

**UNITED STATES  
CROQUET ASSOCIATION  
(USCA)**



**Rules of  
9 Wicket  
(Backyard)  
Croquet**

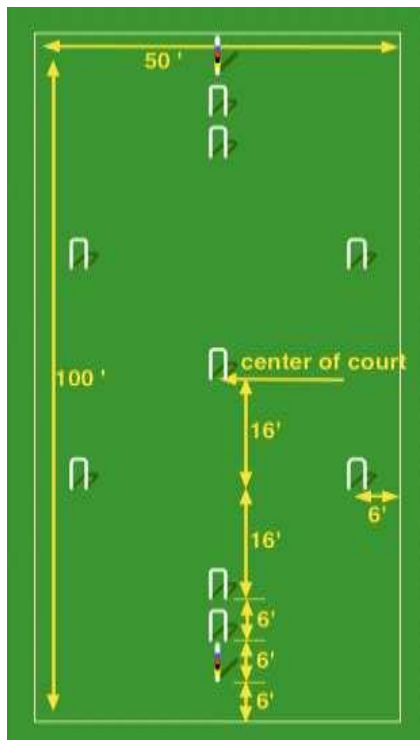
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# Welcome to the World's Greatest Backyard Sport!

The United States Croquet Association has created this special edition of the Rules of 9 Wicket Croquet for newcomers to the game or for anyone, young or old, who wants to play the traditional backyard sport Americans have enjoyed for over 140 years.

The game of croquet (pronounced "crow-KAY") is a tradition of backyard recreation in America, as well as a sport that can be enjoyed by young and old alike. Whether you are a novice who plays the occasional friendly game or a determined competitor who gives opponents no quarter, you need to know the rules and have them handy for reference during a game. This special edition of the rules was prepared by the sport's governing body, the United States Croquet Association (USCA), as a guide for informal backyard play. The following rules are suggested for use in play, as it is the purpose of the USCA to standardize one set of rules. Some interesting "options" are also listed below, which may make the game more challenging. Those playing in a game can always create their own rules and variations; however, any variation to be used must be announced before the start of the game. The major change to the 2013 USCA 9 Wicket Rules is that a ball is "Out of Bounds" when more than 50% has crossed the inside edge of the court boundary (not just any part of the ball).

## Rules of 9 Wicket Croquet



### The Court

A backyard croquet court doesn't have to be a perfectly manicured lawn, but short grass provides the best playing surface. If you have room, the official full-size court is a rectangle, 100 feet long by 50 feet wide. For backyard play you can adjust the size and shape of the court to fit the available space. Use string or chalk to mark definite boundaries if you choose, or just mark the corners with flags or stakes.

### The Wickets and Stakes

The nine wickets and two stakes are arranged in a double-diamond pattern as shown in the diagram. If you are playing on a smaller court, the distances shown should be scaled down in proportion to the length and width of the court. The wickets should be firmly planted in the ground, and the width of the wickets should be uniform throughout the court.

## **The Balls**

For a two- or four-player, two-sided game, you need four balls. The colors usually used are blue, red, black, and yellow. One side (with one or two players) plays with blue and black, and the other with red and yellow. For a six-player team game, you need six balls. In team play, one side plays blue, black, and green, and the other side plays red, yellow, and orange. In "one-ball" games, you need one ball per player.

## **The Mallets**

Each player uses a mallet. Only the striking (end) face may be used to strike a ball, unless the players have agreed to allow the use of "side" shots or other shot-making variations.

## **Optional Accessories**

You can use colored clips or clothespins to mark the next wicket your ball must go through. The clip is picked up when a wicket is scored, then placed on the ball's next wicket at the end of the turn. You can use string or "chalk" to mark boundaries of the court, or just designate "off the grass" as a boundary.

## **Object of the Game**

The object of the game is to advance the balls through the course by hitting them with a mallet, scoring a point for each wicket and stake made in the correct order and direction. The winner is the first side to score the 14 wicket points and 2 stake points for each of its balls, unless the game is played to a time limit and time runs out before that happens, in which case the team with the most points at the end of the time period wins (see below).

The players take turns, and only one plays at a time. At the beginning of a turn the player (called the "striker") has one shot. After that shot the turn ends, unless a bonus shot is earned by scoring a wicket or stake or by hitting another ball. The turn ends when the player has no more bonus shots to play or has finished the course by scoring the finishing stake. The striker may directly hit with the mallet only the ball he or she is playing in that turn (the "striker ball").

## **Order of Play and Starting the Game**

### **Starting point**

All balls are played into the game from a spot halfway between the finishing stake and wicket #1.

When four balls are played by two sides (singles - two players competing against each other playing two balls each; or doubles - two sides of two players each)

The sides should toss a coin or hit closest to the middle wicket to determine the order of play. The side winning the coin toss has the choice of playing first and third with blue/black or second and fourth with red/yellow. The order of play throughout the game is blue, red, black, yellow.

### **Six balls played by two teams of three players**

The side winning the coin toss has the choice of playing first, third, and fifth with blue/black/green or second, fourth, and sixth with red/yellow/orange. The order of play throughout the game is blue, red, black, yellow, green, orange.

### **Six balls played by three teams of two players**

The start of the game is determined by a player from each of the three sides shooting to a predetermined target such as a wicket or stake, with the closest to the target choosing which colors to play. The second closest chooses next, with the third closest playing the remaining balls. The sides consist of blue/yellow, red/green, and black/orange. The order of play is blue, red, black, yellow, green, and orange.

### **Order of Play**

After all balls have started the game, play continues in the same order until a ball is staked out. When a ball is out of the game, the remaining balls continue in the same order, skipping the ball that has finished the course.

### **"One-ball" Game**

Many croquet players like to play singles with only one ball per side, the winner being the player who advances his or her ball around the court first. This popular variation is played with the same rules as regular singles or doubles croquet, but any number of players from two to six can play. The colors may be drawn by lot to determine the order of play.

### **Shots**

If a player plays out of turn, there is no penalty. Any ball moved during the out-of-turn play is replaced to its position prior to the error and play recommences properly. If an out of turn is initially condoned (not discovered) but then later discovered, only the last ball played out of turn is replaced and the correct ball then proceeds. Example: if red plays, then blue plays, then yellow plays, yellow is replaced, and then red plays correctly.

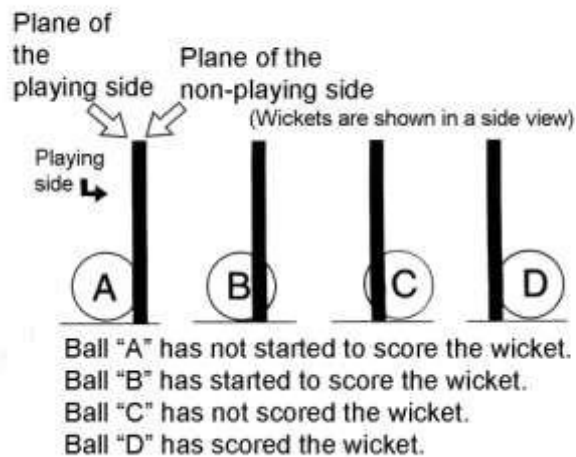
If the striker takes a swing at his/her ball and misses entirely, the miss counts as a shot and the turn ends, unless the striker had a second "bonus" shot.

If the striker's mallet accidentally hits another ball other than the striker ball, the shot must be replayed, but with no loss of turn.

## Scoring Wicket and Stake Points

Each ball can score wicket and stake points for its side only by going through a wicket or hitting a stake in the proper order and direction. Going through a wicket out of order or in the wrong direction is not counted as a point gained or lost. A ball caused to score its wicket or stake during another ball's turn earns the point for its side, but no bonus shot is earned as a result.

A ball scores a wicket point only if it comes to rest clear of the playing side of the wicket. If a ball passes through a wicket but rolls back, it has not scored the wicket. An easy way to determine if a ball has cleared a wicket is to run the side of the mallet head down the plane of the playing side of the wicket. If the mallet head touches the ball on the way down, it has not cleared the wicket; if the mallet head does not touch the ball, it has cleared the wicket!



## Bonus Shots

The striker earns one bonus shot if the striker ball scores a wicket or hits the turning stake. The striker earns two bonus shots if the striker ball hits another ball (a "roquet"). However, the maximum number of bonus shots earned by a striker is two; there is never a time when a striker is allowed three shots. (See the "Exceptions" section below for examples.)

If two bonus shots are scored by striking another ball, the first of these two shots may be taken in any of four ways:

1. From a mallet-head distance or less away from the ball that was hit ("taking a mallet-head").
2. From a position in contact with the ball that was hit, with the striker ball held steady by the striker's foot or hand (a "foot shot" or "hand shot").

3. From a position in contact with the ball that was hit, with the striker ball not held by foot or hand (a "croquet shot").
4. From where the striker ball stopped after the roquet.

The second bonus shot after a roquet is an ordinary shot played from where the striker ball came to rest, called a "continuation shot".

Bonus shots may not be accumulated. Upon earning a bonus shot by scoring a wicket, hitting the turning stake, or roqueting another ball, any bonus shot previously earned is forfeited. For example, if a ball roquets a ball and in that same stroke the striker ball hits another ball, the second ball hit is not a roquet and remains where it comes to rest (with no deadness incurred on that ball).

**EXCEPTIONS:** Two extra shots are earned when the striker ball scores two wickets in one shot. If the ball also hits the turning stake after scoring two wickets, two strokes are earned, not three. Conversely, if the striker ball scores the seventh wicket and hits the turning stake in the same shot, it earns two shots. After the striker ball roquets another ball, it does not earn any extra shots for hitting it again in the same turn before scoring the next wicket in order. However, there is no penalty for hitting the ball again (unless you are using Challenging Option #1, below).

## **Wicket and Roquet**

When the striker ball scores a wicket and then in the same shot hits another ball, only the wicket counts and the striker has earned only the one extra shot for scoring the wicket. The striker may then roquet any ball to earn two extra shots. When the striker ball roquets another ball and then goes through a wicket, the wicket has not been scored but the striker earns two extra shots for the roquet.

## **The Boundaries**

If boundaries are established, whenever more than half of a ball (50%+) crosses the inside edge of a boundary, it is "Out Of Bounds" and should be brought inbounds and placed one mallet length (or 36 inches) into the court. The ball should be placed 90 degrees inbounds and perpendicular to the line and not diagonally from the line. (Exception: When the striker ball has just roqueted (hit) another ball, the striker may choose to place it in contact with or up to a mallet-head from the ball that was roqueted.) All balls are also immediately brought in a mallet length from the boundary when they are less than that distance from the boundary, except for the striker's ball when the striker has an extra shot.

If more than one ball crosses the boundary on the same spot, the striker may measure any ball inbounds first and then place the other(s) up to a mallet-head's length away from it on either side.

## **Rover Balls**

After a ball scores all of the wickets in the course, its player may choose to keep it in the game as a "rover" to help advance that side's remaining ball(s) and to prevent the opposing side from

advancing. During this ball's turn, it may hit any other ball only once per turn, gaining extra shots accordingly, but it does not earn any extra shots or wicket points for running a wicket. Any player may put a rover out of the game by causing it to hit the finishing stake. The rover's side earns the point for the stake, and the order of play continues without the staked-out ball.

An interesting variation is playing "poison." (See Challenging Option # 7.)

## **Time Limited Game**

If time does not permit a game to be played to the stake, a time limit may be set beforehand. A kitchen timer works well to alert players to the end of the time limit. When the time limit is reached the game is over. This is known as "sudden stop". If the score is tied in the "sudden stop" format, the ball closest to its contested wicket gets an extra point for the win.

## **Challenging Optional Rules**

All players in the game must consent to these optional rules before the start of the game. Any combination of options (none to all) may be chosen.

### **Option 1. Using Deadness**

Deadness occurs after a roquet is made and the striker is unable to score his/her wicket. The consequences are that the striker is not allowed to roquet the ball(s) again until scoring the wicket. Once the wicket is scored, the striker becomes 'alive' and is able to roquet the ball(s) again. If a striker roquets a ball he/she is dead on, all balls are replaced to their positions before the shot, and the turn is over. Deadness carries over from turn to turn.

#### **Option 1A. Special Relief of Deadness**

A side may clear one of its balls of deadness when the opponent makes the first wicket after the turning stake (the 8th wicket) so long as that side is behind in points (not tied) at the end of the opponent's turn.

#### **Option 1B. Clearing Deadness**

A side may clear one of its balls of deadness when the opponent makes the first wicket after the turning stake (the 8th wicket) regardless of score at the end of the opponent's turn.

### **Option 2. Out of Bounds Play**

A) A ball is considered out-of-bounds if it is more than halfway over the boundary line which is considered to be the inside edge of the boundary marking. If a striker sends any ball(s) out-of-bounds as the result of their shot, all balls shall be measured in 9" from the spot where they crossed the boundary line. The only exception to this is when the striker's ball crosses the boundary line as the result of a roquet where it is then lifted and placed either in contact or up to 9" from the roqueted ball. Additionally, any ball coming to rest within 9" of the boundary shall

be marked in 9" prior to the next shot unless it is the striker ball and it has any remaining shots. Any balls within the 9" at the end of a turn shall be marked in 9" inches. A mallet head is normally 9" in length. Longer heads should have a 9" mark on it for the placing of balls.

B) If Option 1 is in effect and the striker roquets a ball out-of-bounds, the turn is over and the out-of-bounds ball is marked in 9". However, no deadness is incurred.

### **Option 3. Starting Deadness**

May be used in conjunction with Option 1 regarding deadness. No extra shots are earned by hitting another ball until both the striker ball and the ball to be roqueted have cleared a designated wicket (typically #1, #2, or #3). A ball "not in the game" may have a ball(s) "in the game" marked and lifted for a shot – and vice versa. Balls "out" of the game are dead on balls "in" the game- and visa versa.

### **Option 4. Wired**

If an opponent causes the striker ball to be blocked by a wicket or stake (wired) when the striker wishes to shoot at a ball it is alive on, the striker may move his/her ball a mallet head's length or up to 9 inches in any direction from its wired position to enable a possible open shot on that ball. The striker is not obligated to shoot at a ball from this new position and may take any shot he/she wishes. This optional rule does not apply if the striker's side placed the striker ball in its current position, only if the opponent placed it there.

### **Option 5. Blocked at a Wicket by a Dead Ball**

If an opponent causes a ball to be blocked from scoring its wicket by a dead ball(s) for two consecutive turns, the blocked ball becomes alive on the blocking ball(s). The opponent must be responsible for the block, not the side claiming a block. A block must be confirmed by the blocking side in order to be counted as a block, in order to avoid disputes. In addition, the proposed wicket shot that is claimed to be blocked must be possible to make to count as a block.

### **Option 6. Rover Play**

A rover may hit all balls once per turn; however, once the rover is dead on a ball(s), it must go through any wicket in any direction to clear its deadness on that ball(s). The rover does not get an additional (bonus) shot after going through this clearing wicket.

### **Option 7. Poison**

A poison ball is one that has scored all the wickets but hasn't hit the finishing stake. A poison ball may hit any opponent ball and have it removed from the game. Conversely, if an opponent ball hits a poison ball, the poison ball is removed from the game. If a poison ball fully passes through any wicket in any direction, it is removed from the game. A poison ball does not earn bonus shots for hitting other balls.



## **Option 8. Over Time Play**

When a timed match has expired, each ball gets a last turn. If a ball has played its last stroke of the turn and is still rolling on the court when time expires, it will get another turn. If the losing side has played its last turns, the winning side may not play its last turn (aka last ball/last turn may not play). If the score is tied after the "last turn" round, the ball closest to its contested wicket gets an extra point for the win. A tournament director may choose to use multiple last turns rounds (ideally, no more than two rounds).

## **Frequently Asked Questions**

**Q: "At the start of the game, is it better to go first or last?"**

A: Generally, it's better to go last, because the more balls in front of you, the more options you have in playing your ball. So, unlike other games, it is not polite to insist that the other team/player goes first.

**Q: "Is there any particular way that I must hold the mallet and hit the ball?"**

A: No, except that you cannot "push" the balls, i.e., you keep swinging so that your mallet is really pushing the ball forward. However, it is advisable to use a traditional swing, where you swing the mallet in a straight line between your legs, as opposed to from the side like golf.

**Q: "Do I have to go through the wickets in any particular order?"**

A: Yes, you must follow the double-diamond pattern and go through the wickets in order of their numbers, i.e., wicket 1, then 2, then 3, etc. (See Diagram)

**Q: "Can I really use my hand or foot to hold my ball while hitting it and knocking another ball away?"**

A: Yes, if you have hit that other ball and have scored bonus shots. You may place your ball right next to that other ball and do so. This is called either a "hand roquet" or a "foot roquet." If the striker ball comes loose from the foot or hand after hitting it there is no penalty and you can simply play the striker ball from where it comes to rest.

**Q: "If I send a ball over the boundary, is there a penalty?"**

A: No (unless you use Option 2), sending a ball out of bounds does not end your turn. When a ball goes out of bounds, it is replaced a mallet length (or, on a small court, a mallet-head) in from the boundary, and if the striker has another shot, the turn continues.

**Q: "If my ball hits another ball and then goes through its next wicket, what happens next?"**

A: If your ball hits another ball, you immediately earn two extra shots (unless you have hit that ball in that turn since making your last wicket). In this situation, the wicket doesn't count, and you must take the extra shots earned.

**Q: "If my ball goes through a wicket and then hits another ball on the same shot, what happens next?"**

A: In this case, you have earned one extra shot for the wicket, but the roquet on the other ball is ignored. You may choose to hit that ball again on the continuation shot to earn two extra shots, but you aren't required to do so.

**Q: "Don't I get 3 bonus shots if my ball hits another ball and goes through a wicket on the same shot?"**

A: No. Bonus shots are not accumulated. One shot either results in one more bonus shot or two, depending on the shot. One shot can never result in 3 bonus shots.

**Q: "What happens when, after receiving two bonus shots, my first bonus shot clears a wicket? Do I still have 2 bonus shots or just 1?"**

A: You have one shot left, in that you lose your second bonus shot from the prior roquet, but you still have one stroke left for scoring the wicket.

**Q: "If my ball is hit through a wicket by an opponent, do I get credit for scoring that wicket?"**

A: Yes. You get credit for that wicket and you can move on to the next wicket. When it is your turn to shoot next, you still have only one shot from where your ball ended up.

**Q: "When is a ball through a wicket?"**

A: See the diagram and discussion in the "Scoring Wicket and Stake Points" section above.

**Q: "What happens if I miss my ball entirely on a shot?"**

A: It counts as a shot, and if you had only one shot when you missed, your turn ends.

**Q: "What happens when someone plays out of turn? Is there a penalty?"**

A: No, but once the out-of-turn play is discovered, you must replace the ball that last played out of turn and have the correct ball play. (See the out of turn rule in the main section for an example).

**Q: "Is there a rule that says you are 'dead' on a ball you've hit (not allowed to hit it) until you make your next wicket?"**

A: Yes, see Option 1. In the regular version of backyard croquet, however, there is no carryover of "deadness" from one turn to the next (unless using Option 1) and no penalty or reward for hitting a ball more than once between wickets. Once you hit a ball and earn the two extra shots for the roquet, you cannot earn any extra shots for hitting it again until you either a) make your next wicket or b) finish your turn. Playing with carryover deadness is optional in nine-wicket croquet but is very much a part of the American six-wicket game played in clubs and tournaments. The tournament rules available from the USCA cover the details of this and other aspects of advanced play.

**Q: "At what point can I start hitting other balls and earning bonus shots?"**

A: Once the first ball has finished its first turn. That means after blue has finished its first turn, red and the remaining balls can strike it and start earning bonus shots immediately (unless Option 3 is used).

**Q: "What happens if I hit a ball that I'm dead on?"**

A: When Option 1 is in effect, all balls are replaced and the turn is over. If Option 1 is not being used, there is no penalty for hitting a dead ball; however you don't get two shots for that hit.

**Q: "What if I strike my mallet into another ball accidentally?"**

A: The shot must be replayed correctly with no loss of turn.

**Q: "When you send another ball away by a foot shot or hand shot, do you lose your second bonus stroke if your ball also moves after hitting it?"**

A: No, you just play your ball from where it comes to rest.

**Q: "When you go out of bounds, do you have to place your ball back in bounds immediately or can you wait until your turn?"**

A: You must immediately place your ball back in bounds.

**Q: "When placing your ball back in bounds, do you have to place it 90 degrees inbounds to the line at the point it went out or at any angle at the point it went out?"**

A: The ball must be placed perpendicular and not at a diagonal angle from where it went out of bounds.

**Q: "What happens if more than one ball crosses the boundary on the same spot?"**

A: The striker may measure any ball in bounds first and then place the other(s) up to a mallet-head length away from it on either side (but not in contact with the other ball).

**Q: "May I choose not to use a boundary?"**

A: In informal play, yes. In USCA sanctioned tournament play, no.

**Q: "If my ball is right up against a wicket or the turning stake, can I just hit the back of the stake or wicket and hope that knocks my ball forward?"**

A: No. Your mallet head must strike the ball.

**Q: "If I have a mallet head that is round, and my ball is up against the turning stake, can I just run my mallet head downward between the stake and the ball in order to move the ball as my shot?"**

A: No.

**Q: "Can I keep playing after my ball passes through all the wickets and hits the finishing stake?"**

A: No. Once either you or an opponent causes your ball to hit the finishing stake (after you have made all the wickets), you must remove your ball from the court and your ball may not be played anymore. If you do not hit the finishing stake, you may continue playing, either as a rover or as poison, depending on which rules are used in the game.

**Q: "Can a rover ball shoot through a wicket and take 2 shots for hitting another ball?"**

A: Only when it is totally clean – not dead on any other balls. Any other wicket shot would "Clear" the rover ball and any contact would be incidental.

**Q: "Is there a variation of croquet called 'Poison'?"**

A: Yes, and its definition varies widely. Fundamentally, poison is a ball that has made all the wickets and tries to eliminate the opponent's balls from the game by roqueting (hitting) them. However, if poison is roqueted by an opponent ball or if it should go through any wicket in any direction, poison loses and is put out of the game

**Q: "Can I create my own rules and variations for croquet?"**

A: Yes, this is done all the time; however, it is the purpose of the USCA to standardize one set of rules. If a variation is to be used, it should be announced before the start of a game.

**Q: "What happens if something occurs that is not covered in the rule book?"**

A: The players in the game should try to decide the issue and carry on. If that is impossible, the striker shall rule and thereby set a precedent until the USCA is contacted for an official ruling.



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