

Lawn Bowling: A Primer In Three Parts (A. Novice)

Part 1: The 'boys'

The 'boys' had been meeting on the same day at the same table for a good many years with a pretty good attendance record marred only by the odd knee or hip surgery, a funeral or two, a visit to the urologist to hear the snap of the rubber glove, or maybe some last minute babysitting duties, so it wasn't odd when one of the group was missing; even a couple of them.

As usual Bob was a bit late when he walked in so he first went over to the bar to order his drink and then took one of the empty seats at the table. He looked around to do a quick mental roll call and asked, to no one in particular, "Where's Jack?" He was also wondering who else was missing but the pub was a bit dark and well, the memory ...

"His son took him lawn bowling," Ted answered. "He said he'd see us next week."

"Oh, I wasn't aware he knew how to play," Bob said, somewhat perturbed to hear such a frivolous excuse for being absent. "I know he tried curling awhile back but what with his knee and everything."

"No one really knows how to lawn bowl, Bob," Ted added. "You just try to get near or hit the 'jack' with your bowl."

"You mean he's gonna get hit ..? Why would he go?"

Ted was about to answer but Rick decided to help out and take on some of the heavy lifting that was often needed when you tried to explain things to Bob, so he tapped Ted on the arm to show he was in the game: "No Bob, Jack doesn't get hit," Rick said. "The jack is what you aim at with your bowls."

"So there's another Jack playing?"

"No Bob, just the one jack. It's a little white ball."

"This is really confusing. Maybe I should go out and come in again."

"No Bob, that's not necessary," Tom said. "In fact I think we practiced that a few weeks ago and you mastered it."

"Funny, ha ha ... So how does lawn bowling work?"

"Well, generally there are three of you on a team and each of you has a set of bowls. The goal is for your team to get a bowl closer to the jack than the other team can; that 'closest' bowl is called the 'shot bowl'. Both teams start from one end of the green, with the home team setting up the game by throwing the jack past the hog line."

"You gotta be kidding me; we got livestock in the game as well?"

"Just a term, Bob. So one of the teams wins the toss to position the jack and then, still standing on, um, the ..."

"Mat?" Pete said, adding to the plot.

"Matt? ... Matt's there as well? I knew someone else was missing today and now I learn that they're standing on him. Wow, first Jack gets hit and now poor old Matt is getting stomped on. What kind of fun is that?"

"No Bob, Matt's not playing; he's in the washroom - again. Anyway, if you end up with your bowl closest to the jack you're shot: you win the game."

It was a delicious moment; Bob had always been selfless in celebrating aloud his natural bent for the absurd and all the guys were ready: this could be one for the memory book.

"So let me get this straight about going lawn bowling: first you get hit, then you're jumped on, and if you win the game you're shot! Wow, that's quite the game ... I'd hate to think what happens if you lose."

Part 2: The 'boys' and Their Intervention

It was a sign of Bob's agitation and unhappiness that he was not only on time for the weekly get-together but the first of the group to be sitting at the table with a beer in front of him. All the 'boys' knew something was up when they saw him and they took their first sips in anticipation of another interesting afternoon: everyone that is except Jack, who was missing again.

"We need an interviewing," Bob said when he couldn't hold it in any longer.

"A what Bob?" Ted asked. He was normally the group's front man when there was a new initiative tabled by Bob to consider.

"An interviewing; we need to confront Jack and show him the error of his ways: the damage he's doing. The group is suffering and it's time for action."

"I think you mean an 'intervention', Bob. I don't think we need to interview him: he's been one of us for awhile."

"Intervention ... that's what I meant. What they do on TV with drunks, drug addicts, and people who keep getting tattoos. Their friends and family all get together and ambush them. Right ..?"

"That's right, but I've never heard that 'tattoos' were an issue ... the granddaughter causing you heartburn again, Bob?" Bob frowned a bit at this comment and made a sort of harrumph type sound loud enough to discourage any further discussion on the subject. "So when could we do this? Do you think they'd let us have the back room here or should we meet at one of our homes?"

Ray thought that maybe he'd help out a little and nodded to Ted that he'd relieve him for awhile: "Probably a good idea to meet off-site, Bob. It will be better if it's impartial ... but Bob aren't we jumping the gun a little; Jack has only missed three weeks, counting today."

"Three weeks in our lives is a long time," Bob said, remembering the scare he'd recently had at the doctor's. "At our age we can't take time for granted," he added which sort of put a hush on the group: eight old guys contemplating their mortal links. Peter, who normally wouldn't say anything other than 'hello' and 'see you next week' put his drink down on the table rather loudly and said, "Bob's right ... let's do it," which sort of put a stamp on it as if the oracle had spoken.

"I'll organize it," said Rick. "I can borrow my son's minivan, you can get ten in it, but we have to find somewhere for the ambush; Ted, I have some ideas of where we can meet. Call me later." And with that the group, somewhat relieved, continued their supping and talked about the usual things such as the weather, last night's TV, and maybe an upcoming birthday or christening. Ted had flinched a little when Rick offered to organise the venue, remembering some really strange get-togethers that he had arranged at 'John Duck's Tavern' and the motels west of it, in pre-Palace Pier days, and was pleased it wouldn't be necessary to explore his 'ideas'. Ted had seen the confrontation coming a week ago when Jack had missed two, get that, two meets, and he'd called him last night. Bob had played into the group's hands today and Jack was an able and willing partner in the plot they'd hatched.

A week later the minivan did the rounds and picked up the group members. Rick's son drove as he didn't trust any of the old boys behind the wheel and wouldn't miss the event for anything. Jack and his son had also done their part and the game was afoot ...

It was Mike's job to occupy Ted on the drive: he was the ideal choice as what he said rarely made any sense, but he said it in such a way that had you transfixed as you tried to understand what he was going on about with the forlorn hope that, in the end, it was all going to be worth the effort. By the time Bob came to the conclusion that Mike had once again wasted his time they'd arrived at the back doors of the club house; Jack's son was waiting for them and once the minivan had pulled to a stop he slid the backdoor open to let the boys out. "He's in there waiting for you," he said in an appropriately serious tone.

"Good," Bob harrumphed, "let's get this over with ..."

The first thing they saw when they walked in was Jack, standing in front of a table with about ten sets of bowl in front of him. "Pick a set, lads; go for the largest you can hold without dropping it"

"What's going on here?" Bob said, less than happy.

"It's the intervention, Bob; it has to be done at the scene of the crime," Rick quickly said, passing him a set of bowls.

"Here, these are about your size." And with that they all started to pick up and test the bowls to see what was right for them. Once they were happy with their weapons of choice they were hustled out to the bowling green for basic instructions on how to bowl from Mary-Jo, the no nonsense coach, who knew how to deal with naysayers and grouches.

Bob was persuaded to 'give it a try' and everyone agreed it was a successful afternoon. In fact, it was even suggested that they think about coming again next week but only, Bob said, if they promised that he won't be shot; he wouldn't mind hitting Jack, though.

Part 3: The 'boys' Join a Bowling Club

The 'boys' all decided to go in their own cars and meet in the club car park by 9.30, ready to start bowling. For a bunch of old guys they were pretty excited and even Bob, who was notoriously late, was there ready to rock and roll.

As they walked down the pathway to the club house, Bob turned to Jack, "I didn't notice it last year, Jack, but the grass and the grounds are in really good shape. The bushes around the fence are in bloom and they look absolutely gorgeous ... and look at the flowers hanging from the clubhouse awning: everything is so colourful and welcoming."

"I know, Bob, they really work hard."

"Who does, Jack?"

"The members: it's really a members' club, Bob, and they just about do everything themselves; maybe except for cutting the grass which is contracted out. And there's also a cleaning lady who comes in once a week."

"Wow. That's impressive," Bob said, looking around, enjoying his morning and feeling pretty good about being at the bowling club. "Come on lads, let's see what we signed up for," he called to his friends and they all went into the clubhouse to choose their bowls, ready to join Mary-Jo for their first coaching session of the season. She split them up into teams for the game and tried to remind them of what they were told in the fall at their introductory lesson.

The first six ends of the game went quickly and by 11 they were ready for a break, joining all the other members for coffee, tea, soft drinks, and snacks the on-duty crew had laid out. As was the club's custom, and probably for no valid reason, teams playing together would sit together at one table and the newcomers followed tradition, discussing their winning and errant bowls of the previous hour. Bob thanked Mary-Jo for her patience and asked her who arranged the life-saving goodies that they were enjoying this morning: pineapple chunks, strawberries, raisin bread, and a various assortment of cookies. "We do, Bob: the members. There's a weekly schedule organised so we can spread the load around. The only wild card is that the teams who finish bowling first do the tidying up: basically making sure that everything like the coffee urn and snack platters are clean and put away, and the kitchen is ready for the next day's bowling. Stuff like that. It works."

"Yes, but don't you host tournaments here? And didn't you tell me that there's always something going on when there's a stat holidays? They must be catered, surely... Someone has to pick up the milk and sugar, etc."

"No Bob, everyone chips in: we have special sign-up sheets for those events. Come on, let's get back out there," she said, taking her coffee mug to the kitchen to rinse it and put it away, before going out to the greens. Everyone but Bob followed and when Jack saw him hanging back he went over to him: "Anything wrong, Bob?"

"No, on the contrary, Jack. I was just working it out. Annual membership is \$155 + bowls rental of \$25, which comes to \$180. So, excluding the many other events happening here, such as those on holiday weekends or the in-house tournaments, and let's say we bowl only twice a week for five months, though I intend to come more often, that's only \$4.50 a visit. No parking, as much coaching as you want, and you're having fun with a really nice group of people with interesting stories to tell and advice if you want it. Why haven't we done this before?"

"And you won't mind doing your bit, helping out in the kitchen, or getting the rinks ready in the morning or maybe for the special occasions, even trimming the roses or hedges ..?"

"No, not at all, though I might need to be poked and reminded every now and then; I'm as lazy as the next guy."

“Don’t worry about that, Bob. Check your membership package, fill out the ‘volunteer’ application, and hand it in. It’s a new initiative the board came up with this year. In fact, you can even serve on the board if you want to ... Elections are at the end of the year.”

“I’m not sure I’m ready for that, Jack. Not to say that I won’t want to stick my oar in down the line, but for the next little while I’ll join the multitude and do my bit to keep this club as attractive and successful as it is. It’s gotta be the best deal in town but I might have to buy my own bowls; I’ve tried two rental sets so far and neither of them have got close to the jack.”