

man the mallets

The 1900 Olympics in Paris were an abject failure, replete with poor venues, infighting and dreadful press coverage. Despite its problems, though, there was one bright Olympic moment in 1900.

The first — and only — Olympic competition in croquet ran on Sundays between June 24 through Aug. 15 at Cercle du Bois de Boulogne.

While only one spectator attended, and only about a dozen players took up mallets, the competition was tough in the four categories of play. Winners received a croquet set, a medal and presentation mallets.

Defenders of the game said in the *Official Report* of the Second Olympic Games: "One would be wrong ... to disdain croquet. It develops a combinative mind — one has only to see it transform young girls into reasoners, and from reasoners into reasonable people."

We've come a long way since the *Official Report* showed such condescension to women, but the point is well taken — one should not disdain the pastoral pastime of croquet.

The game began in the Middle Ages and became popular among the wealthy in France in the 17th and 18th centuries. A particular version of the game, Paille Maille, migrated

CROQUET'S A FAMILY GAME THAT CAN BE A PERFECT WAY TO SPEND
A WARM, SUMMER EVENING **BY MARK LUCE**



to England.

During the Victorian age it was played at Wimbledon — at least until tennis became the game of the strawberries-and-cream set.

The leisure-class activity, though, received a distinctively lower-brow flavor when it came to America, where it has flourished as a picnic or family-reunion game suitable for any age.

I remember playing against my brother with a beat-up set at my great-grandparents house as a child, whacking away at the part-dirt, part-grass course we laid out next to my great-grandpa's prized tomato garden.

Decent beginning croquet sets run about \$60 and \$180, while professional-quality sets cost up to \$800. As with most things, the more you spend the longer the set will last.

Croquet takes no athletic skill, but it can tap into your shrewder side. If you hit another player's ball, you can launch it far from the hoop with one strong-armed swing of your mallet. But there is always the chance that a player will do the same to you.

You don't need a huge, manicured lawn (or the 14th fairway) to play. Officially, the croquet court should be 84 feet wide and 105 feet long, but you can adjust as your space dictates.

The undulations and thick grasses of most yards will present an extra challenge. The game is fun and challenging and occasionally frustrating.

But the best thing, by far, about backyard versions of the game is that you can enjoy a cocktail while you await turn. I suggest gin and tonic.

Ladies and gentlemen, grab your mallets.

Mark Luce is a free-lance writer who swings a mean mallet in Lawrence, Kan.

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