

SCIENTIFIC CROQUET A POPULAR PASTIME FOR MEN IN CENTRAL PARK



Mr. E. G. Lallernand.



Mr. Leash.



Mr. James Grace and Mr. Taylor.



Mr. John H. Welsh.



Mr. Henry Keil.

Snapshots of Well Known Players on the Ground of the Union Croquet Club at Central Park.

ALMOST the entire area of the great playground of Central Park, situated near its northeast corner and fronting Central Park West above Fifty-ninth Street, is given over to children. Interspersed with them there are some adults—baseball players in Spring and Summer and football enthusiasts in the Autumn and early Winter—but, for all that, to the casual looker-on the place is distinctly a children's playground.

Yet if the looker-on takes somewhat more than a casual look he may see one plot, tucked away in a corner of the big playground, where instead of children old men with snow-white hair are at play—old men as enthusiastic as any one of the youngsters—and who look upon their hours of play in the park as not only a pleasure but a necessity.

These old men are members of the Union Croquet Club, which has played croquet on the Central Park playground for a quarter of a century. Some of them are charter members of the club. From early in April to late in December of each year for twenty-five years there never has been a day that a croquet game has not been in progress among members of the club in that self same corner of the playground.

Every morning a man in the employ of the club sets up a lot of wickets and arranges some strings about the plot of ground in a manner that means something to players, but looks very abstruse and inexplicable to a rank outsider. Then the man goes back to a storehouse near the playground and reappears with some camp chairs, which he arranges on the grass near the wickets. Then he sticks up behind the chairs several handsome blue and gold banners lettered "Union Croquet Club."

With that grand final touch all is ready for another day in the club's history.

As soon as the wickets are up and the strings arranged and the banners proudly flying the early birds among the club's members begin to drop around, eager for a game. The club possesses six croquet sets, every one of which gets active service while the season lasts. It is in the afternoon that the grounds are most animated in appearance. The daily average of members who play in the afternoon is twenty-five. Among the most enthusiastic are some of the club's oldest members, who may be seen in the park on any fine afternoon—or even in doubtful weather, for their enthusiasm for the game is immense—with their hats off and their sleeves rolled up, with not a thought for anything but croquet.

The oldest member of all is Mr. Oscar Purdy. He has been an active player for as long a time as any one in the club can remember.

"How old is he?" inquired the reporter.

"Eighty-five," answered somebody proudly.

"Goodness, why I thought Mr. Purdy was at least a hundred years old!" exclaimed another member.

But, whether his age is eight-five or one hundred, his game doesn't show it. Day after day his actions on the croquet field make many a younger player sit up and take notice. And there are a number of other players in the club who have passed the sixty-five mark, but play like hale and hearty youths.

Each member pays annual dues of \$2, which is largely expended in keeping the ground in condition and paying the man who looks out for the wickets. The club occupies its corner of the playground

The Union Croquet Club Has Played There for a Quarter of a Century—Its Oldest Active Player Is Eighty-Five.

year in year out by special arrangement with the Park Commissioner.

Recently Mayor Gaynor strolled over to the croquet ground while several exciting matches were going on and looked on with the critical eye of a connoisseur. The Mayor is by no means a stranger to the game, being a member of a younger organization in Brooklyn similar to the

Union Croquet Club, which meets in Prospect Park.

The Mayor told members of the club that he would see to it that their grounds were better taken care of by the park authorities.

"A croquet ground," one of the members explained, "should be like a billiard table." The Mayor fully agreed with this

view, but so far nothing has been done. However, the croquet players seem to enjoy themselves hugely every day, in spite of the somewhat hummocky condition of their park corner.

And they're very proud of the game they play.

"It is what is known as tight croquet," thus one of them enlightened the re-

porter, "which is the real, scientific game—not the one commonly played on lawns in this country."

"What are the leading characteristics of tight croquet?" was respectfully asked.

"Why, you see, it is played not with wooden balls, but with balls of vulcanized rubber, a special kind of heavy mallet, and steel-covered wickets. The balls cost \$14 for a set of four. One of the principal rules is that a player must play for the first arch just the same as he plays for the others, from behind the stake. There is no roqueting."

Every year the club holds a tournament on its Central Park grounds, which lasts for about three weeks. This year the prizes for which the members strove were two pastel sketches made by S. K. Pembroke, an artist who is an enthusiastic member of the club.

Mr. Pembroke intends to offer a silver cup as the prize in the Spring tournament of 1911.

Previous to getting the Central Park playground, twenty-five years ago, some of the club's members used to play in a vacant lot in Harlem. Among the players who founded the club and were active in its tournaments and daily informal games was Dr. Hughes, father of Charles E. Hughes, ex-Governor of New York.

The club's members, being really scientific croqueteers—if such a word may be coined—are extremely particular about the mallets they use. Most of them have these mallets specially made for them according to their own specifications. The mallets are much heavier than the ordinary croquet mallet.

For about ten years, or until the time that the Majestic Theatre was built in Columbus Circle, the Union Croquet Club played all winter on the lot at Fifty-

eighth Street and Eighth Avenue. The club had permission to use the ground from its owner, the late John C. Eno. Two courts were laid out on the lot, each with a border of heavy six-inch plank-ing, attached to which were heavy rubber bicycle tires, which made a cushion similar to that on billiard tables.

The club in those days employed a man to clear away the snow from the lot after each snowstorm. It was one of the sights of the city in mid-Winter to see croquet games in progress on dirt courts, with snow banked high about them on all sides.

If it rained the man would cover the ground with sawdust. When the rain stopped, the sawdust would be stacked away in barrels for use on another rainy day.

The courts used by the Union Club now are 84 feet long. A boundary line surrounds each court and when a ball is driven out of the court it is brought in on a line with the middle wicket and placed twelve inches inside the boundary line.

Old as the Union Croquet Club is, it must yield the palm of age to the Brooklyn Croquet Club, which has been playing in Prospect Park since 1876. Its best player is Dr. George J. C. Wardenberg. He played eight years ago against Mr. John H. Welsh, founder of the Union Croquet Club, for the championship of New York and Brooklyn. Wardenberg won 3 to 2, after three hours of strenuous play, before two thousand spectators.

Among the well-known players who are frequently seen on the grounds of the Union Croquet Club, Central Park, are Mr. E. G. Lallernand, Mr. Leash, Mr. James Grace, Mr. Taylor, Mr. John H. Welsh, and Mr. Henry Keil.