

Handicap Association Coaching - Lesson 1: Playing a Tidy Break

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Put me on the spot. Ask me what's the most important thing about bisque-taking, and I'll have to say it's not using bisques to set up a break. You can be the best player in the world at creating a promising position from nothing, but it counts for little if your later play isn't up to scratch. Once you've taken that clip off the top of hoop 1 and put it in your pocket, the trick is to reach the peg, with a stack of bisques still firmly in the ground.

This is the first of a series of articles I'll be writing on break play. You can focus on the start of your turn later, and sometime after that you can decide on how to finish gracefully, leaving your opponent with a difficult prospect, and yourself with an easy pickup at the start of the next turn. For the time being, let's look at how to deal with the middle of the break. Learn to play this well, and it's the key to winning games and improving.

I'll deal with the nitty-gritty of how to make things easy, and how to regain control once it's started to slip away, in later lessons. Lesson One is concerned with a few basic tips which should make things easier throughout the break.

1 Keep the balls in front of you.

Stand by your ball and face your next-but-one hoop. You should be able to see all four balls without having to look round. If there's a ball ten yards behind you, you've got problems. Or if there's a ball miles away that you can only see from the corner of your eye, you've probably got a nasty split roll coming up in a shot or two. A laid four ball break can become a three ball break, a two ball break, and then no break at all very quickly. Even if the best you can do is shove a ball somewhere anywhere into the middle of the lawn, it's almost always better than abandoning it, for want of a better plan.

2 There's only one important ball

I remember my first tournament. I was very good at hitting long shots, and very good at placing pioneers for my next hoop. But I was dreadful at getting my own ball anywhere near where I wanted to be. So I lost all my games.

Only after I'd finished did the club coach tell me where I went wrong. You can be forgiven for placing the object ball too far or too short; it's easy enough to tidy it up later. Focus on the striker's ball. Be certain that you always end up near enough to another ball to hit it. Nothing will use up bisques faster than that five yard roquet which you need to hit, but miss (and then miss again three times with bisques). If you can't ever leave yourself a hittable roquet during your turn, you'll lose. Even with 24 bisques, 24 misses won't get you a clip beyond 2-back.

3 Keep inside the rectangle.

Imagine a rectangle joining hoops 1, 2, 3 and 4. Once you're off and running, it's usually a good idea to keep all four balls within this rectangle (within reason, of course you won't be able to score Hoop 1 if you're too rigid about this.)

Work out the surface area of a croquet lawn, and the bits outside the hoops account for 70% of the space. Convincing yourself that you only need to cover the inner 30% of the turf makes the whole idea of a break seem much less of an obstacle. Keeping inside this inner rectangle as much as possible leaves you with much shorter shots.

You'll find it's much easier to approach a hoop from two yards in front than two yards behind. Often when I'm playing very badly, or when I've no confidence and the lawn's pace is difficult to judge, I'll deliberately leave balls short of where I want them. Rushing a short ball another couple of yards towards a hoop is a lot easier than coaxing a ball back into play when you've accidentally put it two yards beyond.

4 Not all shots are equally easy.

This sounds kind of obvious. You'll know yourself which shots are your best ones and which ones you'd prefer not to rely on. Generally speaking, most people find short shots easier than long ones, and straight shots easier than splits. If you're sticking to the principle of keeping within the rectangle, it's

unlikely that any shot will be much longer than about 13 yards that's from the peg to each of the outer hoops, or equivalent to half the width of the lawn.

Confining yourself to the easy shots, and not having to cope with 30-yard split full rolls or corner-to-corner cut rushes, is something you can control with your choices about where to put the other balls in your break. I'll deal with that at some length in the next lesson.