

By Peter Goldstein Special to The Wall Street Journal Europe

Genvai, Belgium

RODOLPHE DOURTHE OF FRANCE is methodically trouncing an English opponent in the finals of the second annual Belgian Croquet Open played on a summer Sunday in this verdant Brussels suburb. The players, like everyone else scattered around the pristine 32-by-25.6-meter crew-cut pitch, are dressed in gleaming white. This is six-wicket croquet, after all, the civil pastime of sophisticates and royalty.

Or is it? Mr. Dourthe, a rising star on the European tournament circuit, works for French do-it-yourself chain Castorama SA. Watching from the sidelines is Jonathan Lamb, the No. 1 seed in Belgium, whose day job involves personnel and security at the European Commission. Next to Mr. Lamb is Peter Payne, a player from Geneva who works for a bank.

These aren't people with coats of arms above the fireplace or signet rings in their safety-deposit boxes. They're commoners, mostly middle class, and they're fueling a croquet revival.

"Until recently, croquet had a real image problem - most people considered it a child's game played by old Aunt Agatha and some upper-crust types," says Mr. Lamb, who practices about 10 hours a week on the Genvai greens. Now the finer points of croquet are coming out. People realize it's a mental game, like a cross between chess and snooker.
