

I recently returned from playing in the Lake Toxaway Golf Croquet Tournament in North Carolina and thought it might be interesting to write about some things I have found to be helpful when playing croquet and, in particular, when competing in a tournament.

I would be remiss if I didn't acknowledge what a well-organized tournament it was, in an absolutely beautiful setting, combined with some of the most friendly people you'd ever want to meet. I can't wait to go back!

I have found that having a pre-shot routine is incredibly helpful in developing consistency in croquet shots. Research shows that performing a ritual actually helps you relax before performing the task at hand. This is true for other sports such as in tennis when the server bounces the ball a certain number of times before serving the ball and in golf as you see a player address the ball and then adjust their grip and stance as they prepare to hit their shot.

Each person's pre-shot croquet routine will be unique in style but will most likely include the following components.

1. **Stalking.** This is used to determine the "line" on which you will send your ball. To do this, back away 5 feet or so from the ball you are going to strike, then look toward the target you are attempting to hit and visualize a straight line.
2. **Alignment.** Set up the line on top of your mallet with the line you have just stalked. It is important to place your mallet behind the middle of the ball to get a nice clean hit. Use a narrow stance with your feet and point your toes so that they are running parallel with your line.
3. **Gripping the mallet.** So now you've determined the pathway that you are going to shoot, your feet are set, and it is time to finalize your grip. Try to keep your grip as relaxed as you can so that you don't squeeze it too tightly.
By keeping your hands relatively close to one another on the shaft you can avoid one hand dominating the other during the swing.
4. **Stillness or conversely, casting.** This is where you will see some distinct differences as people get ready to take their shot. Try both ways and see which works best for you.

Casting is a rhythmic swinging motion above the ball some players like to use right before they make contact. I actually saw one player in a previous tournament swing 35 times before striking the ball. This is a bit extreme and I wouldn't recommend that many casts, but a few casts certainly would be acceptable. (It is important to remember that you may not touch or nick your ball while casting as it would count as your turn).

On the flip side, I prefer to place my mallet on the ground to keep it still before I start my backswing. This is my way of adding a sense of calm to the process. (You may be noticing a common theme here in that staying relaxed can help you perform better. This is particularly true when playing a tournament where you might feel pressure that is usually not as prevalent in a social game). Let's face it; we all want to play well.

Now all that is left to do is to take a deep breath, keep your head down and shoot.

Develop and practice your pre-shot routine and you will find the rewards will be consistency and a sense of calmness to your game. Have fun!