



BARBARA P. HERNANDEZ/NYI

Florida's National Croquet Center — the largest facility of its kind in the world — offers weekend seminars for about 60 students of all ages to learn the game from pros.

Pack your mallet

GETTING THERE

U.S. Airways (1-800-428-4322; www.usairways.com) offers daily flights to Palm Beach International Airport from Montreal, Ottawa and Toronto. WestJet (1-888-937-8538; www.westjet.com) offers non-stop flights from Toronto and Calgary to Fort Lauderdale, 75 kilometres to the south. Miami International Airport is 100 kilometres to the south.

WHERE TO STAY

The Breakers Hotel: 1 South County Rd., Palm Beach; 1-888-273-2537; thebreakers.com. Golf is still the main sport at this stately period piece, but croquet is another favourite. The hotel even organizes croquet lawn parties, which include lunch or dinner and come with two croquet referees dressed in regulation white. In high season (through mid-May),

doubles start at \$560.

PGA National Resort & Spa: 400 Avenue of the Champions, Palm Beach Gardens; 1-800-633-9150; www.pga-resorts.com. Doubles from \$300 through December; \$430 from Jan. 1 to April 15.

THINGS TO DO

The croquet season begins Nov. 1. The National Croquet Center has a clubhouse, hosts croquet lawn parties, offers dining in season and hosts competitions every Saturday morning. Golf croquet instruction is free; equipment is provided. For more information, visit www.croquet-national.com.

The United States Croquet Association's next weekend courses run Dec. 2 to 4, and Jan. 5 to 7, 2006. For more information, visit www.croquetamerica.com.

'Croquet is fast. It's a whole new world'

So much for 'chess on grass' — Palm Beach's wicket scene is muscular, brainy and occasionally cutthroat. And a pair of Canadians rule the lawns

BY JUDITH RITTER, PALM BEACH, FLA.

With its wood panelling and display cases full of silver trophies, the lounge of the National Croquet Center in Palm Beach, Fla., feels like a time machine. The clubby room seems like the perfect place to hobnob with the high-strung Dorothy Parker or 1930s movie heartthrob Tyrone Power, both die-hard fans and cutthroat players of croquet. But that was then. While it has a reputation as an anachronistic pastime of the leisure class, croquet is making a comeback, and Palm Beach is the epicentre for a not-so-genteel version of the game.

At the National Croquet Center, visitor Cynnne Cagney argues that the game might eclipse golf as Florida's obsession. "Golf is boring," she says, punctuating her words with a thwack as she hits a ball down the lawn with a three-pound mallet. "Croquet is fast. It's a whole new world."

Cagney is one of about 60 stud-

ents, from teens to retirees, who come to the croquet centre for seminars with pros (yes, indeed, there are croquet pros). And she's joking, of course; it's highly unlikely that croquet will ever outshine Palm Beach's 110 golf courses.

With the croquet centre, the largest croquet facility in the world, and a number of smaller green-swards (or croquet lawns), the gilded ghetto probably has the highest density of croquet greens in the United States. And the wicket sport has caught the attention of hundreds, if not thousands, of visitors to Palm Beach.

The curious rebirth of this game in America has another odd twist: The best players in America are Canadians. Leo McBride, a Barrie, Ont., schoolteacher, is the No. 1-ranked player in North America. And when Elora, Ont., native Brian Cumming made his last visit to Palm Springs for the National Croquet Championships, he stole the gold from his American competitors.

The tournament croquet that Mr.

Cumming and Mr. McBride play has nothing to do with lazy summer days in the backyard. It is muscular and brainy and can be cutthroat; players talk of "killing" their opponents and aren't averse to running up the score against weak competition. The students who come to the centre all ante up \$470 or more for a weekend of lessons, and while few aspire to high-stakes tournament croquet, all but the rank beginners take the game seriously.

For visitors to the Palm Beach area, the United States Croquet Association's seminar weekends offer an easy way to get into the game. On the centre's wide, shady veranda, students in white shorts and safari hats dine on elegant luncheons, imagining themselves as Boston Brahmins or British blue-bloods just for a few days.

Then there are the lessons with croquet pros like Teddy Prentiss, the Arnold Palmer of the wicket world. For beginners, the guidance begins with stance, grip and lessons in swinging a mallet. Failed at-

tempts to hit the brightly coloured balls are met with friendly jocular-ity.

Croquet's rules are so Byzantine (there is a 67-page book) and involve so much jargon that beginners may as well be studying a foreign language, sorting out their peels from their pass rolls and cannons. Of course, the more advanced students spend their weekends learning complex strategy and tactics.

Some, like Maine resident Marcia Chapman, practise the sport far from the warm winds of Palm Beach. "We have a tournament in the snow," Chapman chuckles. "It's beautiful to see the bright colour(ed) balls carve little tracks in the snow." But she confesses that it's a lot easier to play in shorts in Florida than in a parka in Maine, and there's more to learn here too. "There are so many variables," she says. "It's a complex game of strategy, like chess and billiards on turf."

The complexity of the game and its reputation for snootiness have kept some people away. Bob Al-

man, who is editor of an on-line croquet magazine and runs the museum at the croquet centre, is on a mission to change that reputation. "There's this image of croquet as this elegant esoteric game that you can look at, but no one has any idea what is going on," he says. "Croquet rules are so complex, they seem beyond understanding."

In his white pith helmet and white trousers, he seems an unlikely impresario for the sport he calls "chess on grass." But democratizing croquet is Alman's life's work. He concedes that traditional croquet can be a tough sell, so he is pitching a few other croquet-inspired games that he thinks have broader appeal.

One of those variants is a super-size version called malletball, played with big mallets, brightly coloured soccer balls and large PVC hoops. No perfectly manicured lawn is needed for this form of wicket madness; any old backyard or park will do. Alman says the popularity of this game and a kids' version called Toequet are creating new interest in the more strategic traditional game. Malletball games are played at the National Croquet Center, on hotel lawns and in city parks around Palm Beach.

An unstoppable optimist, Alman also has a plan to lure the thousands of golfers visiting Palm Beach with a hybrid game called "golf croquet." This curiously named pastime — which has little to do with the area's more popular sport — is really a beginner's croquet that is easier and more social. It's already popular enough that the National Croquet Center has a dedicated lawn for the sport and a year-round schedule of tournaments and seminars.

The continued growth in popularity of golf croquet may even serve to restore harmony in Cynnne Cagney's home. Back on the expanse of croquet lawn, Cagney, still smacking red, yellow and blue balls on the grass, explains that her golf-obsessed husband humoured her recently and challenged her to a game of croquet — which he had never played but was convinced was a snap.

According to Cagney, hubby changed his tune quickly. "Of course, I whipped him," she says. Next time, she says, she'll avoid domestic warfare, opt for the golf version of the wicket sport and level the playing field.

Special to *The Globe and Mail*