

At the All England Club, they're also wicket smart

By [Chuck Culpepper](#)

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WIMBLEDON, England — The tennis matches have ebbed to a few, the defeated have jetted home, and the six spillover practice courts across little Bathgate Road stand ready for their annual rebirth.

They will go back to croquet now.

“It’s part of the DNA; it’s part of the fabric of the club,” said Neil Stubley, head of courts and horticulture for the All England Lawn Tennis and Croquet Club.

That word — “croquet” — long has glimmered from that long title of this club that breaks from its routine each midyear to conduct the world’s most coveted tennis major. The word remains present in signage amid ivy and hydrangeas.

In fact, “croquet” dates back to the beginning.

In fact, “croquet” precedes “tennis.”

“The All England Croquet Club” hatched on July 23, 1868, when six men met in a magazine office in London, and the one who became honorary treasurer (a Samuel Horace Clarke Maddock) had no idea just how that treasury would mushroom. It budged to add tennis — “The All England Croquet and Lawn Tennis Club” — by 1877. Croquet waned. Tennis surged. Croquet made a rally, and even as the place became “The All England Lawn Tennis and Croquet Club” in 1899, “croquet” hung on.

Until 2007, it hung on smack upon these grounds, the croquet lawns persevering over in one corner, until the medium-sized stadium of Court No. 2 got up (with human help) and trudged over to cover that area. That’s when the lawns moved off-site just across the street, there for croquet from April to September except for mid-June to mid-July when they are converted to tennis practice courts.

Now croquet persists in sprightly glory because it’s a routine pursuit of 5 to 10 percent of club members and an occasional pursuit for many others but also because of respect for origins or, as club manager Ross Matheson puts it, “connecting with our past, the journey that we’ve been on, what we’ve learned.”

So now as tennis players have dispersed, it's time again for the path from the six extra tennis practice courts to the three main croquet lawns — for the scarifying, for the baseline renovations, for the oversewing, the fertilizing, the regrowing, the germination sheets, the remeasuring, the return of the croquet hoops. It's time to "Hoover it," as Stubble said, to get out the "Billy Goat, which is like a big petrol Hoover," and to suck up detritus.

It's time to take the millimeters of grass from eight to six.

"So a traditional croquet lawn should be the same as a traditional USGA golf green," he said. "It's a sandy profile. It's normally a bent-fescue sward. Because on croquet, like golf, the greens, it's about the trueness and the smoothness. On a tennis court, it's about rebound and ball height."

By Monday, July 18, croquet will reappear.

Play on.

There seems no equivalent of, say, Wimbledon in the croquet season. There's no most-coveted trophy or uppermost bauble. The club's croquet players vie with those in other clubs such as Hurlingham or Roehampton. They fly on croquet trips to places such as the Greek island of Corfu and Montenegro. One legend who balked at that noun for himself, Bernard Neal from Cheltenham, a professor of structural engineering at Imperial College London, won the All England Lawn Tennis and Croquet Club's own club championship 38 times, proving that in some cases the will to win doesn't dissipate at, say, 30 titles.

"It's not a very great achievement," he told the BBC when he was 89 in 2011, five years before his death. "These were the club championships for members only, and not many members of the All England Club play croquet at all."

Sometimes the croquet life can follow upon a tennis life in the same life.

"It is a game that grabs you," Jonathan Smith said.

Smith played world-class tennis in the Grand Slams of the 1970s. He reached the Australian Open semifinals in doubles. He reached the Wimbledon third round in singles in 1977, losing to Vitas Gerulaitis. He never anticipated he would hold any position such as "member in charge of croquet." Then about 15 years ago, a friend took him out to the lawns in the corner of the grounds, and so it went, and so it goes.

He calls croquet "a great game for anyone who's a bit knackered" after the strains on the joints and whatnot from a pursuit such as tennis or rugby. He says he's at a level akin to a scratch golfer, while he would be "chuffed" if he were a scratch golfer also. He knows his elegant new pastime has bounteous levels of excellence, and he says: "If I were to try to hit a croquet ball from the boundary and hit the peg in the center of the lawn, that is 14 yards. And if I did that three times out of 10, I would be a very happy bunny."

Then he mentioned Reg Bamford, a croquet wonder who got honored at Wimbledon this fortnight.

"He actually hit the peg 65 times consecutively," Smith said, "and then he stopped for lunch."

Even after walking through the gates "hundreds and hundreds of times" in life and even if he enters just for lunch, Smith still considers the club "a reverential, sacred place to me" and "a hallowed place" and "the place of my dreams as a child." And as a venturer into its realms both tennis and croquet, he says: "If you go to a croquet club, people are passionate about croquet, and if you go to a tennis club, people are passionate about tennis. We happen to have both. We're keen on croquet, but we're passionate about tennis."

He also has a membership at a more croquet-intensive club, Surbiton, but sees the All England croquet subdivision as uniformly "thrilled" to be part of the tennis kingdom.

He spots zero tennis envy.

“So every year in September,” Matheson said, “we sit down and we look at the croquet plan for the next year, and they ratify it and fund it. And also remember, it’s a considerable investment. Our grounds and horticulture team, the time that they have to spend on the lawns themselves, to keep prepping them — and then those lawns again are, like every [tennis] court here, destroyed completely at the end of the season and renovated and reseeded, leveled and built from scratch again for the following year. But all the maintenance and the preparation and the ongoing day-to-day care of those croquet lawns,” a grounds team of six to 10 is “constantly looking after those lawns, which we don’t necessarily have to do if we didn’t prioritize croquet as part of what we do.”

Croquet will breathe on, maybe even for another 154 years, with somewhat easier horticulture ahead. Once Wimbledon expands as planned, ample practice courts will appear, and the croquet lawns will stay put year-round.

In that vein, Matheson pointed to “incredibly established croquet clubs” such as Hurlingham and Roehampton and said: “You take a croquet ball there and move it half a turn, it’s gone. I mean, it’s lightning fast. Ours aren’t as quick as that, but they’re still very good lawns. ... So in a perfect world for croquet players, we want to redo the lawns at some point and do them absolutely with the right grass. Because croquet is cut much lower down to three [millimeters], grass for tennis is about eight mil. You can’t cut rye to three mil because it dies.”

He spoke as a man who, like Smith, played in Wimbledon tennis main draws — in the 1990s, in his case, won two doubles matches — yet a man who can speak of his fescue and his rye and his croquet.