompany such a feat.

This was one situation that they had not bargained for but Gloria looked surprisingly cool and calm under the circumstances as she stood back and watched her ball smack into the black.

It was one of those unforgettable moments. History being made. The tea lady shot only this time the tea lady had HIT IN.

"Oh my God! She's hit in! Beginner's luck." Said the Robert to Fred under his breath.

"She'll soon break down and then I'm back in." thought Brian. "Nothing to worry about but damn the woman I won't be able to do a sextuplet peal. It will have to be a triple and the silly woman has to do another shot."

They watched Gloria as she walked across the field. It was a long diagonal walk and she did it in a relaxed but purposeful manner picked up her red ball placed it touching the black for the croquet. Then quickly she did a little take off to a spot behind the blue so that she could hit it down to hoop one and start her round.

"She hasn't forgotten how to play" The Robert said to Fred and his wife who had just arrived. "But that is one hell of a long rush. She'll never make it with that old mallet. Spoiled Brian's sextuplet. Here she goes!"

Gloria hit the balls a resounding whack. This type of hit where one ball hits the other and sends it a long distance is called a rush. To start her turn Gloria had to make sure the blue ball covered the twenty meters to end up by the first hoop. If successful she could then pick up her red ball and use Brian's blue to make the first hoop. Once through that a champion player

can go round but Gloria as everyone knew was a novice and only a 20. She would sooner or later and most probably sooner break down.

But she didn't. To everyone's surprise and horror Gloria's rush sailed down the field to just the right spot for her to make the hoop. This was achieved with some difficulty as Gloria took a long time to line it up. In fact every roquet Gloria made took a long time to line up. For every hoop and roquet she made she was inordinately careful and oh so slow but she hit and got through, every time, even difficult shots.

What is more after two hoops it was obvious to all watching and by this time many more members had arrived for the evening session and news that "the tea lady" had HIT IN and was making a decent showing had traveled fast and quite a crowd was lining the boundaries. Brian was just sitting and watching in amazement for what had seemed a walk over had turned into a match. He was not unduly worried though for he knew soon she would break down. They all did.

But Gloria did not break down she went slowly and carefully through five hoops until she reached one back this is the traditional place where a championship player starts to make the set up for the sextuplet leave. A Twenty bisquer would normally not know how to do this but to everyone's astonishment Gloria obviously did. Slowly she sorted out her balls. One or two went array and left her a long roquet but after her set of maneuvers the ball shot like an arrow and hit the bulls eye.

This had taken her an hour. With a few shots Gloria had left the traditional *sextuplet leave* giving Brian very little option than to play the *tea lady* shot himself. The same impossible shot he had asked Gloria to play.

By this time it is fair to say Brian was rattled. He had never expected today to be put in this position. This shot is difficult at the best of times but this time not only was he nervous but rattled. Nobody had ever been sure of hitting this shot every time so he picked up the one of his balls and hit in the hope that like Gloria he would *hit in*. He missed swore to himself and sat down to watch Gloria continue her break.

By now the audience was on the edge of their seats as the crowd knew that to continue Gloria, if she had been a champion would have to play do a *sextuplet peel* in order to be sure of a win. This is just not possible for a beginner as it takes years of work but they were eager to see what she would do.

Gloria did not disappoint slowly and methodically she started to perform the moves that are the traditional *sextuplet peel* but she was so slow. Every roquet every hoop she went through this performance and ducking down and carefully arranging her mallet.

“Why doesn’t she just hit the bloody thing and get on with it.” you could hear the crowd think but they were impressed at her accuracy as virtually every roquet was hit. Her placing was perfect to and her shots were so elegant, like watching a beautiful ballet.

For the difficult peals she like every other player took her time and on the last hoop her ball stuck and Brian who was by now biting his finger nails as he could see his championship season about to go up in smoke heaved a sigh of relief. Gloria had to do the jump shot where her ball would jump over the ball without touching it and go through the hoop at the same time. Very tricky but to his horror and the crowds pleasure she did it perfectly to a round of applause.

There was only one shot left and that was to hit the peg with both balls and Gloria the tea lady, had won. She placed both balls right up to the peg where it was impossible to miss, Brian could hardly watch as he knew he had lost and his chance of international play that year out of the window and then she stood up looked around and hit both balls to where Brian could make an easy break.

The crowd roared and clapped as she curtseyed and went to sit down. She had won, everyone realized she had won but at the last moment she had given Brian a reprieve and let him back into the match. Brian was so shocked he thought for a minute he would break down himself but croquet is a vicious game and he soon pulled himself together and went around himself to peg out and win.

Gloria went forward to shake his hand and congratulate him. The whole club was in an uproar and both were feted. Brian felt elated and humiliated at the same time. He should have lost but this woman had given him at the last moment a second chance. Why?

After when they were enjoying a well earned cup of tea Robert the club captain, rebuked Gloria for telling lies. She was obviously an expert croquet player. Indeed a scratch player. How dare she say that she had only played twenty matches and had a club handicap of twenty. It takes

years to get so good and she knew the game well. Nobody who is a novice can play those breaks and peals. How could she be so devious?

By this time quite a crowd had gathered to hear what she had to say by way of explanation.

“Do you really want to hear?” she said modestly “ It is not a happy tale. It happened a long time ago and I think best forgotten.” But by this time everybody was intrigued to know how the Tea Lady from Australia, a novice player with an official ranking of handicap 20 had beaten a -5 club champion had literally beaten their club champion.

“Many years ago my darling husband died from leukemia leaving me alone and friendless. We were both still quite young. Whilst I was visiting him at the hospital I caught the hospital bug Clostridium Difficile. CD is a form of gangrene and it eats you alive from the inside out. It ate my nervous system and among other things I lost my balance. At the time I did not realize just how important one’s balance is.

The drug given to me to save my life was Vancomycin, the drug of last resort and this does dreadful things when it mixes with the toxins. I lived but like a cankered apple I was rotten on the inside. I lost my immune system, my hair and my nerves. I could barely stand up.

In my youth I had played garden croquet, the sort where you put your foot on the ball and hit it into the bushes and I had always been fascinated by the game so I went to the local club and sat and watched. For six months I watched and sat with the old ladies, they were so kind and understanding until I was strong enough to stand up hold a mallet and hit a ball then they turned into demons.

Because of my balance I could never be sure of hitting a ball, even on short shots I missed so I could never *hit in*. I went to club sessions but I was never given a *bisque* as the club always played championship games and of course in championship games an extra shot to a novice is never given. Association rules are association rules.

So after about twelve months I decided to play alone. In my innocence I had made myself unpopular by asking for a few free shots so I could *get in*. This was met with complete horror by everyone including the club captain who again explained that those are the Association Croquet rules and could not be altered and I soon learned how nasty a game of croquet can be.

I decided, as I needed the exercise it would be better for me to play alone. As you all know croquet at championship level is really a solo performance. All you need is someone to play the *tea lady shot*. I had watched our Aussie champions and I thought I should set out to teach myself learn the four ball break.

I found an ancient book on how to play croquet in the club's small library and armed with this and a couple of DVDs I slowly mastered the breaks and the peels but I never mastered how to hit a roquet nine times out of ten or go reliably through a hoop.

I knew that I had lined up the ball carefully as everyone else did. My mind told me when I looked down at my mallet that I had done it carefully and it looked bang in line but when I hit I always missed.

Gradually over the years my insides healed. A stomach can heal within three days. A wound a week and a broken bone a month but a compromised nervous system takes years if ever but after about five years I knew that one day I should be able to join in and play every Saturday at club level and not be banished to play alone.

Then I had an idea what if I found out how to hit a roquet in a manner that ensured that I could *hit in* say 7 times out of ten and I came up with a plan. My eyes told my mind I had put my mallet down in alignment but my mind was obviously playing tricks. What if I checked by walking back and having *a look*. If I could see it was out I could correct it. If I squatted down I could see that my mallet was aimed at the ball I wanted to hit and then I just went back very carefully lifting it up so I did not move it and hit. It ought to go straight and hit the ball and it did.

I found as you saw today that I could hit a roquet every single time. I had a similar problem with the hoops. which I solved by looking through the hoop I wanted to go through from the other side. I could see immediately if I had miscalculated which I probably had and fix it.

But and it is a big BUT this took time. I took twice as long as your ordinary player who goes up hits and misses and sits down.

Stupidly I did not think this would be a problem. Naively I thought the club members would be so proud of me that I had taught myself to play well enough to join in that they would wait a few moments for me to play.

I was horribly wrong. After three games I heard that the club players had complained that “I was holding up the game” and one told me “That I had to speed up”. In private I tried but I missed again and again so I went back to playing by myself. I was by now very good. I could always make a break and one famous Sunday afternoon I did a triple peel. I took myself for a large ice cream after to celebrate.

The winter season had passed. The lawns were rested and an in house club rule the only play allowed was in club winter session. This in house rule had never been enforced before but this year they did. I turned up one winter afternoon to have my game and was turned away by the club president. It was a bit hard as I lived alone and my illness did not allow me to enter into any indoor activities. My immune system will never recover and any cold could kill. Even to day I am risking my life being in here with you all but on such a night I am willing to risk it. I was effectively barred from winter play. I was a private club and they are allowed to do this

Another in house club rule arrived on the board at the start of the summer season. In house club rule number nine stated the members must not hold up play. I was vaguely uncomfortable when I saw this but I felt sure that although this might apply only to me that because of my disability it would not be enforced. Anyway I would sharpen up.

Summer arrived and I felt ready to join in. I had practiced and practiced so I could do my lining up fairly quickly so that I knew even if I did hold up the game it would only be for seconds. Mark you I knew the old ladies would very soon have to wait for me to go around but my bisquing would be improved and they would not have me for long.

On the penultimate day of my croquet career I had a wonderful game with three of our clubs best players. They gave me some bisques and I did not abuse them. Although I knew the first class game I was not up to ordinary club defensive games. This I knew I had still to learn. They suggested I join in a lesson by the head coach the next morning to learn how to tackle Aunt Emma which is the name of the extremely defensive game played by the lowest bisquing players and can as you all know be lethal.

That fatal day I had not been feeling well. I had good days and bad days as those with a mental disability will understand. I had cleaned the leaves of lawn three for the local interclub matches so I was already tired.

And then it happened. My first shot was to be straight through a hoop. My ball was isolated. I had nothing to roquet but I could go through the hoop and then lay up or have a long roquet of the missable type

I approached from the hoop from the front to save time walked to behind my ball and started to make preparations. The ball was far back about 8 feet so it was not an easy hoop run but I knew I could make it. It was an interclub day and many players were around and of course as most had never seen me play they were intrigued.

Before I could finish my line up the Head Coach a man of eighty just rushed over and said firmly “No, no, NO! I am not going to let you do that any longer. You have to do it this way. You have to stop holding up the club games. It’s in our etiquette rules. You must hurry up as you spoil the games for all our members.”

I was devastated all my years of work and practice were going out the window. When I defended my right under the rules of Association Croquet to take as long as I liked I was told to do it his way. I knew that was impossible but I tried failed. After I missed a three foot roquet I gave up in despair. I felt humiliated. Nobody came to my aid, they stood and let me go. I heard they said I had over reacted! I suppose I had!

In two minutes the Head Coach had wrecked my confidence in my ability to hit a ball. I walked off the field went home and resigned. I knew that I could never fight him and the committee and still play. They were so old and there was nothing to be gained. I wrote a resignation letter of the sort one can never withdraw to ensure I never went back. Like an abusive marriage one must never return so I, found another interest, it takes on average three weeks for someone to find something else to fill the time and I put my mallet away for twenty years until today.

When you asked me today to play against Brian I just thought I’d make the long roquet shot in the normal way and miss and then I thought well you might as well see if my method of hitting a roquet every time still worked. It wouldn’t hurt to have a go and it did. I had taught myself well, Then I had to play the sextuplet peel. I knew I could do it in private so why not have a go in public. The problem was I could not remember it

but as I played the moves came back. I had taught myself to place the balls accurately every time and that skill too seems to have remained too.

I did not want to win so I went around and let Brian in. I am so sorry.”

“But can you do the *tea lady shot* every time?” enquired the incredulous Robert. “Frankly Mrs. Prescott, I don’t believe you. Magnificent as it was you were lucky. Nobody can guarantee hitting that shot.”

“I used to be able to hit it four times out of five” said Gloria humbly “But I reckon now it would be seven times out of ten. Do you want me to show you? After that session I think I have just about got my eye in. Mark you I shall have to take my time!”

The opportunity was too good to miss so Gloria took the field again watched by the entire club and demonstrated how easy it was to hit the *tea lady shot* five more times in a row. The members were stunned and Brian was only too grateful that 20 years ago Mrs. Prescott had had her confidence removed by a Head Coach or he might have met her in an international competition.

And that was how Brian Brother qualified for the local championships. He went on to win the UK championships but just lost out on an international title by missing a crucial long roquet. Gloria went back to Yeppoon, Australia and hung up her mallet. She have achieved her ambition and done a sextuplet peel in public once.