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How to Play

Expert Croquet Tactics

Article 4: The Opening

By Keith F Wylie

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Article 4: The Opening

*"Heads!"**"Heads it is."**"I'll have Red and Yellow"**"Wovon man nicht sprechen kann, darüber muß man schweigen"*

Ludwig von Wittgenstein

4.1 Introduction

For the purposes of this Article I shall adopt the convention that the balls are played into the game in the order U, R, K, Y. For example, [K to II] will usually refer to the third turn. Whereas up to now I have generally been looking at the game from the point of view of one player, RY, I shall now be considering what each player in turn should do.

I shall use the term "critical distance" to denote the range at which a player hits half his shots, which may typically be 11 or 12 yards. Where it is relevant to a diagram, I shall indicate it with a suitably vague block of dots.

Until recently, opening tactics have been developed by players whose critical distance did not exceed 13 yards, or who at any rate seem to have believed that to be the case. I too shall make this assumption during most of what follows, but I return at the end to consider what happens if players are better than that.

4.2 More lasting than bronze?

Articles from the late sixties by William Ormerod and Nigel Aspinall in the Croquet Gazette (No. 98 page 3 and No. 99 page 5 respectively) still seem fresh. There one finds the suggestion that one should open at least 7 yards North of IV, and there too one finds the sequence [U near IV]; [R hits U]; [R sends U to 8 yards South of III]; [R to 8 yards North of I] (Fig. 4.1),

which is still being “discovered” in one form or another by every bright newcomer. However, received opinion about the opening does change and is changing. This Article is written, of necessity, for the present. If the section in which I champion the Duffer tice bears fruit, it will become dated. Equally, ideas that at present are somewhat conjectural may in time acquire justified recognition or rejection.

The large number of imponderable factors in most openings clouds one’s vision and disrupts attempts at objective evaluation. (What are the odds of RY getting the first break in Fig. 4.11, after both K and Y have missed the Duffer tice?) My assessments have to be subjective to some extent. As the need to play the man and not the position may make an objectively weak opening correct in a particular case, perhaps objective assessment is an unnecessary goal.

The motto at the head of this Article might be translated as “If you have nothing worth saying, keep your mouth shut”, a dire warning to anyone writing about the opening. So much depends on judgment on the day that one can make objective comment only with the greatest diffidence. My excuse for writing on this difficult subject (if I need one) is that the material has not been gathered together in one place before. To my survey of established ideas I add some views and conjectures that I hope will be found interesting.

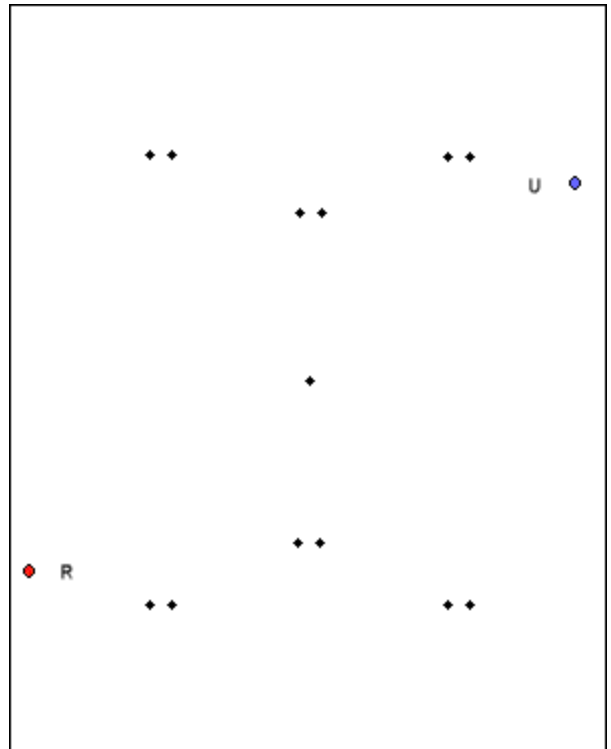


Fig. 4.1

4.3 The purpose of the opening

In the existing literature the opening is generally described in terms of a battle for the innings. That may be fair enough in general; but when the players are strong enough to be looking for an all-round break as soon as they take croquet, the opening is more *a battle for the first innings with the prospect of a break*. When the First Edition of this book was published John Solomon disagreed with this opinion. He regarded the innings as paramount. He reckoned that in his time he usually picked up a break if he won the innings from the opening and suggested that the “expert”, for whom the book was written, should have the same expectation. In a sense this is not a real objection to the proposition I have advanced: for if he himself had “prospects of a break” after almost any opening then naturally he was concerned only with the battle for the innings itself, particularly if his opponent was equally good. Readers must decide whether I demand too little of my “experts”. There would not be many of them (readers or experts!) if they were expected to play to Solomon’s standards.

When one compares the relative merits of various openings, one inevitably looks first at how long a shot the fourth ball Y is expected to get; yet the apparent advantage to UK of an opening that concedes the longest shot to Y may be counter-balanced by RY’s good break prospects or UK’s poor ones.

One finds the same principle in the context of the leave at the end of the first break. Maximising the shortest shot is not necessarily best. An illustration of this is shown in Fig. 4.2 (Wylie v. Murfitt, Hurlingham test match 1974). UK gets at least two shots before Y can get a break, and in general has better break prospects than RY. One cannot say that the leave, however interesting, has a clear advantage over the OSL.

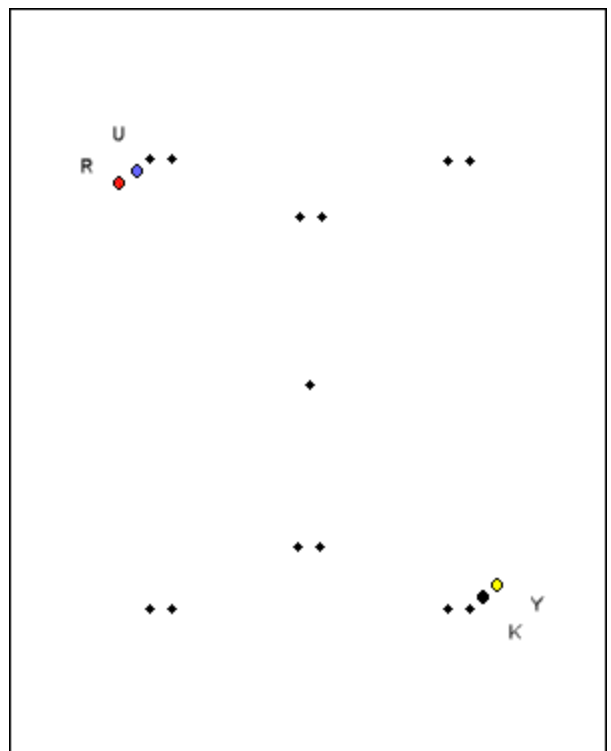


Fig. 4.2 R for 4-back, Y for 1

So too when assessing an opening you need to look ahead a little to obtain a balanced view. In Fig. 4.3, where the tice is a little past RY’s critical distance, his better break prospects give him a roughly equal position with UK. In a game in the 1984 President’s Cup my opponent played [Y to II] in Fig. 4.4. I think he was wrong to forgo the shortish shot, but it was at least plausible for him to concede the immediate innings to me. I should have had an easy break if he had missed U or R, and a

trivial one if he had missed K; whereas as it was I had no break at all and he had a reasonable hope of my conceding a safer shot. ([K hits U] was by no means likely to lead to an easy break, so the risk of missing made the shot unjustifiable.)

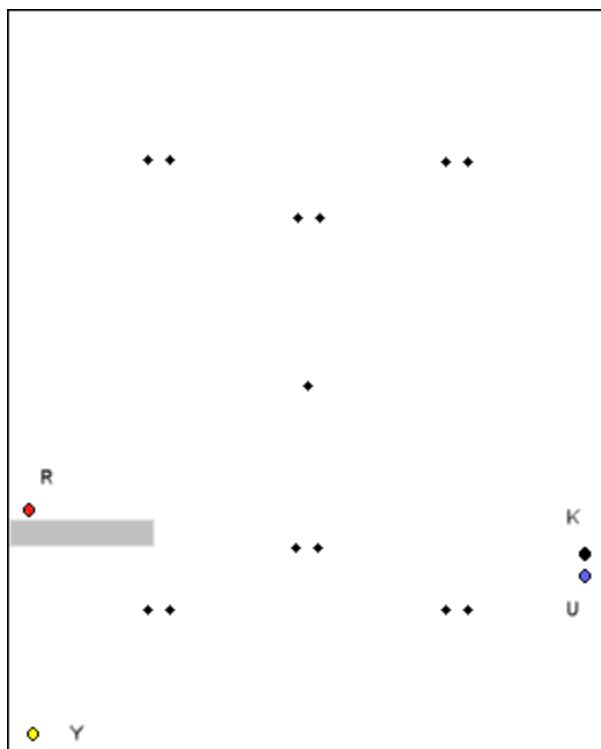


Fig. 4.3

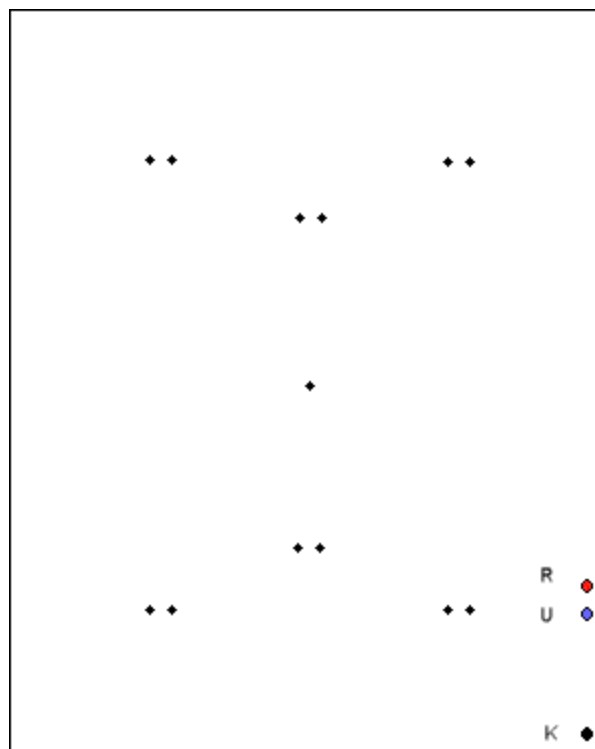


Fig. 4.4

4.4 Further general comments

The choice of type of opening is not always vital. A casual [U to peg] used occasionally to be used in serious matches. It is surprising how seldom the “joke” opening [U tries 1] is punished. Some experts admit to not caring much whether they play first or second. As most openings give each side about a 50% chance of getting the first innings, the pragmatic attitude is sometimes to play a casual opening and to regard the game as only really starting when the first shot is taken. Some particular openings may be considered to carry with them implied statements of your opinions about the strengths and weaknesses of you or your opponent. If you prefer to keep your opinions to yourself, stick to the main lines of the standard opening.

Control of IV at the beginning of the game is generally an advantage, for then your balls tend to be behind the first break and your opponents’ in front of it. If in doubt, choose tactics that enable you to occupy the corner, or failing that to have a good rush to it.

It is a fallacy to regard UK as in some sense having the innings merely by virtue of his playing first. He does not. He is battling for it and must be prepared to take a calculated risk to earn it.

4.5 The standard opening: (1) Where to put U

In the standard opening U plays near IV. Usually R then lays a tice on the West yard-line and K either shoots at R or joins U.

[U in or a little North of IV] In A class play this is arguably refuted by [R at U]: for even if R misses, K usually has no break if he hits the double target and faces disaster if he too misses. However, this is hardly a refutation if UK is a reasonably good shot: still less so if RY is a poor one. Besides, the advantage RY gets from hitting U is debatable. If you are content to face [R at U] this is a respectable opening, favouring those who like being in corners; but you deprive yourself of [K at U] and you are less well placed after [R tice]; [K hits R] than you would have been if U had been out of the corner.

In the late sixties virtually everyone (*pace* Ormerod) opened two or three yards from the corner. This opening is still played, but is unfashionable. An argument for opening here is that UK can join very wide and then play [K at U], leaving his balls two or three yards apart if he misses. In addition, U is reasonably out of the game for the fourth turn.

[U just West of IV] This is played from B-baulk, so that K can shoot at U (usually also from B-baulk): then if he misses he has a rush to the first hoop and leaves no double target. This opening is not used in the best circles for a variety of reasons, principally because RY gets such an easy break if he hits his tice with Y; but it is one way of getting off to a good start if Y misses, and as such may be considered suitable if you are shooting badly.

[U well North of IV] With U here, it is relatively easy to set up the leave in Fig. 4.9 after [R tice]; [K hits R or U], or you can join reasonably wide (if so minded) if the tice is long. You deprive RY of a sound standard tice (see below).

Until recently it was usual to play U about level with 4. My personal reason was that I preferred to remain within plausible striking distance of the corner which, for an indifferent shot, meant about there. I wanted to keep open the option of joining wide with K near corner IV. That reasoning is questionable. If the tice is of such a length as to call for [K at R] it matters little where U is; and if UK wants to join wide it can only be because the tice is beyond the players' critical distance in which case he stands to win the innings anyway and does not need to hide K away.

The great disadvantage of playing U level with 4 is the likelihood of leaving a double target if K shoots at U and misses on the right. The risk is significantly diminished if U is about 3 yards further North. The advantage of being able to play [K at U] relatively safely makes that opening superior to [U level with 4].

This is the place I now recommend for U. It is only a little short of being wired from the end of A-baulk. It seems to have become more fashionable in 1990, but I do not know for what reasons. Ormerod deserves credit for having supported this opening, virtually a lone voice for 20 years. In the rest of this Article, "well North of IV" means this position. Perhaps by the third edition I shall be able to call it the "standard" position.

UK cannot afford to open U much further North than that and still shoot at it from A-baulk, because the prospective double target from B-baulk after a miss becomes too good.

If you propose to play [K at U from B-baulk], you can shorten that shot by starting off with U further from IV. Travellers tell of an opening peg-high, but I do not understand how that can be justified if UK's critical distance is below 13 yards. Some players who use this opening will favour having U about 5 yards from the corner spot to make the fifth turn shot easier.

4.6 The standard opening: (2) The standard tice

It has been generally believed that, if UK and RY are equally good shots, RY can achieve an equal opportunity of winning the opening if he lays a tice of the correct length. Indeed, one would very much like to believe so, as it implies that winning the toss gives no clear advantage.

Tice length is obviously a matter for the player's judgment on the day. Cotter (page 35) suggested an 8-yard tice and Solomon (page 29) a 10-yard one. As their books were aimed more at the general reader it is perhaps more informative to note what tices they themselves laid against strong opponents, which in the late sixties was usually one of about 11 yards. At that time the response would reasonably often be [K joins U]. The increasing popularity of [K at R] has coincided with, and perhaps has caused, a general lengthening of the tice to 13 yards or so.

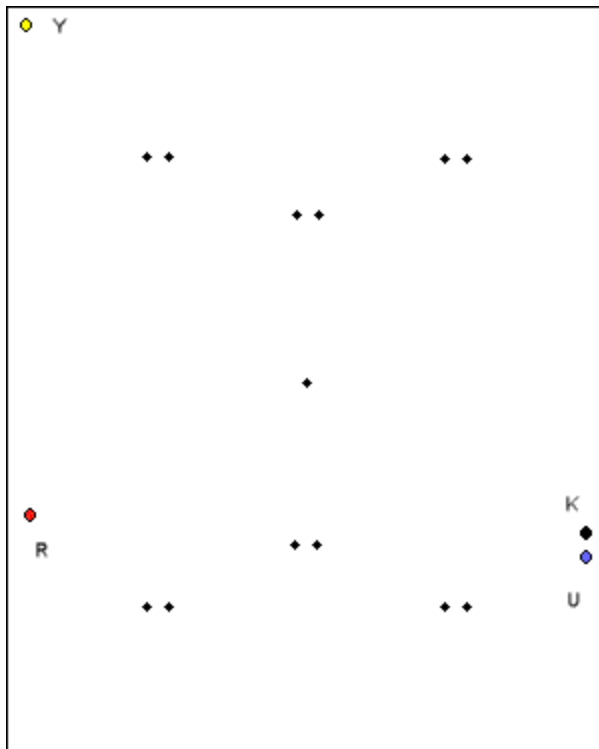


Fig. 4.5

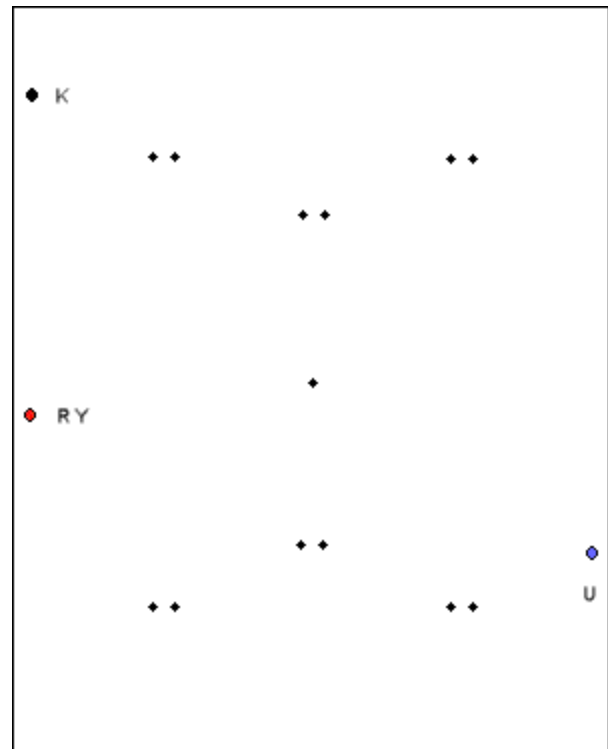


Fig. 4.6

The reward for winning the innings Looking two turns ahead, Fig. 4.5 shows the position after K has missed U and Y has missed the tice, and Fig. 4.6 shows the position after K has missed the tice and Y has hit it. In addition to the position actually shown in Fig. 4.5, we must bear in mind the similar positions where K has deliberately joined wide. Each position poses problems for the player who has just gained the innings, UK in the first diagram and RY in the second: he does not have a ready break (though in Fig. 4.5 UK can try Solomon's take-off to Y and thick take-off to get a rush on R), so he will usually have to make a leave and give his opponent a chance to shoot. That in turn opens the door to all sorts of

complications. So even though a particular opening may make one player more likely to win the first innings than his opponent, the relative poverty of his break prospects may diminish the value of that innings and make the opening equal.

I mentioned the influence of break prospects in connection with Fig. 4.3. We see a similar influence in the case where both K and Y miss the tice. K's fifth turn shot promises break prospects if he hits that are better than those he concedes if he misses, and indeed better than Y would have got if he had hit the tice in the fourth turn. The [K at R] variation of the standard opening in general yields better immediate break prospects on winning the first innings to UK, which is a factor to be weighed in the balance when we consider which player is the more likely to obtain that first innings.

For the purposes of what follows I shall assume that if K misses the tice it goes near enough to II for it not to be worthwhile Y making a double target of R and K. A shot going in a straight line and just getting into the corner area at II misses a 12-yard tice by nearly 9 inches, more than foot off the middle of the target. This assumption demonstrates the shortcomings of analysis on paper. Misses like that are quite common below a certain standard of shooting. More common, though, is that the lawn will slope outwards slightly, and that a ball just missing the tice on the left will leave the lawn ten yards further down. My analysis therefore applies only when the players are good shots and the West boundary is not outwards-sloping.

The critical-distance tice A little mathematics (which I set out in an Appendix) suggests that, if the tice is laid at the players' critical distance and K shoots at it, RY is slightly more likely than UK to gain the first innings. If one takes into account RY's poorer break prospects, this opening will be about equal when UK has nothing better to do than [K at R].

When UK is a strong player, he may improve his chances by [K at U from A-baulk] if U is far enough North of IV to make it a safe shot. Even if he misses he still has a 50% chance of the first innings and if he hits he can make the leave shown over the page in Fig. 4.9. Which player has the advantage just before K shoots at U rather depends on your view of UK's break prospects after misses by both K and Y (Fig. 4.5 above). If you consider them slim, then the opening is at best equal: for on that view RY is in the stronger position immediately after K has missed (compare Fig. 4.3). On the other hand if you agree with Solomon then the opening early favours UK. The higher the standard of play is, the more this particular opening favours UK.

Some people would argue against any opening that involved U and K joining close. As an alternative, K can shoot from B-baulk. If UK has opened with U within comfortable hitting range of IV, I consider the players to have equal chances after a miss from B-baulk (Fig. 4.7). Consequently the original odds are tipped in UK's favour by the chance that K will hit.

Longer tices That advantage becomes even greater when the tice is longer, and for the same reasons. To those may be added the fact that the longer the tice the more [K misses R] leaves a threatening position.

The super-long tice (peg-high and beyond) is a red herring. Among the best players it is refuted by [K at R] and in any event the reply [K misses or joins U] gives UK easily the better chance of the first innings. This tice has in recent years acquired a certain standing by having been widely used by leading members of the mighty New Zealand team. Their success in play does not justify their choice of opening; nor does the fact that they would often hit their own tices mean that the opening gave them an advantage, for they would have had that advantage anyway by virtue of their ability. As I know to my shame, the game's leading players are occasionally mistaken.

Shorter tices If Y stands a better-than-even chance of hitting the tice, K is dissuaded from joining or shooting at U. Can RY improve his prospects by shortening the tice? The mathematics (in the Appendix) shows that as you shorten the tice you also increase UK's chance of the first innings after [K at R]. You do not at the same time change the players' break prospects. You just make [K at U] less and less attractive.

It is a matter for you whether you can find some tice length, presumably just below the critical distance, where (a) RY still has the edge in terms of getting the first innings, (b) K will shoot at R and (c) you personally consider RY's poorer break prospects to be adequate. For myself, I cannot. How agreeable it would have been for me to be able to conclude that a tice of about 11 yards, i.e. the tice of the sixties, is usually best (*plus ça change ...*). Perhaps it is, but I cannot offer a logical argument to that effect.

The validity of the standard tice My conclusion is that RY's best choice of tice length is probably the critical distance; but that among strong players there is no standard tice - of any length - that gives RY equality where the lawn is level, the players have equal shooting ability and U opens well North of IV. This is as much of a surprise to me as I suspect it will be

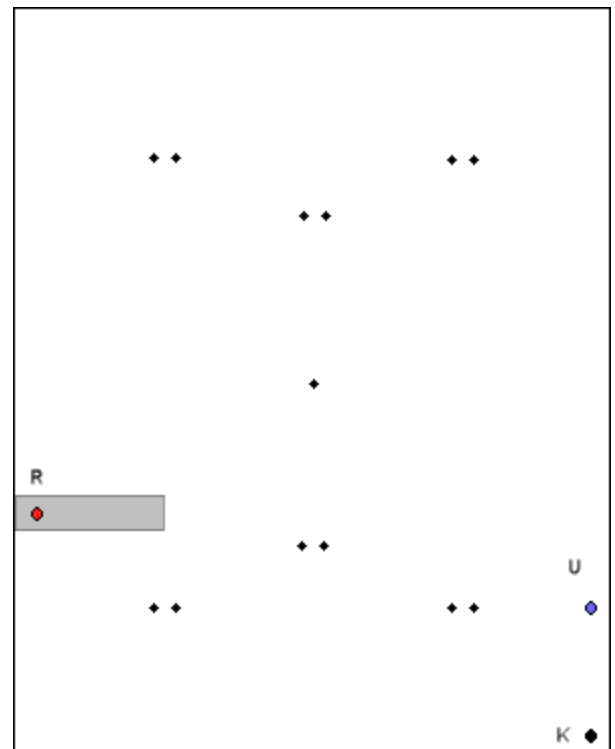


Fig. 4.7

to most of my readers. What I said about some experts not caring whether they play first or second is a plain fact. I was one of them. To be fair to us, U used not generally to be opened far enough from IV to expose our error (if it is an error).

If there is an inherent and inescapable weakness in the standard tice one would expect to have found signs of it in play. It is certainly no coincidence that I have frequently used the Duffer tice, which interestingly enough enjoyed a revival during the 1990 season in England. It may also be no coincidence that over the last few years people have been trying tices of a “psychological” 4 yards (perhaps 6 yards would be more of a menace) or the “virile” 18 yards or more.

Never fear, reader, the standard tice is not dead. This is only a book. You may have noticed how level the lawns are in all my diagrams - better than Hurlingham's. If the West boundary slopes outwards (as so many do) RY can secure a positive advantage from a standard tice, because if K misses it on the left there will be an easy double target. Even on a level lawn the opening is far too convenient to be abandoned when it is not obviously unfair. UK's theoretical advantage depends significantly on his successful shooting, which may let him down at the beginning of a game. Any residual unfairness is further softened by the frequency with which critical distances are misjudged. Besides, the faint-hearted will forever be set short tices.

Other influences on tice length The choice of tice length may be influenced by RY's tactical preferences for the next turn or two. There must be many factors, but I shall mention two: he may not care to take off across a very fast lawn and so may lay a shorter tice to encourage [K at R]; or his view of the players' strengths may lead him to prefer which player is to have the greater chance of the first innings but the poorer break prospects. (This choice can only be consciously made by UK, as I shall shortly explain, but the tice length will affect it). Not everyone would consider RY (to play) to have a particularly good position in Fig. 4.8 - or at any rate not everyone would do a very good job with it. I have had some very enjoyable games as UK in this sort of position (and, to be fair, as RY also).

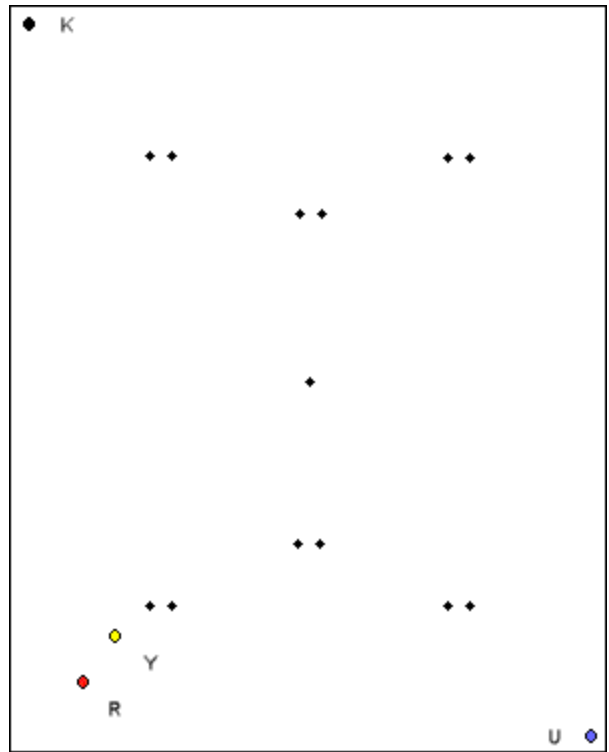


Fig. 4.8

4.7 The standard opening: (3) Play after a standard tice

The position in Fig. 4.9 represents most people's ideal after hitting with K. If R is just a yard or two off the yard line, rather than well into the lawn, then it is easier for UK to get a dolly rush to the first hoop and the break is a little more difficult for RY if he hits from B-baulk. R can be a good deal further South than shown in the diagram. Strong though the position is for UK, it is one which is not always easy to achieve. Cross-court split shots and take-offs do sometimes go wrong. Besides, Y may hit; and if he does, he stands to get an immediate four-ball break which UK would not. When you weigh up choices of opening you have to be careful not to attribute too high a value to this position. The “dream opening” is often shattered. (When in reply you shoot with Y, be aware that if you roquet U too far you may not get a break. Your shooting style and the levelness of the lawn will influence your decision whether to shoot at full strength.)

Whether to shoot at R with K If K misses the tice and Y hits it, RY gets a sterile position (Fig. 4.6) though at the same time the decision by UK to shoot at the tice made RY the favourite to get the first innings. On the other hand if K shoots at U, UK has the greater chance of the innings, though often that too is arguably sterile (Fig. 4.5). *In making this choice UK dictates which player is more likely to get the first innings along with the possibility of a sterile position.* The very fact of having this choice may in some games be a tangible advantage to be UK. Some players are considerably better than others at judging sterile positions, whether as in-player or out-player. Some players are better than others at making something of these sterile positions, or indeed at defending against them. Your appreciation, as UK, of the players' strengths in each department of the game may influence which shot you take or whether to join wide. If you agree with Solomon that Fig. 4.5 should lead to a break for U, you will probably wish to shoot at U from A-baulk. If RY is unlikely to make much of the position in Fig. 4.6, but very likely indeed to make a break if you miss U and if he then hits the tice, then you may be influenced to shoot at R, to join wide or to shoot at U from B-baulk.

What I have just said applies primarily where the tice is at about the critical distance. Where a tice of a different length has been laid, or where one player is a much better shot than the other, the choice for K may be easier but will still be influenced by the points I have mentioned.

One player once suggested to me that in a match between equal players K should always shoot at a standard tice. This is an interesting conversation point, but there are too many counter-examples for it to be valid. The current fashion is to shoot at the tice almost every time, but fashion is often wrong. The same player once took advantage of this fashion (and perhaps cast

doubt on his own theory!) to win the opening against the odds during a phase when he was shooting badly: he laid very long tices, which his opponents invariably shot at.

[K at R] If R is roqueted off the lawn level with 5 or thereabouts, the difficulty of the split shot going to U can make you decide against the Fig. 4.9 position. Then I should recommend a stop shot sending R near the yard line level with 2 followed by a moderately wide join (i.e. defensive) if you as UK are the stronger player, or if you are the weaker a split shot to the East of the peg followed by a 1-yard join (i.e. aggressive). These options may be forced on you if you opened U too near IV.

When taking croquet from R, aim K about 2 yards to one side of the line of U. Then you are less likely to leave a double target if you send K off.

It is usually good defence to send K all the way to the North boundary if it misses, but occasionally UK obtains an advantage if K stops a few yards short and menaces R. Shoot from the corner spot. Then if the slope of the lawn carries K a little into the lawn, or if you miss by a good deal on the right, RY will not have a double target however short K goes. Besides, if K is a little off the West yard-line, it has a larger target if Y misses R. If you want, aim a little to the right of the centre of R to reduce the chance of missing on the left. You must use your judgment over sending K short of the North boundary, important factors being (a) the ability of RY to pick up a break if K is off the yard-line and (b) the extent to which you lose accuracy by not shooting hard.

After [Y misses R], the return shot [K at R and Y] is one that you simply must take against a strong RY. Ignore the risk of conceding a corner cannon. It hardly ever happens. (Incidentally, do not forget the easy break that RY can get by using a pseudo-cannon if K goes a yard or so East of the corner peg.)

[K at U] I have already covered most of this subject. If you shoot from A-baulk you must not risk leaving a double target. If you take that risk, you stand to lose much more by missing than you stand to gain by hitting. If U is level with 4, you will have to aim left of centre to reduce the risk. At the same time you reduce your chance of hitting, which in turn may invalidate your decision to shoot at U in the first place. Wherever U is, you suffer a tactical loss by joining close even if there is no double target.

In the First Edition I did scant justice to the shot at U from B-baulk. I have already shown one valid use of it (see Fig. 4.7). The shot becomes more doubtful the further U is from IV, and for all but the best shots is virtually inconsistent with the place I recommend for U. If UK joins seriously wide he puts at risk the innings he could otherwise claim when RY misses the tice. Players whom I respect are content to end up 7 yards wide against a standard tice, sometimes even 10 yards or more and certainly beyond comfortable hitting range. Presumably they consider these tactics successful, but if they are I cannot explain why. If U is 10 yards from IV, I should play this shot only after a Duffer tice.

[K joins U] Remember that if Y misses the tice your fifth turn break will depend largely on your making the first hoop. You get little assistance in this from having a yard-line rush at the start. You cannot cut rush to Y, and the danger of failing to make I ought to persuade you to leave your partner ball near the East boundary. If you do not need the rush, why join close? It just makes life easier for RY if he hits.

One answer to that question might be that you would like to avoid a corner-to-corner take-off. As I propose not to stray beyond the fifth turn in this Article, I shall leave this point open; but the situations where a close join is plausible are very few. If you are joining up you should join wide.

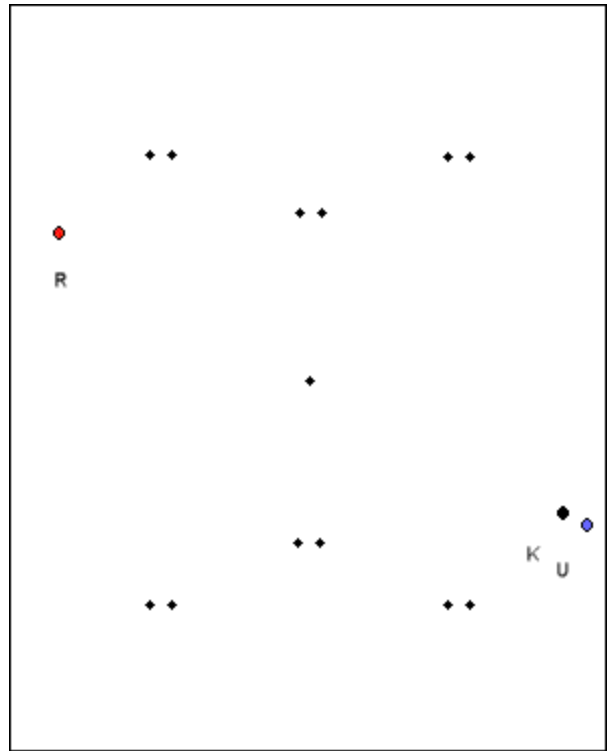


Fig. 4.9

4.8 The standard opening: (4) Other replies by R

[R in or near II] The idea is that K will join U, presumably wide, and that Y will shoot at U or K. R should not be played more than 9 inches or so from the corner spot, or UK will play a crushing [K to II].

Given my hypothesis that the players' critical distance is less than 13 yards, this opening deliberately concedes to UK the better chance not only of the first innings but also of the first break. It can be justified on three grounds: (a) In all the circumstances RY would do even worse if he laid a tice. (b) RY considers himself better placed for the prospective first break than UK. Perhaps RY is clearly better than UK at approaching 2 from II. Ormerod suggested that it is an advantage for RY to be able to approach 2 off his partner ball, which UK would not do after this opening. I beg to disagree, because for UK the approach sending R to 3 is a natural split shot. (c) The third reason for the opening is that it makes for a quiet,

defensive beginning to the game. Less depends on whether Y hits in the fourth turn, since he does not hand UK a break on a plate. It might suit RY when he considers himself significantly better than UK or better equipped for a tactical battle.

[R Duffer tice] The invention of the “Duffer tice” (shown in Fig. 4.10 together with K’s possible replies) is attributed to Duff Mathews (who was known as “the Duffer”). It should be spelt with a capital D if only to dispel any notion that it is unsound. R is played near hoop 6, offering K a shot which is sometimes as short as 8 yards but which he cannot afford to miss. The only safe shot at R is taken from III.

Aspinall advised putting R to the West of 6, but I prefer it 2 feet or so to its East: then (a) after [Y misses R], you end up well away from the first hoop and menacingly near to IV and (b) if you send R short of 6, as I prefer, the hoop often interferes with a rush on R to 1. There is something to be said for a tice even further East. For each extra foot, Y will end up a further 3 or 4 feet nearer to IV if it misses.

None of the replies is particularly attractive, but at least the defensive ones give RY a hard time if Y hits. [U well North of IV] is a rewarding anticipatory measure, as you usually get a good wide join after [K at U from B-baulk] - further reason for putting U there.

The Duffer tice is one of my favourite openings. I find it particularly strong when I am playing against a really good shot. I have often won the opening with it against all the odds. The reply that has been most effective against me is the wide join, because after hitting with Y my attempts to remove R from the centre of the court and to separate U and K have often been incompetent.

I find myself obliged to advise in terms of my personal experience. At the time of the First Edition, the Duffer tice was totally out of fashion and I hardly ever saw anyone else using it. The opening has very recently acquired a significant following, but there is not yet a consensus as to the best lines for each player, nor as to whether the opening is theoretically equal. The position in Fig. 4.11, after K and Y have (unusually) both missed the tice, is very open. It might be thought that a drawback for RY is that after hitting with Y you have nothing on and have to concede a further shot; but equally, UK has very little on after [Y misses R] unless he has had the effrontery to join close enough to get a rush.

You do need to judge the pace of the lawn reasonably accurately with your first stroke of the game - perhaps of the tournament - but the precise length of the tice is usually not critical. I first learnt the value of the 8-yard tice when I laid one by mistake.

The unpopularity of the Duffer tice may arise from a dislike of opening in the centre of the lawn and then missing with Y. The remedy is simple: lay a shorter tice. You should not lay it a yard beyond the hoop. Be bold - lay it a yard short of it. I have laid 9-yard Duffer tices against the best shots in the game and watched them stride down to B-baulk, rub their chins, have a look from III and finally trudge back to A-baulk. During the 1990 Open Doubles Championships I had the pleasure of seeing an 8-yard Duffer tice laid, and the drama of a member of the recently victorious MacRobertson team shoot at it - from III! Sound enough, but in context it was a crushing psychological defeat. The Duffer tice was successfully used in the final of the 1991 World Championship.

Very rarely indeed has my Duffer tice been hit. Try it. You will not regret it.

[R - other tices] Eric Solomon once suggested a tice one foot South of 3: then K is wired from a direct shot, and if he shoots from a wide point he gives Y a double target. Unfortunately, even on the flattest of lawns you cannot expect to place R

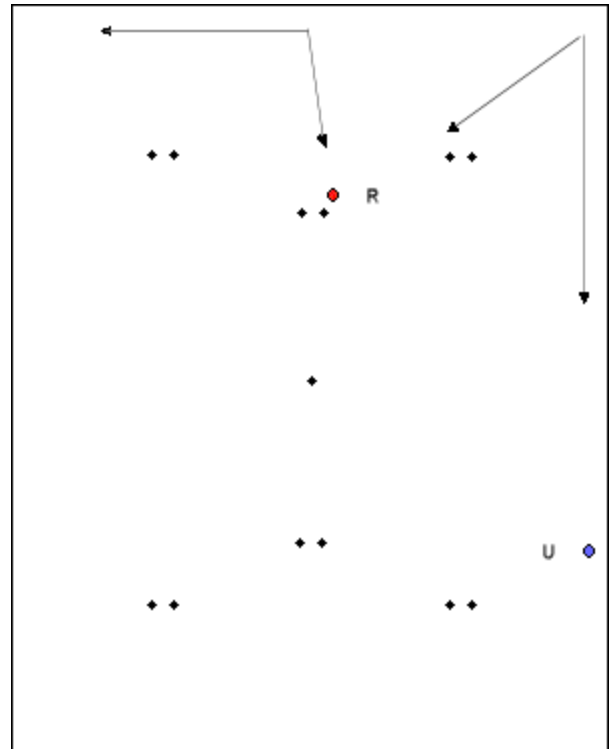


Fig. 4.10

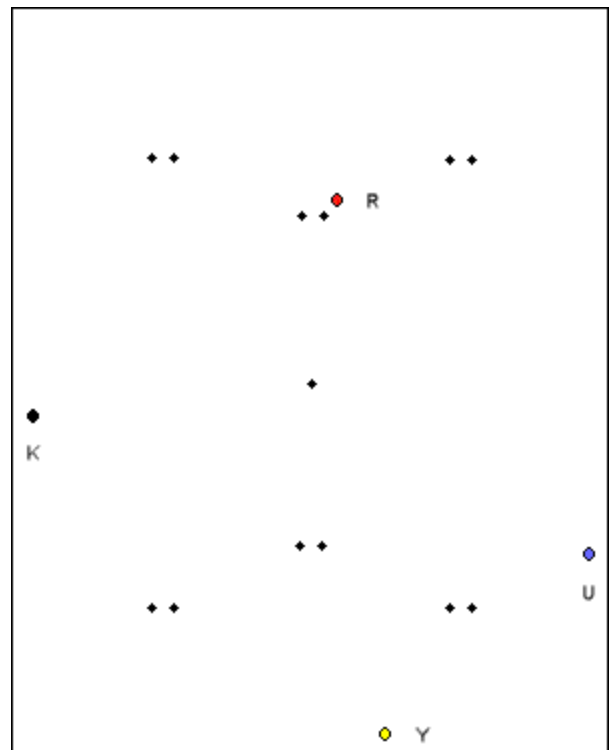


Fig. 4.11

accurately enough. I do not recommend the East boundary tice in the A class. K can shoot at R in such a way as to join wide if he misses, making him the clear favourite to take both the first innings and the first break. I should also mention the tice played from B-baulk: about 8 yards towards II and a few inches off the yard-line. If K misses he will leave a very large target for Y. (The spot where K goes off should always be refereed.) Is it sufficient recommendation for an opening that it is “interesting”?

[R near the centre of the court] This is a desperate measure, particularly when K can afford to shoot at U. It is plausible only when RY is much the weaker player, the idea being for him to stake everything on Y hitting. A clever tactical reply by UK is [K well South of II], denying a sound shot for Y and threatening to shoot at R in the fifth turn and join U wide if he misses.

[R at U from A-baulk] If U is in or near IV, the reasoning behind this opening is that, quite apart from the advantages of hitting, you are content with the position after a close miss. Note that if U is in the corner and R misses on the right, it should be replaced to the North of U, giving a ball-and-a-half target.

However, if U is well North of IV and R misses, RY ends up in the dilemma shown in Fig. 4.4. As that represents a clear disadvantage if RY's critical distance is less than 13 yards, you should only shoot at U if you consider that you gain a clear advantage by hitting. Alternatively, where you as RY are a reasonably good shot but are the weaker player, you may justify the opening on the basis that taken together the two shots give you as good a chance of the first break as you will get.

The most popular continuation after hitting is to roll U and R to the peg leaving a double target from baulk. K cannot afford to shoot and miss. The danger for RY is that UK will shoot, hit and go round. If UK is a really strong player, RY would be unwise to leave U and R so that the shot at the double target is a short one: it should then be made available only from near the corner. If K shoots from A-baulk and misses, Y can rush K to 2. That makes the shot from B-baulk slightly safer, but only really when the lawn is a difficult one. There are various theories about just where to put U and R, which way round, whether to cross-peg and so on. Aspinall criticised this opening as being “too much white or black - not enough grey”, with which I agree. In this respect it is the converse of [R to II], which is sometimes played because RY considers himself the stronger player. RY will sometimes wish to hit U and roll to the peg because he considers himself the slightly weaker player and wants to avoid a quiet start to the game.

Another continuation is to play U between 5 and 9 yards from III and R a similar distance North of I, as in Fig. 4.1, or actually into corner I. This opening is not what you would call “mainstream”, but it is interesting and it sometimes works. If R is played into I, K's best reply is usually to approach 1 immediately, sending R well past the peg in the direction of 2; then if K fails to get position he plays in or near IV, leaving nothing very exciting for Y.

A third continuation is to roll both balls into the yard-line area just North of IV and to leave them in contact. K is virtually forced to shoot at a target equivalent to a single ball at 8 yards 2 feet with no break if he hits and almost certain disaster if he misses. I used this opening for 15 years, before [U level with 4] became common, but no one else took it up. Was it splendid isolation or was I making a fool of myself?

[R at U from B-baulk] and **[R just outside IV]** These are all very well if RY's critical distance is 13 yards; but otherwise [K 1 yard North of R] puts RY back with the Fig. 4.4 problem. Again, these openings can be justified where RY is the weaker player.

4.9 The standard opening: (5) The use of bluff

I have suggested motives for making some choices in the standard opening. From your choices your opponent may deduce your motives and opinions, and so may you from his. Is that wise? For one thing your opponent might be bluffing, and for another his thinking might be unsound. My general advice is to be straightforward. The opening is a tense enough time as it is, and you can do without further worry. A deliberately unsubtle approach to the opening permits you to concentrate on your shooting. If you do propose to use a reasoned opening, prepare your tactics before you reach the court. If you dither it will only give heart to your opponent.

4.10 Other openings for U

[U to mid-court (various)] This is an interesting set of openings. If RY lays a tice, K has a free shot at it with the chance of a break. Those who have read the First Edition of this book will find my analysis much changed. Unless U is placed with some care, a long Duffer tice laid just below the critical distance is a killer. It is easy to avoid leaving a double target: see Fig. 4.12. In order to dissuade RY from laying this tice, UK must put U somewhere where [K at U] is a free and relatively short shot.

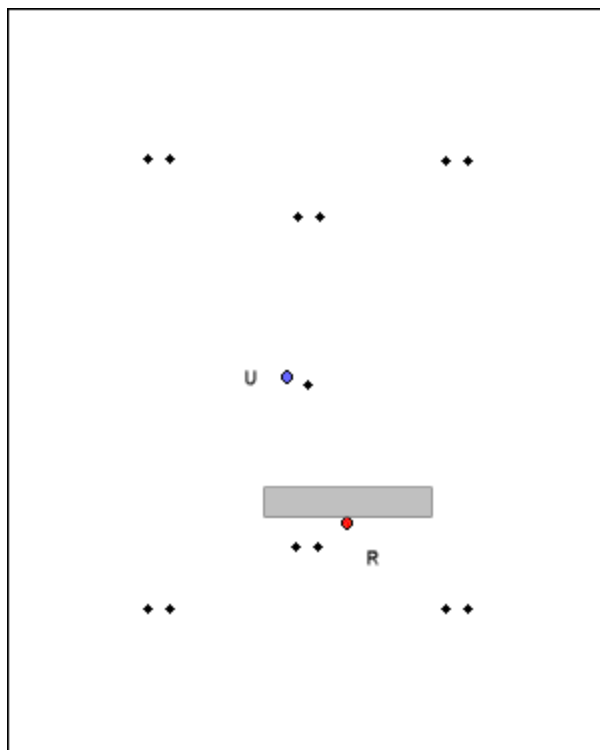


Fig. 4.12

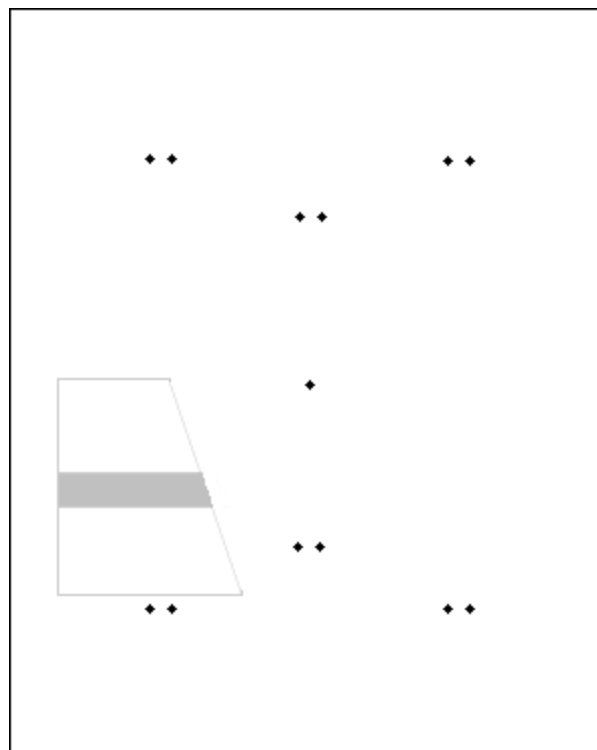


Fig. 4.13

At the same time, U has to be somewhere useful for a third-turn break, for otherwise RY can simply lay a yard-line tice. I do not consider the available areas in the Eastern half of the court sufficiently menacing, as they are too far from the first hoop. That leaves the area outlined in Fig. 4.13.

If U is played to the critical distance from A-baulk, the long Duffer tice offers RY an insufficient likelihood of the first break. K will shoot at U and if he hits (a 50% chance) he may get a break and will anyway leave Y a long shot; and if he misses, Y has only slightly more than an even chance of hitting. RY can perhaps increase his chances by the bold move of laying a Duffer tice of more normal length, but who is going to offer to a competent K such an easy third-turn break? It is all very well teasing K with an 8-yard tice when U is on the yard-line, but quite a different matter when U is about 6 yards from the first hoop.

As U gets further from baulk, and further also from the first hoop, a standard Duffer tice might be considered more plausible: for whether K hits U or R, the break becomes less certain. I should not feel happy with that opening, with U and R swanning around the middle of the court in such an unfamiliar and undisciplined fashion, but this may simply be stuffiness on my part.

I conclude that with U in the upper part of the area shown it is probably best to play R to the East yard-line. It is not a true "tice", as you are not enticing UK to shoot at it. Aspinall suggested [R 14 yards North of IV] so as to maximise K's shot, but then after [K misses R from B-baulk] or [K 5 yards North of IV] K will have a juicy shot if Y joins R. An arguably better place is about 2 yards beyond the critical distance, reducing the chance of K hitting it in the third turn to a level that is acceptable bearing in mind that if the third and fourth turns are misses UK will be under considerable pressure to move U: see Fig. 4.14, where RY has chosen to counter K's menacing position short of the corner by playing Y a yard short of R.

I am unable to tell at present which player does better from this opening.

That leaves the lower area in Fig. 4.13. At the longer end of this range I should suggest [R a few inches outside IV] as a reply. At the shorter end I favour [R at U] which, though embarrassing if missed, gives RY two chances of hitting to UK's one.

By my calculations, openings in this range slightly favour RY. You would presumably choose them for temperamental or psychological reasons. At present there is a good deal of light-hearted support for [U a little North of hoop 1], but that does not justify further analysis of it here.

[U to III] This trick is really only playable against a high-bisquer and is much too easily refuted in the A class. I mention it to give space in this book to the witty reply [R to I].

[U tice] This doubtful opening rarely succeeds in its aim, namely to allow UK to dictate the length of the tice. Usually UK will be anticipating a tice from RY which he would consider too short; but if he lays a longer one RY can always lay his own from B-baulk. If UK lays a shorter one than RY intended, RY will presumably shoot at it and will rarely be any the worse for ending up in II.

Play does not continue as in the standard opening: for instance, after K misses the tice he is not menacing two opponent balls, and RY has control of IV. I am not aware of any way in which this opening favours UK.

[U South of II] These openings are in general worse than mere 180 degree rotations of recognised openings, because UK loses control of IV. A Duffer tice laid to the West of 6 is also devastating: for K has no safe shots, long or short!

[U Duffer tice] I have recently become attracted by the tice East of 5, which I had originally ear-marked as a “super-shot” opening (see below). If R plays to a yard-line K shoots at it with prospects of a break. [R 6 inches South of II] is a plausible reply. Because of the threat of [R to peg], the tice must be quite short: compare Fig. 4.12.

4.11 The world of the super-shot

There have been a few players in my time who I am sure have had a critical distance exceeding 13 yards for appreciable periods and many more who have occasionally performed that well. You do not get that good by chance. It requires more devotion than most people would care to give to a mere pastime. Some leading players are now becoming conscious of their considerable shooting prowess and are treating it as a tool to be used rather than as a gift to be accepted with bashful surprise. How may the presence of super-shots (those with critical distances exceeding 13 yards and aware of it) affect opening tactics?

At first blush, it seems that it is UK who faces the main problem. By playing R near II or IV, RY can always set himself up with a 13-yard shot. How can UK keep RY out? Since posing this question in the First Edition I have mulled it over on several occasions without always necessarily coming to the same conclusions. Too much depends on judgement and there is too little that is worth putting into print. I gather that our latest crop of super-shots have also given the matter some consideration, but I have not learnt of any definite decisions from them either. In this Second Edition I shall offer only notes on the subject.

Better break prospects In some openings Y gives relatively too much away if he misses, or in some cases if he misses on one side, e.g. missing U on the left in Fig. 4.15. This may make such openings equal.

[U more than about 4 yards North of IV spot] R gets a free shot from B-baulk. In the First Edition I suggested [K at R] to follow, but I now consider this not to be a percentage play. [K at U and R from B-baulk] may give K a double target, but there are no firm prospects of a break. If U is within striking distance of IV, I suggest [K II]. The relatively better break prospects for UK after this give something like equality. [R II] is inferior and is answered by [K at U from B-baulk].

[The standard opening and standard tice] The critical distance tice takes on a new aspect when there is the threat that, if K misses, Y will shoot not at R but at K. The threat is not a real one if K has missed R on the left, because then a miss by Y on the left concedes better break prospects to K; but if K is not on the West yard-line [Y at K] favours RY. That is sufficiently balanced by the chance K has of hitting R first to make the opening equal. I do not see any variation of tice length that swings the balance towards RY. An alternative reply to a super-long tice is [K to IV], a position which is about equal because Y cannot afford to miss K on the left.

[The standard opening and Duffer tice] Once again I believe it to be strong for RY. Among supershots it will be laid slightly longer than I have previously suggested. A consequence will be that the risk of missing and going too near A-baulk will render [K at R from III] no longer safe. [K near IV] loses to [Y at K], as Y has break prospects if he hits. [K near II] still leaves RY as favourite with [Y at R]. [K at U from B-baulk] is the best reply, but my money is still on RY.

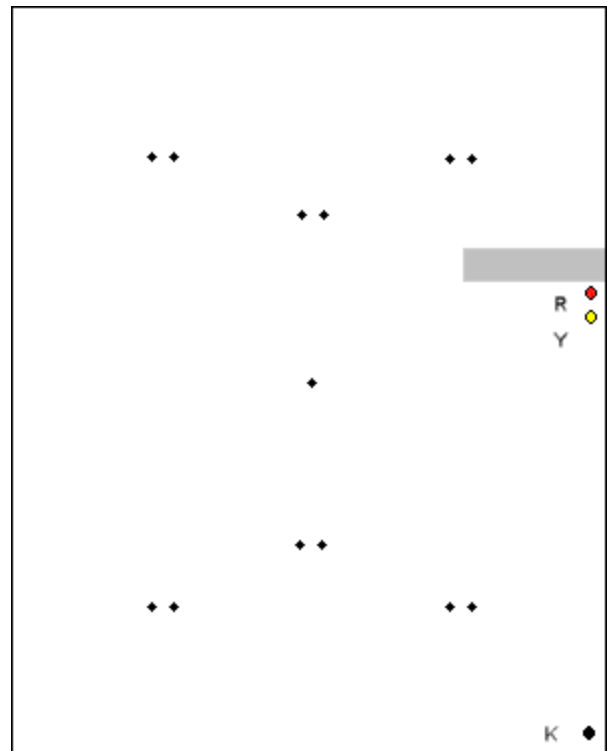


Fig. 4.14

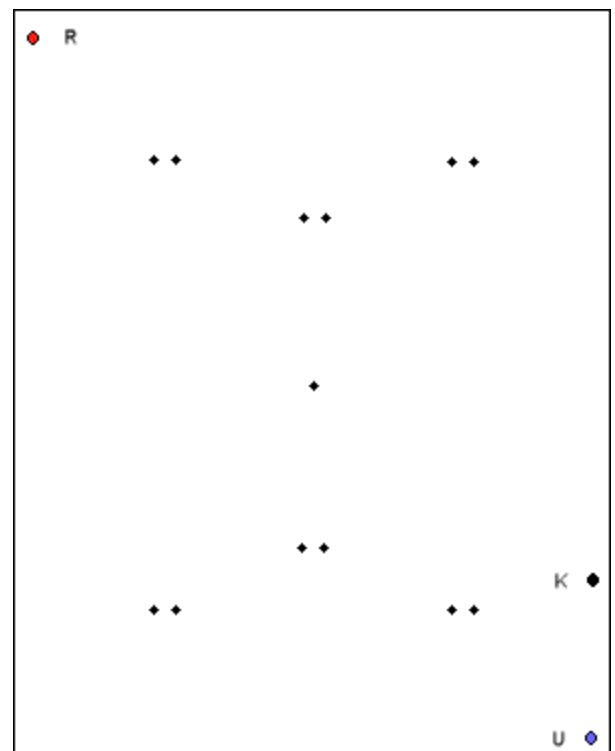


Fig. 4.15

[U near IV; R near U] This sets the scene for a brief slogging match. [K II] is a straight loser, so [K at R or U] is forced. The best target is from A-baulk. Plenty of drama - pistols at dawn - which latecomers will miss. The opening only slightly favours RY because UK gets a definite chance to pick up a break in the third turn. The shot from B-baulk reduces the risk of leaving a double target.

[U Duffer tice] We need a light touch in this heavy-weight section, and this is the best I can do. The idea would be that K would hit U (the tice must be shortish) and put all three balls by the peg. You lay the tice to the West of 6 or East of 5, so that if R takes the short shot and misses he leaves a likely 3-ball break.

[U mid-court] The same reasoning applies as in the case of ordinary players. The area in Fig. 4.13 will be further from baulk. I am unhappy about the shorter range in that diagram. U should not be too near to the first hoop. K will shoot at R along the east or West yard-line unless it is near II or IV, when [K at U]. Among super-shots there may be valid places for U to the East of the court. If [U peg-high; R peg-high(?)], [K peg-high]!

What if R hits U? I shall not attempt a survey of all the possible leaves. How about sending U to the peg and R near IV? If they are also cross-pegged (Fig. 4.16) then after [K III] Y leaves no double target after missing R.

It looks as if RY does not obtain any clear advantage from playing second unless critical distances exceed about 15 yards, which will rarely happen. I find this very comforting; but in case I am proved wrong, I shall repeat the closing words of the First Edition, written at a time when I feared that the laws of the game might give RY a built-in advantage. It may in that case turn out that players will cheerfully accept the fact that UK will be at a slight initial disadvantage. One could at a pinch shorten the baulk lines for the purpose of the opening, but I for one should regret any tinkering with the laws of the game. Croquet has already experienced a number of super-shots and survived intact. A match between super-shots may differ from today's croquet not only in the opening: dare you take the first break to 4b if your opponent is *likely* to hit in and triple peel you? Perhaps winning the opening will be considered less of an advantage than we should now expect. All avenues should be explored before ear is given to any carping complaints of unfairness. I entirely agree with Arthur Lillie's opinion, as quoted and adopted by Prichard (page 183), that the laws should be changed only if there is a pressing need.

Previous article: [Article 3: Establishing a Break Style and Technique](#)

Next article: [Appendix](#)

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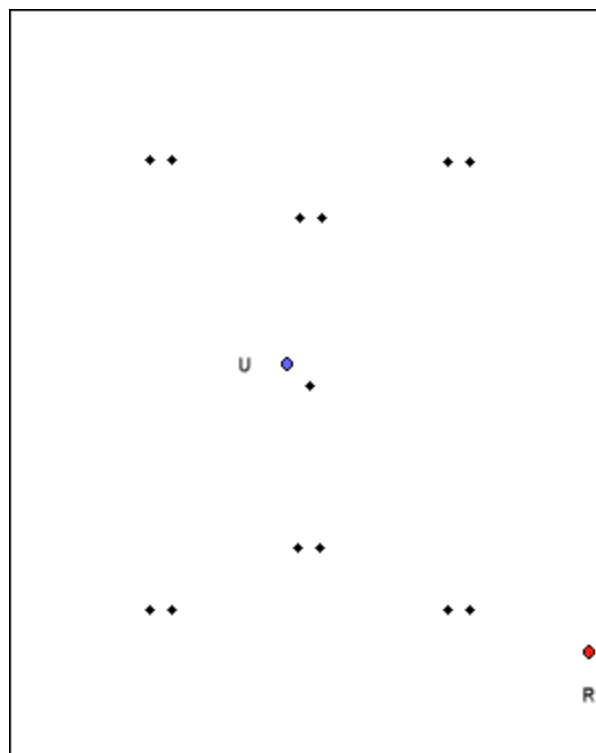


Fig. 4.16