

Croquet Federation of Belgium

8th Indoor Association Open

7th-8th January 2006

Report by Colin Hemming

There was a discussion at the tournament dinner on the Saturday night as to how many of these mid-winter Indoor Opens there had been in Belgium. Estimates ranged from six to ten. Nothing unusual in that, given that judgements and memories may both have been somewhat affected by the amount of alcohol on offer; what was unusual was the number of people who could volunteer an educated guess, in other words the number of people who had previously played in the event. Of the 12 participants no fewer than 10 had played in it before. How do I know this? Quite simple - I have played in the last seven of them. Only local man John Swabey can claim better. There were even two visitors who had played in the very first event: Alex Jardine and Jim "The Destroyer" Potter. More of both later.

You may think that a tournament which attracts such loyalty would be offering the highest quality courts and equipment. Let me disillusion you. The courts are laid out in the Conference Centre of the Hotel du Château du Lac at Genval, near Brussels. This is big enough to hold two roughly half-size courts side by side, and is nicely surfaced with carpet tiles. Now what is "nice" for a conference centre is a brightly coloured carpet with spirals, swirls and squiggles of blue, red, pink and green; this helps to hide the inevitable slight damage which occurs to such a carpet from time to time. Unfortunately, it also helps to hide quite large objects (such as Croquet Balls) which are placed randomly on the carpet; it is not unusual for an incoming player to stroll on to the court squinting to try to see where all the balls are, and tripping over the one that is a yard in front of him. Apart from the violent colours, the carpet tiles are not perfectly laid, and there is the occasional 2-3mm gap, or a 1m ridge where a tile fractionally overlaps its neighbour. But these imperfections pale into insignificance compared with the socket boxes. Every Conference Centre, of course has to have electricity available to supply the stands at the exhibitions it hosts. This electricity is distributed underneath the floor, surfacing at regular intervals to a little trap-door which lifts to reveal two sockets inside. The little door is carpeted, but the door itself tends to sit

either slightly above or slightly below the rest of the carpet. You can imagine what effect hitting one of these has on a ball.

You are probably wondering by now how the hoops are actually set into the court. It would be an understatement to say that it is indeed a croquet club bore holes in its floor and hammer in hoops, so an alternative approach is needed. Thin steel plates about 60cm square have two pieces of plumbers' piping welded to them to form the uprights. These pieces of pipe have T-pieces screwed to the top, and a piece of plastic conduit is squeezed through the T-pieces to form the crown of the hoop. No, seriously! The plates are fixed to the carpet with double-sided carpet tape and then covered with a green plastic mesh which is designed to provide a non-slip surface for patios and swimming-pool surrounds. Hoop setting is accomplished by wiggling the T-pieces a bit closer together or further apart. This bizarre arrangement actually works quite well, producing hoops that are quite difficult to run, particularly under control.

[As an aside here, it is appropriate to mention the first two Indoor Opens, which were held not at Genval but at Les Pyramides conference centre in central Brussels. Here, the owners *did* allow the Croquet Club to bore holes in its (concrete) floor to fix hoops. This resulted in hoops which were so rigid they were *extremely* difficult to run; so much so that Jim "The Destroyer" Potter was able to beat no less a player than Phil Cordingley. Visitors to this event are left in no doubt of this; it takes Jim an average of 12 minutes and 17 seconds to steer any conversation round so that he can slip in this remarkable fact (though to his credit he does admit that the final score was two hoops to one). You may think that this famous victory earned him his nickname. But it isn't so.]

But back to 2006. The competitors all arrive on Friday afternoon and evening by a mixture of car, train and aeroplane. It's a truly international field this year: 8 players from England (one arriving via his holiday home in France), 2 locals, Alex Jardine, a Brit working in Brussels and a member of the club, Nelson Morrow from New Zealand (via England) and finally Kevin Garrad, proudly claiming eligibility to play for Wales, the Channel Islands and the Isle of Man and a long-term resident of the Netherlands. Early arrivals help to set up the courts, and then most people "enjoy" a practice session. As usual, most first-timers are dismayed at the obstacles, the speed (very fast) and the quaint but difficult hoops. As usual, most old hands are equally dismayed that it really is all as quaint but

difficult as they remember it was. We all meet in the bar and go for dinner at the local Chinese Restaurant.

Saturday morning, and after a hearty breakfast which is as good as all the old timers remember (I should have mentioned that this is a five-star hotel), we all assemble at ten to nine ready for a nine-o'clock start. All, that is, except manager Gabor Wiener who hurries in with two minutes to go, clutching his laptop, his briefcase and a large wooden box (of which more later). Play gets under way just about on schedule. The game is 20-points level advanced (that's where your partner clip goes to 1-back as soon as you run hoop 1). Time limit is 1 hour 40 minutes. Two American blocks of six players each, criss-cross semi finals between the first two in each block and a 26-point final. Coffee, soft drinks and beer are all available court-side throughout the day.

In the Blue Block, early promise is shown by Chris Daniels, who seems to find the pace of the court ahead of his opponents, and Richard Dickson and Julie Hudson, who are both running hoops very accurately. Less promise is shown by Don Gaunt and John Swabey. No promise at all is shown by Colin Hemming. In the Red Block, Samir Patel is setting the pace; he is the only player consistently to be pegging out. Nelson Morrow is playing accurately but finding it difficult to maintain breaks, Alex Jardine is playing steadily but unspectacularly and Charles-Eric Vilain XIII (that's his real name), Kevin Garrad and Jim "The Destroyer" Potter are all struggling.

If you do some elementary mental arithmetic, you will quickly establish that an American block of six takes 15 games to complete, and that in 10 hours double-banked play (which will take us through to 7:00pm) we can fit in 6 rounds, or 12 games, in each block. This means that there will be three games in each block to play on Sunday. Manager Gabor spends most of the morning on his laptop before apparently coming to this conclusion and announcing that, just like in the previous two years, there will be an eight o'clock start on Sunday for four unfortunate persons. One of these unfortunate persons is Colin Hemming, whose complaints that he had had an early start in both of the previous two years strangely tend to evoke mirth rather than sympathy amongst his fellow competitors. Samir needs no computer to work out that Colin's chances of this happening were 1 in 27, which somehow doesn't seem to cheer him up much.

Lunch is taken "on the hoof" in order to try to keep to the tight schedule. This consists of filled baguettes, followed by a selection of delicious home made desserts made by the Members of the Brussels Croquet Club and their wives. Attention gradually switches from the soft drinks to the beer. Gabor opens up the big wooden box; it's a backgammon set; everyone knows how to play backgammon; but not as well as Gabor, who refuses to play except for 1 euro per point. Moral: never play backgammon with a wily old Hungarian who plays at least once a week at his Chess club. Something rather surreal develops in the atmosphere; it's odd in the first place to go for a weekend at a hotel and never set a foot outside, but when you spend all the day in a large room with the blinds drawn, staring at that carpet, hearing the gentle click of the balls, the soft clickety-click of the backgammon dice. . . And now the spell is broken! Pandemonium! "The Destroyer" has struck! Jim Potter has tried to run 3-back so hard, and so inaccurately, that he has earned his nickname. The hoop is not just broken, it is totally destroyed, the weld on the right hand upright broken and the upright sent flying up the court. Jim tries to claim (tongue in cheek) that he should continue his break: after all, the ball did pass between the uprights. This is undeniable, but since the uprights were about four feet apart at the time of the passage, the ROT (John Swabey) rules that the turn has ended. All back to normal. The gentle clicks of the balls return. Players drift off as their last games finish. The last games finish just in time to allow a mad dash to get changed in time for the Gala Dinner.

The Gala Dinner is at "Eight for Eight-thirty". Not just the competitors but a very large contingent from the Brussels Club sit down in the Salons du Lac for a truly five-star dinner at this five-star hotel. There are probably about 30 people around one large table, expertly served with first -class food. In between courses, Gabor stands up and announces the status of the tournament: the Red Block is already settled: Samir has won all four of his games, all within time and wins the block; Alex Jardine, with his steady and careful play, has won three out of four but cannot be beaten for second place because of "who beat whom"; the hare and the tortoise. The Blue Block is a different matter; if matches go according to form, we are going to have a three way tie which cannot be resolved by the Schonenberg-Berger count (don't ask me . . .). Gabor spends 5 enthralling minutes telling us of the complicated process he will use to resolve this tie, reminds us about the early starts, and the dinner continues. Round about now, Colin remembers something about "a priori" and "a posteriori"

probabilities which he learnt about way back in the olden days of the last century which means that his odds of ending up with an early morning match this year were only 1 in 3 anyway. This makes him feel better. Well, a little bit better

After the dessert comes the fun. Remember this is the weekend of twelfth night, when gifts were brought from the East, and a shower of gifts descended on our table. No, Gabor hadn't asked three of his mates to pop down the local Woolies, rather each invitee had been asked to provide two low-value presents to be distributed at the end of the dinner. It's the manner of the distribution that provides the fun. In the first round, pairs of dice circulate, and every time you throw a six you select a gift from the pile (but don't unwrap it yet). After all the gifts have been selected, round two begins, and this lasts for 20 minutes. This time, four individual dice are circulated. Throw a 1 and you can steal any present from your left-hand neighbour; throw a 3 and you unwrap a present; throw a 6 and you can steal a present from anywhere. This results in 20 minutes of chaos, with people running round the large table and shrieks of hilarity as presents are unwrapped. After the time-limit is up all the remaining presents are unwrapped (to more hilarity) and the dinner sort of disintegrates, with some presents being swapped and others just being given away (some, of course, couldn't even be given away).

Sunday. The eight o'clockers assemble. Jim Potter vs Nelson Morrow in the Red Block and Colin Hemming vs Chris Daniels in the Blue. No sore heads at all. Nelson continues his steady and accurate play and despatches Jim, but not without a fight. Colin and Chris, meanwhile, are having a ding-dong battle, with Colin threatening to overturn the odds and help Gabor avoid his dreaded tie. The rest of the players start drifting in at about 9 o'clock, by which time the match starts developing into one of those where each player appears to be trying to give the game to the other, and Colin proves marginally better at this than Chris. In the turn when time is called, Chris gets a hoop in front with a break ahead of him and misses a short roquet ("after you, Colin"). Colin hits in, sets up a break, makes the first hoop to draw level, and sticks in the second hoop ("no, after you Chris"). All four go for a well-deserved breakfast.

During breakfast, what is happening on the courts remains a mystery to me, and so will remain so to you. Suffice it to say that at the end of the block play there is no three-way tie after all, but the Blue block has been

won by Chris Daniels, with Richard Dickson the runner-up, so the semi-finals are Samir "The Hare" Patel vs Richard Dickson and Alex "The Tortoise" Jardine vs Chris Daniels; these get under way whilst Gabor draws the rest of the field into two four-person American blocks for the one-ball Plate event. This is 13-point advanced one ball.

The semi-finals of the main event are both won by the Red Blockers: Alex "The Tortoise" Jardine beats Chris Daniels, whose uncharacteristically inaccurate play perhaps indicates there may have been a sore head after all. Meanwhile, Richard Dickson slows down Samir "The Hare" Patel dramatically but is unable to jug him, and Samir goes through, but this is the first game he has won without pegging out.

The 3rd-4th place playoff begins just about as lunch arrives - a delicious Lamb and Apricot Tagine today, followed by more home-made desserts. To make sure that the fat lady has sung in good time for people to catch trains and planes, the (26-point) final begins double-banked with the playoff. The playoff finishes: victory and 3rd place to Richard Dickson. The one-ball blocks finish: Nelson wins his block outright, Colin wins his only after a three-player shoot-out at hoop 1. The one-ball final starts and ends: Colin destroyed by Nelson's accurate hoop-running. Let's concentrate on the Final.

The Hare has taken yellow ball to 4-back and starts with red. At hoop 4 he has positioned yellow in perfect position for a delayed triple but in going for a rush out of the hoop he falls victim to the Genvall effect and blobs the hoop. But no matter - his opponent is only at hoops 1 and 2: nothing to fear.

But The Tortoise strikes! Or perhaps it might be more accurate to say that The Tortoise finally wakes up to the fact that the game is in danger of being lost and drags himself into motion. Nothing flashy. Nothing, in fact, in the remotest way exciting: just a few hoops at a time, but very carefully played and, more importantly, very carefully thought out. The Hare hits in and gets to hoop 6 with red, but the Tortoise then begins to take control: even more careful now, he makes a few hoops at a time and lays up, always making sure that there is no opening for red. And Samir "The Hare" Patel's shooting, which has been impeccable all weekend, begins to desert him. Slowly, carefully and very, very methodically Alex "The Tortoise" Jardine edges his way to a famous victory which, before the

game started, no-one, probably not even he himself, thought was within his grasp. For the first time, victory in the Belgian Indoor Open goes to a member of the Belgian Club.

Presentation time. Alex gets an elegant glass trophy and a large but beautifully proportioned wooden plinth. Samir gets an identical glass trophy on a smaller but still reasonably well proportioned wooden plinth. Nelson gets a similar trophy to Samir; thank goodness they're inscribed. All the participants get to take away an elegant solid-gold letter knife, suitably inscribed, whatever loot they managed to scramble at the dinner, and a host of fond memories. Gabor gets to take away a pocketful of Euros.

What do you mean, it wasn't solid gold?