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How to Play

Expert Croquet Tactics Article 2: The First Break

By Keith F Wylie

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Article 2: The First Break

Perhaps it is Thursday. Five past ten on a mild autumnal morning at Hurlingham. You have just begun a match against a Celebrated International Star. (He has just joined up outside the fourth corner and is putting his ball on.) You now hit your tice, take off to the fourth corner, get the rush to 1 and make the hoop with a rush back to IV. The Celebrated International Star is at your mercy. (He has sat down and is now lighting a cigarette.) What do you do?

1: P-QB4	...	A sensation ...
...	P-K3	
2: Kt-KB3	P-Q4	
3: P-Q4	...	A second sensation. Fischer is now playing the Queen's Gambit, an opening which he has openly condemned and has never been known to play before.

C.H.O'D. Alexander

2.1 Introduction

In a handicap or a doubles match it occasionally makes sense to stop at 3b with the first ball as a precaution against the opposition doing a triple peel on you. Subtle use of the first break is more important in the expert game, where victory may depend on the careful handling of a slight advantage. Whereas a scratch player would quite properly concentrate on making a tidy break to 4b, and whereas the not-quite-expert would aim to make an effective leave when he got there, the true expert should look beyond the break and the leave and should concern himself with the shape which the whole game will take, an approach which I shall call “whole-game tactics”. You can use the first break to influence the general course of the game. Just as a chess master chooses an opening to suit himself and to discomfort his opponent, so you too can choose the best ground on which to do battle.

This Article is concerned with the question of what one expert (RY) should do when he picks up the first break against another (UK). Can you improve on the simple break to 4b? We leave behind the world of everyday croquet, with its missed roquets and blobbed hoops. For most readers this particular Article will be an exercise in armchair croquet, but for a few players the question is important and the answer elusive.

I shall discuss various tactical ideas in the order in which they emerged during my time in the game. This is a review of ideas, not of leaves. Some notable leaves may go unmentioned. I shall suppose that R has the first break.

2.2 1966 tactics

When I first reached the President’s Cup there was only one respectable thing to do with the first break. Virtually everyone, whether expert or not-quite-expert, played an unadventurous, if safe, 4-ball break to 4b. They usually arranged to make 2b off Y and to peel it through 1, ending with what came to be called the standard leave (now the Old Standard Leave, or “OSL”) shown in Fig. 2.1. There are two principal disadvantages to a leave of this type. First, it leaves a shot of only 13 yards which among the best players is virtually compulsory and eminently hittable. The second is that it gives almost as good a break to UK if he hits as it does to RY if UK misses. (So do most leaves, but the shorter UK’s shot is, the more serious the disadvantage.) A third disadvantage when you peel Y through the first hoop, which strangely has not been widely exploited, is that if UK subsequently gets in he can easily reduce RY’s chances of a triple by peeling Y through 2. The variations on the OSL all tend to suffer from these disadvantages to a greater or lesser extent.

The OSL was a wonderful tool in the right hands. Playing against Solomon or Cotter you could be pretty certain (a) that if you missed the short shot [K at R] he *would* do a triple and (b) that if you missed the long shot [K at U from III] he *would* get a good rush to the second hoop. Most people develop their tactics by imitation, and it was interesting how the OSL was widely used by players (a) who would have regarded the triple as a notable achievement and (b) who were seriously anxious as to whether they would even make the second hoop. Yet these same players would sometimes even give Y a 5-yard roquet on R. In my view there is a good deal of muddled thinking about the OSL. Make no mistake, it is an aggressive leave. You deliberately offer a 13-yard shot, and you simply must threaten to go out with a triple if your opponent misses it. If you are unable to offer such a threat credibly, you should look for a different leave. On no account leave a reverse rush. (That topic is discussed elsewhere.)

For many years I “openly condemned” the OSL, but more recently I have occasionally found it appropriate. I do not think its use could ever cause “a sensation”!

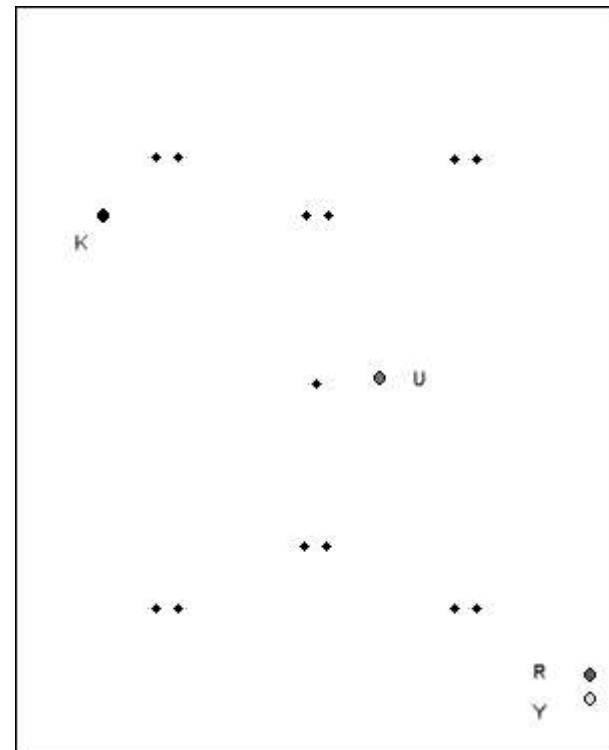


Fig. 2.1 (R for 4b; Y preferably for 2)

2.3 Hoop leaves (c. 1965-1968)

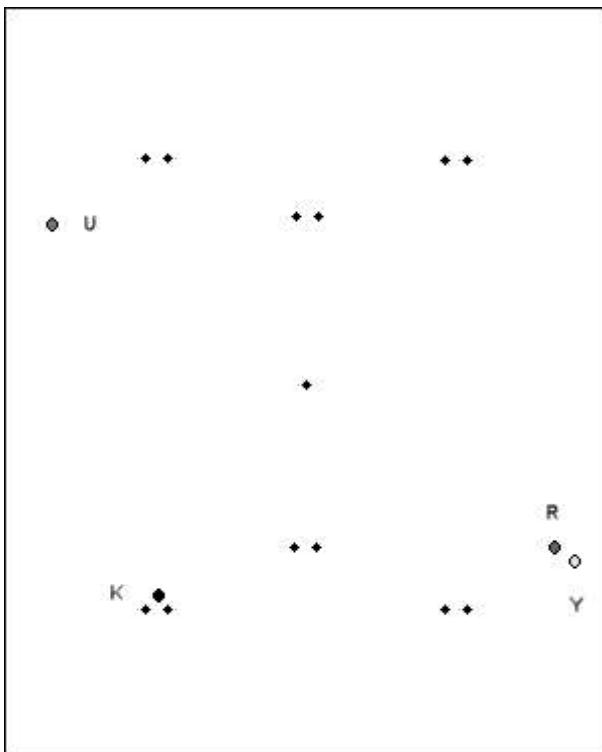


Fig. 2.2 (R for 4b; Y for I)

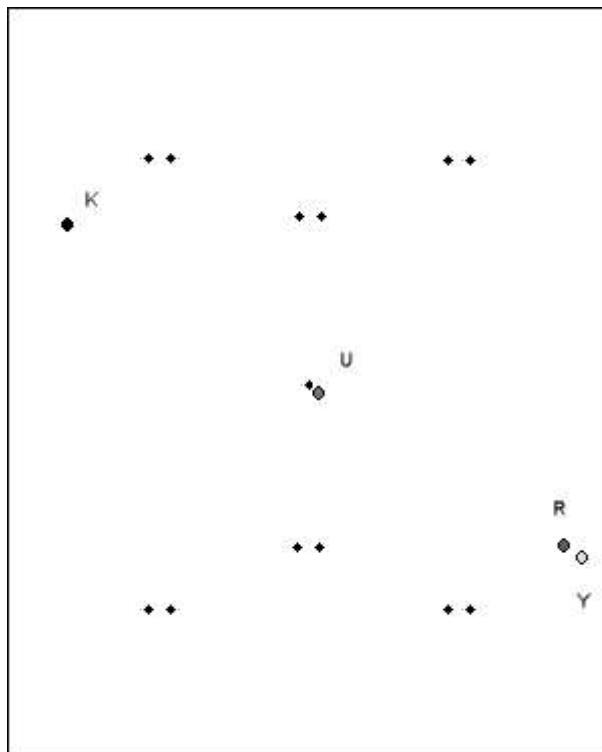


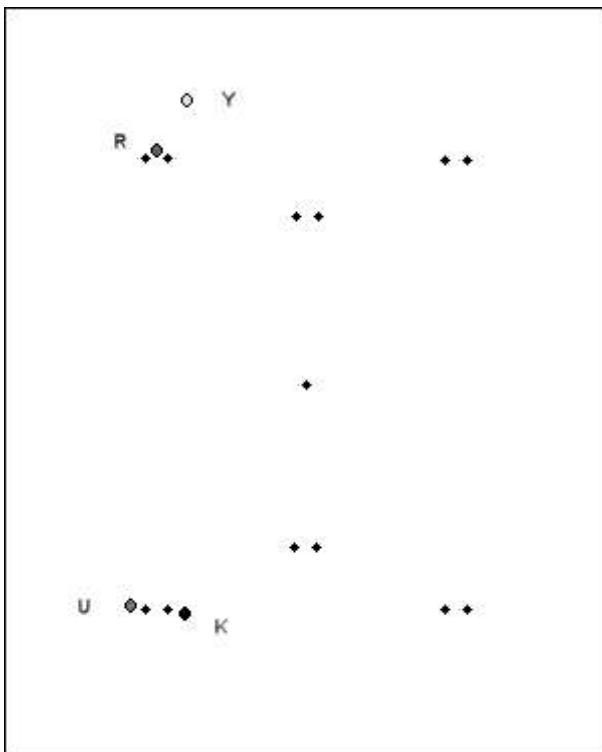
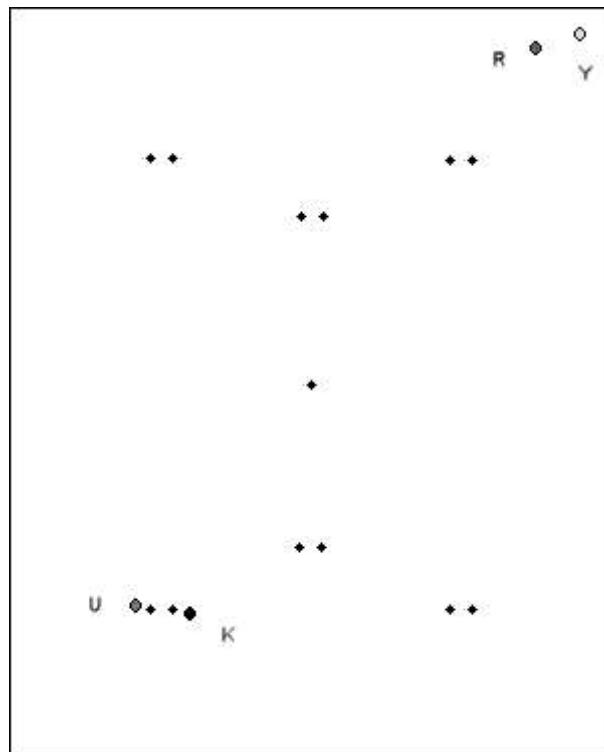
Fig. 2.3 (R for 4b; Y for I)

The idea of improving leaves by hiding balls from baulk behind hoops or by cross-pegging very close to the peg had been the subject of experiment for some time by the mid-sixties. A short burst of enthusiasm for these leaves (which I shall refer to as "hoop leaves") saw them tested to, and perhaps beyond, their useful range. Some of them were both eye-catching and successful, but more often than not they left some shot of only 14 yards or so, or there was no easy break for Y if UK played safe. Overambitious leave attempts often ended in disaster. Hoop leaves had (and indeed still have) various objectives: to lengthen the shortest shot; to force a particular ball to play; to yield an easy 3-ball break in any event if UK were to miss; to give RY better break prospects than UK; to encourage UK to finesse; and sometimes to encourage a slow-witted UK to take a deceptively safe long shot. A detailed treatment of these leaves would be outside the scope of this Article. A couple of valuable ones are shown in Figs. 2.2 and 2.3.

Most of the hoop leaves have failed to survive beyond the sixties. Only one of them has achieved the status of a regular leave (the New Standard Leave - see below). They often paid off at the time, because they were so new and because such exhibitions of prowess gave a psychological advantage over some lesser opponents. However, what the OSL had, which most of the cleverer leaves did not, was the threat of an easy triple if UK missed the short shot. This in itself caused a fair amount of jitters which fancy leaves often failed to do. After some hoop leaves Y had no trivial way of making its first hoop so that UK could shoot, albeit from quite a distance, with some sense of safety. Some of the ideas appearing later in this Article can be traced back to those earlier experiments.

2.4 1-back tactics (c. 1968-1974)

The standard sextuple leave is shown in Fig. 2.4. I have personally seen just one standard sextuple completed in genuine match play, as against dozens of attempts that have ended in (often bitter) failure. In theory the standard (or "ladies") sextuple is not much more than a quadruple, but stating that does not make it any more remunerative in practice. In my view the success rate is not high enough to justify laying the standard leave. The leave itself can go disastrously wrong, and even when completed it leaves UK a shot of only 22 yards or so with a laid break if he hits.

*Fig. 2.4 (standard sextuple leave)**Fig. 2.5 (principal 1b leave)*

Almost by accident it emerged from numerous attempts to conquer the sextuple (then the unclimbed Everest of croquet) that there are attractions in the idea of stopping at 1b with your first ball even if you do not go on to finish the sextuple. For example, if you get in for the first time when your opponent is for peg and 4b, you can stop at 1b, peel your partner ball to penult and peg out your opponent thus gaining a superior position without having had to concede a lift shot. The natural extension of this is to stop at 1b even when your opponent is still for 1 with both balls.

Fig. 2.5 shows the leave which I recommend when you-stop at 1b, a leave which is not so much “the delayed sextuple leave” as “a 1-back leave”: you use it to save lifts and not to do sextuples. (It is of course an ancient leave, having been the natural leave in the days before lifts.) It is easy to make and you can even tidy up U and K after making 6 if the wiring has not quite worked first time. During the second break (with Y) you do not have to press for peels, though you may if you are in the mood. Four peels are usually easy to achieve with safety if UK has shot and missed: 1b after 2; 2b before 4 or 5; 3b straight; and 4b after 4b. However, peels are not essential. You might be disappointed if all you could manage was a straight peel at 1b, but even then 1b tactics would have served their purpose.

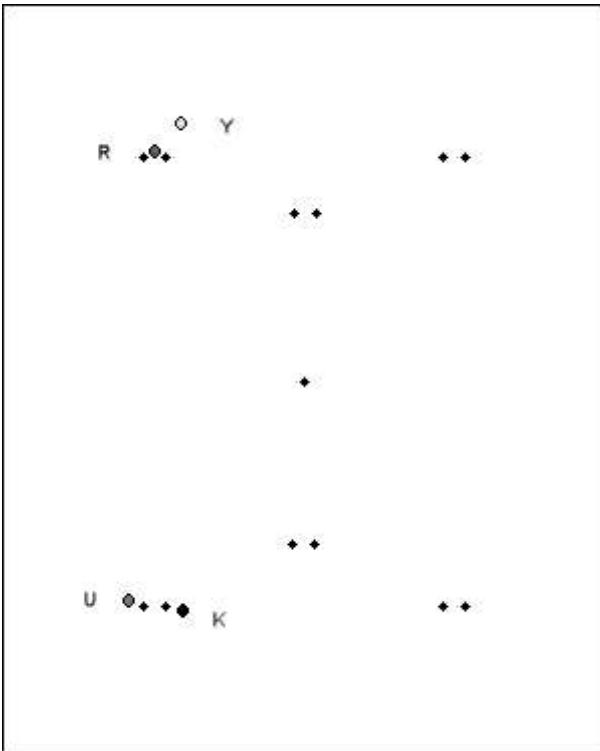


Fig. 2.6 (two 1b leaves; U left after 4)

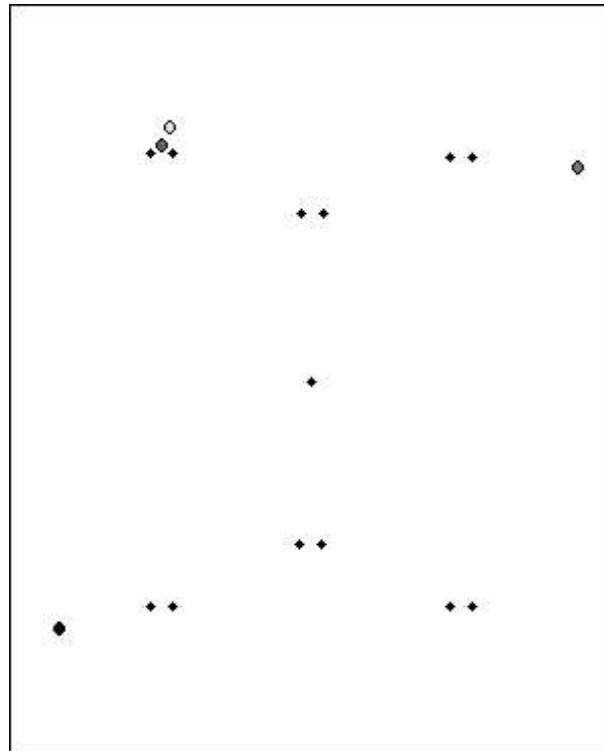


Fig. 2.7 (1b leave; U left after 3 or 6)

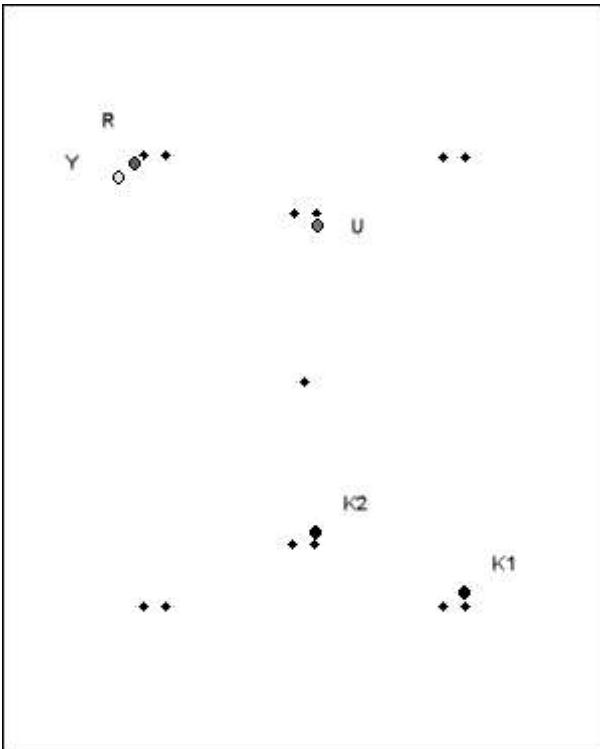
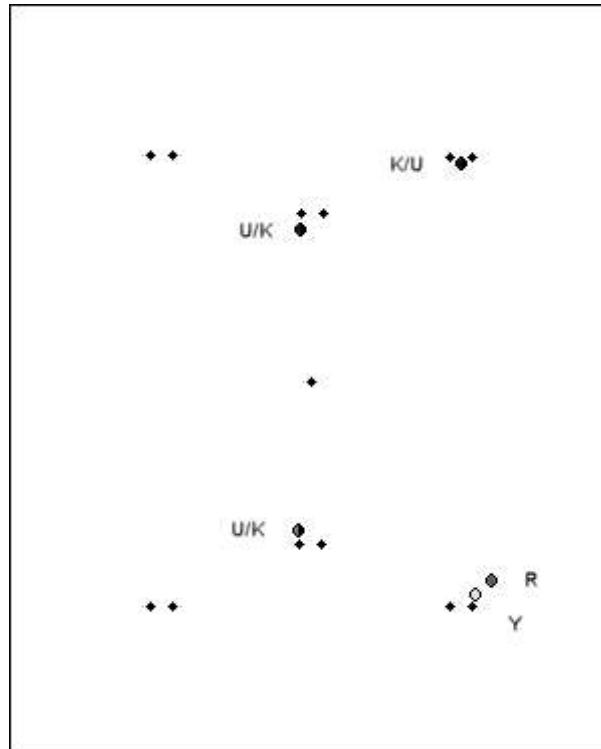
Further 1b leaves are shown in Fig. 2.6, U_1/K_1 version, (introduced by Solomon in about 1971) and Fig. 2.6, U_2/K_2 version, and Fig. 2.7 (variations of mine). It is not entirely clear whether on balance they are any better than the two main ones.

In this Article I am mainly concerned with the situation where UK is for 1 and 1, but a few words are appropriate about the use of 1b tactics when UK is for 1 and 4b. Here, you can consider stopping at 1b and then triple peeling your opponent and doing a double peg-out. By switching pioneers at 3 or around 6 and 1b you can also peel R straight at 1b, with a possible further peel through 2b. The reasoning in favour of this idea is that R, for 2b, *ought* to win the 2-ball ending against U or K, which is for 1. I can only say that, in my limited experience and rather to my surprise, these tactics have not been a complete success. The more expert the players, the more unpredictable the 2-ball game becomes. You should consider not pegging out Y. Possibly a better plan for you is to peel UK's backward ball to 3, at the same time peeling R to 3b; but perhaps the truth of the matter is that when UK is for 1 and 4b you have better whole-game tactics than to stop at 1b, such as (a) the NSL, (b) going to 4b peeling UK's backward ball as far as possible or (c) the immediate triple peel of the opponent.

If you are off form, it is tempting to use 1b tactics because you thereby avoid the triple and concede no lifts. I have found such tactics to be dangerous, as you get into all sorts of trouble if you cannot get the first peel to work. I advise you not to use 1b tactics in this situation unless you are sure that you can keep your head, which is not easy when you are playing badly.

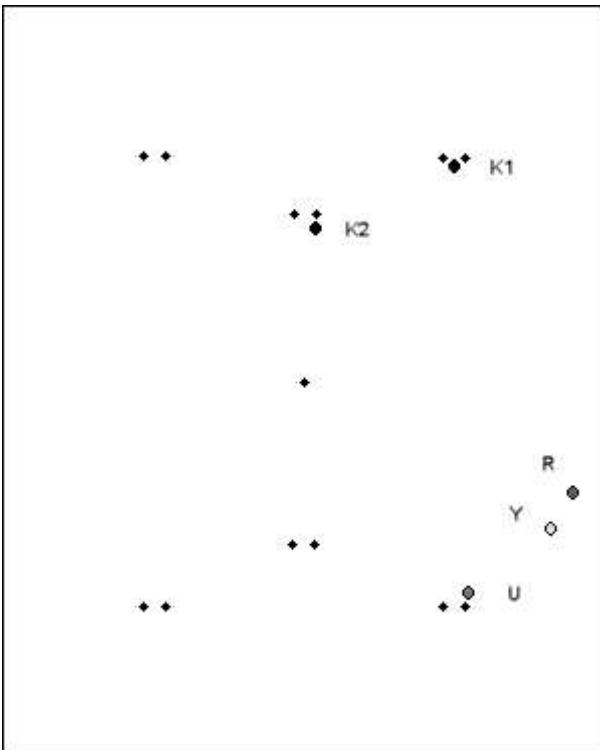
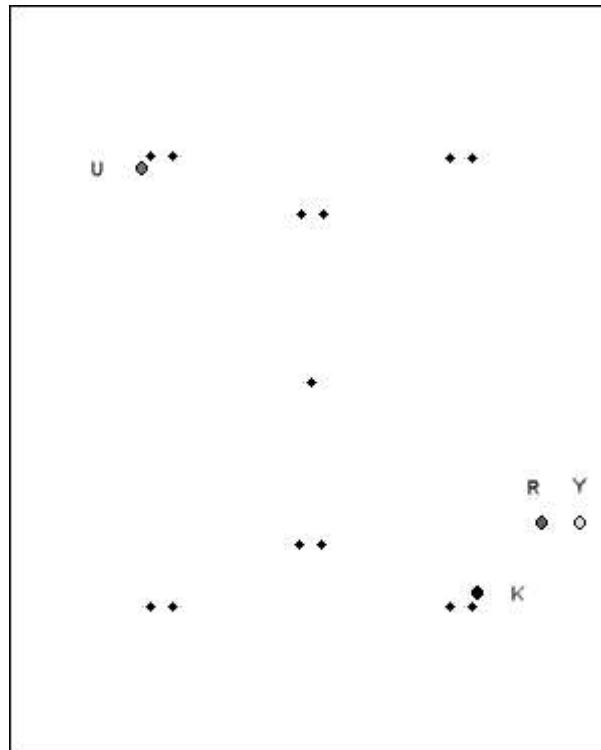
2.5 The 2-back system (1973-1974)

This is a curiosity, not entirely of a piece with the rest of this Article. Bad loss of form made me look for a system that would enable me to win without having to leave any short or medium-range shots or to do any difficult peeling.

*Fig. 2.8 (R for 2b; Y for 2)**Fig. 2.9 (R for 3b; Y for the peg)*

Starting with Y already for 2, preferably, you take R to 2b only and make the leave in Fig. 2.8. Then you take Y to the peg doing a straight peel of R at 2b and make the leave in Fig. 2.9. It is possible to peel Y through 1 when R is for 4 or 5 and still to make the Fig. 2.8 leave, but if you are playing well enough to do that you are better off using other tactics.

I find it difficult to make a balanced judgment of the merits of this system. It has had no proper field trials, having been used only once in match play when I used it to gain a surprise win against Solomon in the seventh round of the 1974 President's Cup after six successive losses. Such a craven system should not be used by a strong player on form, but most experts lose form from time to time and need alternative tactics on which to fall back. The undeniable difficulty of the final turn can be avoided by the use of an alternative second leave, Fig. 2.10, which gives UK a shot of 18 yards or so; but this soulless leave is shamefully unthematic.

*Fig. 2.10 (R for 3b; Y for the peg)**Fig. 2.11 (4b leave; Y for 1)*

2.6 New Standard Leave (c. 1967 / c. 1977)

One of the hoop leaves lay dormant only to reemerge (or to be rediscovered*) in the mid-seventies as what is now generally called the New Standard Leave (“NSL”), the principal form of which is shown in Fig. 2.11. The NSL adds nothing to the whole-game tactics of other 4b leaves. Its significant advantage over them is the extra length of the shortest shot, but a notable disadvantage is that it often gives clearly better break prospects to UK if he hits R or Y with U than it does to RY if he misses and goes into IV. Perhaps the most striking thing about the NSL is how long the croquet world took to discover it. It seems so obvious now.

* Rival claimants to authorship of the NSL are almost as numerous as the birthplaces of Homer.

Just as the OSL became palely imitated, so too the NSL was soon taken up slavishly by players who did not fully understand it. It is a splendid leave when the conditions are suitable. It is not always a good leave when the court is difficult, because you can have trouble picking up a break from it; nor when UK is a really good shot and the lawn is reasonably true, because then the 18-19-yard shot is not all that long. Both these conditions occurred during the 1982 Test series in Australia, the experience of which left the once gleaming NSL looking a bit tarnished, I thought. Why is it that so many players who regularly use the NSL never seem to use the hoop leaves like those in Figs. 2.2 and 2.3?

2.7 Peeling the opponent (1978-1984)

These tactics (I hope stylists will forgive the neologism “POP tactics”) are not yet fashionable. Their detractors might call them hyper-modern (or worse), but the idea behind them, namely that you can sometimes gain a tactical advantage by peeling your opponent through one or two hoops, has been acknowledged for many years. If you are playing a high-bisquer and get a break when he is for 1 and 2, you peel his backward ball to 2 to give yourself the first corner. If when your expert opponent is for 2 and 4b you pick up your first break, you peel his backward ball to foil his triple if he ever regains the innings.

So much is obvious. What is not yet widely accepted is the extension of this idea to the situation where UK has not yet made a hoop. The scheme then is to peel one of his balls to 3 while you go to 4b with R, so that if UK hits in with his backward ball (which you will make the more inviting ball for him to lift) and goes to 4b, he will have no easy triple with which to finish.

This might at first appear to be a fairly meagre gain, but closer inspection shows otherwise. You get the most out of POP tactics when the ability of UK and the state of the court are such that your peels significantly reduce the likelihood of his being able to win in two turns. Then you stand to get one extra lift shot which, unsuccessful delayed triples being what they are, will often be a relatively short one. As this extra lift shot is the one goal of POP tactics when UK is for 1 and 1, they lose some of their value (a) if UK would be unlikely to complete a standard triple, since then you are likely to get the extra lift shot anyway, or (b) if UK would be likely to complete a delayed triple, since then you are unlikely to get an extra shot despite your peels. Figs. 2.2 (above) and 2.12 show useful leaves when you have peeled U to 3.

POP tactics are so new that they call for further explanation which would be out of place in the body of this Article. I go into the subject in an Appendix.

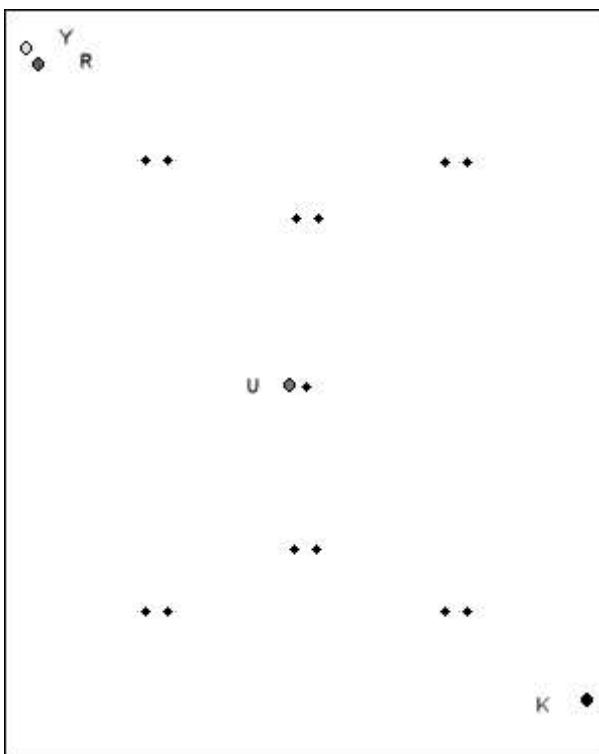


Fig. 2.12 (POP leave; U for 3)

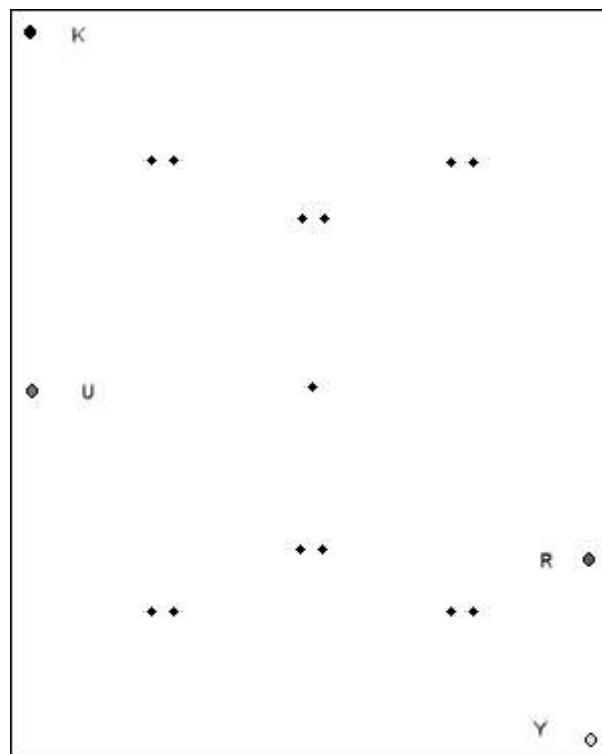


Fig. 2.13 (4b leave)

2.8 Defensive 4b leaves

If when RY makes his leave he sets up a prospective break for his next turn, UK often has an easy break if he hits. To avoid this, RY can deliberately loosen his grip. The idea is an old one, though I am told that the particular leave shown in Fig. 2.13 has recently enjoyed a brief vogue. It ensures that there is no easy break for whichever player obtains the innings. You almost go back to the principles that affect opening tactics.

RY's decision is consistent with the idea that the stronger player (RY himself) should choose defensive positions on the grounds that he will make more of them. One could not recommend a defensive 4b leave to the weaker player unless he had good reason to suppose that his opponent's chance of hitting in was greater than 50%; and even then one would think twice.

2.9 Other whole-game tactics

This Article would be incomplete if I did not mention a few other interesting ideas, and particularly one often used by Hamilton-Miller who was fond of taking his first ball all the way to penult. I suppose the idea was that he threatened to be able to go out in one turn if he ever got in again, however unpromising the positions of the balls. The main criticism of this system is that if your expert opponent wants to peg you out he is not going to be bothered about having to do a double peel first, so you might as well have gone all the way to the peg and exerted a little more pressure. (See Solomon at pages 69 and 70 on giving contact.) On the other hand, if you do not mind being pegged out* this system has the advantage of making your opponent concentrate on peeling you so that he has less time to peel his backward ball.

* See the article in the *Croquet Gazette*, No. 170 page 1, and subsequent references passim. I find myself unable to share all of Mr Riggall's views.

From time to time respected players take the first break to the peg and peg themselves out. Infuriatingly, they seem to win! It is easy to do four peels on your backward ball and I have heard of 5 being done.

I have touched only lightly on positions where UK has advanced well beyond the first hoop. Much of my reasoning applies there too. Interested readers will have little trouble in making the necessary logical extensions.

2.10 Conclusions

While discussing expert tactics I have referred also to tactics more appropriate to the not-quite-expert. Even the expert needs to have a good grasp of what to do when he has lost form. My general recommendation for the not-quite-expert is to use the OSL, the NSL and such hoop leaves as the one in Fig. 2.3. Use 1b tactics sparingly and with modesty, and POP tactics only when obvious. The expert of tomorrow, though today still not-quite-expert, will be given to overambitious attempts at breaks, peels and leaves and will perhaps become the undeserving subject of gerontic criticism. I should be the last person to discourage such experiment, not that anything I wrote could possibly dissuade such a player in his career to the top.

My conclusions for the expert are more Delphic than Olympian. I offer few imperatives and many ambiguities. The chief ambiguity lies in my use of the word "expert", which I deliberately do not define. My thesis is not so much that those particular players who might be thought to be "the experts" ought to adopt the tactics which I advocate, but rather that

players can become so good that it will become necessary for them to do so. To some extent, then, this is a forward-looking Article, though I am sure that in my time a few players have played so well that they outgrew the tactics of the day and could with advantage have looked for others. I offer the following general conclusions:-

- a. The OSL is unsafe after the first break against a really good shot. It is not unplayable, but I regard its main virtues as being (a) the shortening of matches, (b) the saving of energy and (c) a good chance to practise during the first game of the day.
- b. The NSL is unwise on a difficult court. It is at its most valuable when your opponent is an indifferent shot.
- c. The expert must acquire a sound grasp of hoop leaves, but they will not often play a useful part in the first break.
- d. POP tactics should at all times be in the forefront of the expert's mind. I have presented them almost as if they were distinct whole-game tactics, but they can and should be used in conjunction with others. When conditions make the peel of U or K to 3 likely to give RY an extra lift shot if UK hits his own lift shot, I regard POP tactics as the "best buy".
- e. Otherwise, my "best buy" against a really good shot is 1b tactics. You grasp the game by the scruff of the neck, take your two breaks (against me the 30-yard shot has never been hit), quit the court when for peg and penult and defy your opponent to get home before you hit in again. When the gods play croquet, they undoubtedly use 1b tactics.

2.11 Appendix: More about POP tactics

*"Now, my dear Peer, I'm going to peel you,
However little you may enjoy it."*

Henrik Ibsen, *Peer Gynt*

I do not suppose for a moment that what follows represents the last word on POP tactics. They have not yet had the attention of competing enthusiasts which is needed to knock any new idea into shape.

Ordinary peeling breaks generally involve going to the peg. Such breaks call for a frame of mind which values, in decreasing importance, (1) control of the break, (2) peels and (3) the leave. When you use POP tactics this simply will not do. The leave is immensely important, and throughout the break you have to know exactly what leave you are aiming for. One of the reasons for this is that you tend to find that the peeled ball (which for present purposes I shall suppose to be U) is still hovering around 2 when you are making 2b and 3b, making it necessary for you to exercise care and skill if you are to organise a sound leave. If your POP break meets a setback it will usually be wise for you immediately to stop peeling and to concentrate on the leave.

For similar reasons you should avoid the temptation to peel K as well as U. Peeling one ball through two hoops and making a good leave is quite difficult enough.

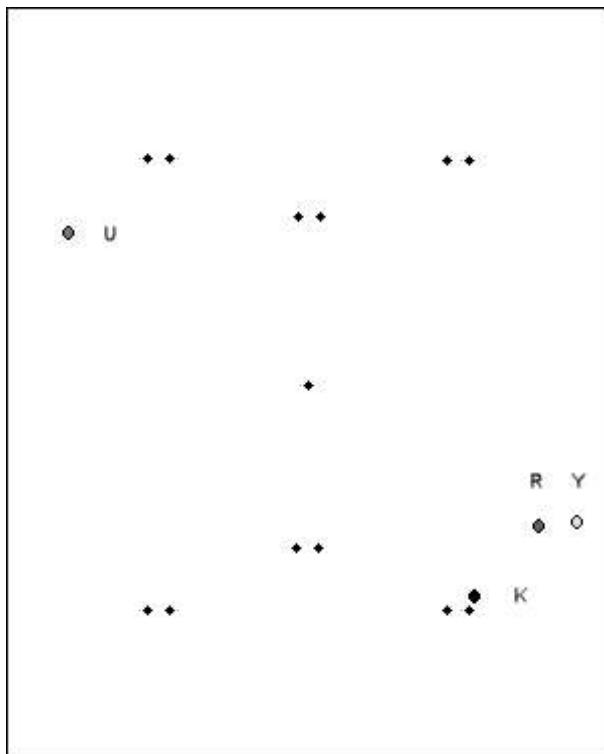


Fig. 2.14 (POP leave; U for 3)

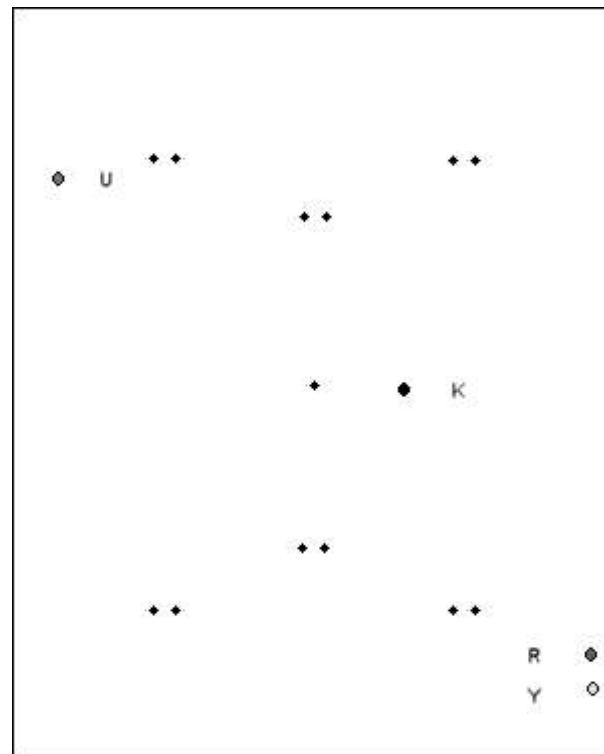


Fig. 2.15 (POP leave: U for 3)

There is little point in peeling U to 3 if your leave then positively invites UK to shoot with U. The leave should at least be neutral in this respect, and if anything should invite him to shoot with K. Fig. 2.14 shows quite an easy leave, but it does virtually force U to shoot. A shortcoming of the OSL, of which Fig. 2.12 is a variation, is that the short shot is just as risky

with the one ball as it is with the other. If you have to use a form of OSL, use a slightly defensive one like Fig. 2.15, however suspect its rationale. The “dream leave” in Fig. 2.16 is strictly for the elite as it usually calls for a strong finish: leave K, rush Y to 3b, make 3b, rush Y to the boundary near II, get behind U and leave it in position.

I laid stress in the last paragraph on the need to invite UK to shoot with his backward ball because that shot is often a turning point of the game: depending on whether or not he hits, one of you ought to be able to get an all-round break. At the same time it is worth while taking into consideration the possibility that the game will not go according to plan and that it may get messy and complicated. Once U’s clip is safely on 3, you have a little more security in the event of your breaking down on K. Therefore, although POP tactics are much better when you force K to play, you should not avoid them just because you doubt your ability to make a perfect leave. In particular, the Fig. 2.14 leave which I have just criticised is not all that bad. It is a perfectly respectable NSL in its own right.

POP tactics can validly be used even when the likelihood of their increasing the number of your lift shots is low. Sometimes you may have nothing better to do. For instance if UK breaks down at the first hoop it may cost you no effort to peel U through 1 before or after 1 and through 2 before 6 or 1b. If these peels fall into your lap, why not take them?

I have been discussing POP tactics in the context of the first break. I referred at the outset to their use in other contexts. Sometimes the use is obvious, such as when your opponent sticks in 3 with a standard triple set up: you peel him through 3 without having to think about it and through 4 if you get a good chance. Another obvious use arises when UK is for 1 and 3: you peel him to 3 and 3. Then the OSL becomes rather more attractive, especially in the Fig. 2.12 version with U further West. At other times the use of POP tactics is more subtle, and on occasions my pellucid explanations to enquiring spectators have been met with blank incomprehension.

Here are some further examples. The first, of which there are numerous examples, is where a peel improves your leave by spoiling UK’s break prospects. Fig. 2.3 is improved if you have peeled K to 2, because U can be rushed to 1 but not to 2. Secondly there is the peel through 6 (or occasionally 3b) which puts the clip on a lift hoop when UK’s other ball is already for 1b or 4b. Thirdly there is the peel through a “nice” hoop. The most common example is hoop 4. Every thinking player prefers to be for 4 than for 5, because when he is for 4 he can use corner IV as a base from which to launch an easy break. Besides, you yourself can more safely play into IV once your opponent’s clip is on 5. A less common instance of this kind of peel arises when the lawn has one particularly difficult hoop, perhaps with very fast and uneven ground in front of it. It may then be considered advantageous to peel the opponent through the preceding hoop so as to give him as hard a time as possible at the difficult hoop.

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Next article: Article 3: Establishing a Break Style and Technique

Author: Keith Wylie

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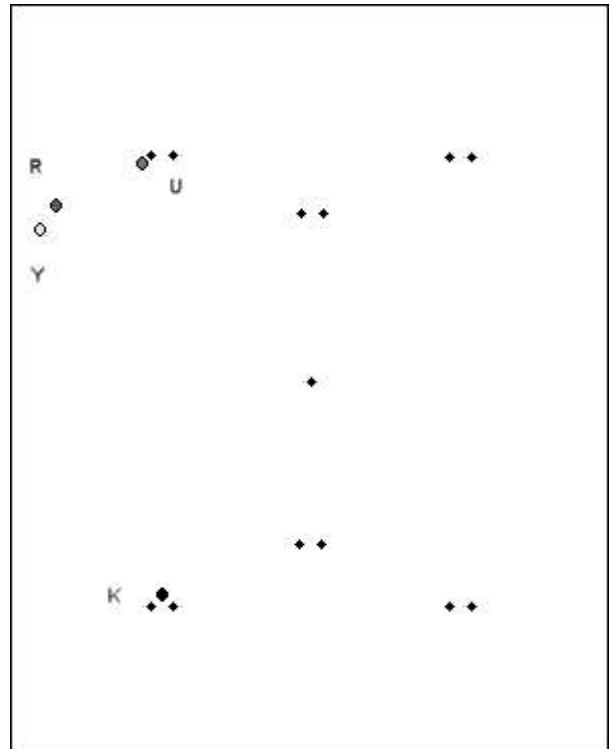


Fig. 2.16 (POP leave, U for 3)