

# Genteel game has fascinating history

Croquet is a perfect sport if you have creaky knees but as ANGELA BENSTED reports, it can be fiercely competitive.

It's a very satisfying sound, the "thwack" of a brass-tipped mallet as it hits a rubber ball, sending it spinning towards a hoop and cracking an opponent's ball off-course.

On a steamy day at the 101-year-old Windsor Croquet club, three-time Queensland representative Cynthia Tacey downs her weapon of choice, a "terminator", to talk about her sport.

"When I first took it up about 20 years ago I did it for the social activity," Cynthia says. "My husband died and I decided I needed to get out and make new friends."

She says most people join for recreation, but once they get to know the game and how much fun it can be, they want to compete.

"It can be quite aggressive," she says. "I got hooked after a few months."

Croquet has a long history, possibly dating back to Roman times. A version of the game called pall mall (from the Latin for ball and mallet) came to England from France in the early 17th century and was played in London's St James's Park, now called the Mall.



Caption

The modern game flourished in England in the mid-19th century and in 1870 the All England Croquet Club bought four acres of grassland at Wimbledon. The club offered to share its courts with the emerging game lawn tennis but was swiftly overtaken in popularity by the newcomer.

Those once humble paddocks are now home to The All England Croquet and Tennis Club. Today, the sport has a strong following in the UK, US, New Zealand and Australia. These countries compete every four years for the MacRobertson International Croquet Shield (the 'Mac'), started by Australian

confectionery maker Sir Macpherson Robertson in 1925.

Geoff McGlashan, an ex-rugby player, surf lifesaver and paddle-boarder, is new to the sport and loves it.

A gammy knee sent him searching for a gentler pastime but croquet surprised him. He plays golf croquet, a faster version of the game.

"Competition is fierce," he says "and we don't mind a bit of sledging. It can be brutal." The rules are easier to learn and it's more social, with four players on the court at the same time.

"I can teach you that game in a few minutes," Cynthia says, adding that a lot of businesses have their yearly wind-down at the club playing golf croquet.

But association croquet, which is the original game, is more complex.

"I can teach you in about six lessons, but to get the nuances of the game it takes at least a year," Cynthia says.

Some players come to croquet via tennis or golf, looking for an alternative sport when joints start creaking.

But croquet is not a soft option. "If you're playing competition you

can probably do about 12km of walking in a day," Cynthia says.

It's not an expensive sport; a mallet costs anywhere from \$150 to \$1000.

There's no age limit and men and women play together. For competitions, players are graded by handicap.

In typical Australian fashion, the game's name has been mangled a bit over time and the French pronunciation is losing favour. But Cynthia says it doesn't really matter.

"I don't care if you call it 'croak-ee' or 'croak-ay', so long as you play."

➤ [More at croquetqld.org](http://More at croquetqld.org)

## DID YOU KNOW?

- Australian Robert Fletcher, 22, from Lismore, is ranked number one in the world for association croquet
- Billiards is an indoor version of croquet
- The expression "it's all over red rover" stems from croquet, where the last hoop played is the red one

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