Croquet pro Mike McDonnell demonstrates a shot on the court at Meadowood resort in St. Helena. He's one of the few croquet pros in the United States.

T. HELENA - The meticulously manicured lawn at Meadowood Napa Valley would make any golfer green with envy. But put away those putters. They will get no play here.

Mike McDonnell steps onto the course, sporting white shorts and a white polo shirt, carrying a 3-pound mallet. He sets up two balls, one red and another blue, and lines them up for a shot.

"Walk and stalk," said McDonnell, repeating his mantra of setting up the perfect shot.

McDonnell knows the shots slightly underneath his cap. He swings his mallet slowly at first like a pendulum, then takes a full swing.

Bank!

The blue ball sails over the red ball and passes right through a wicket that allows a mere 3/16 inch of wiggle room. This is what you call a trick shot in the world of croquet.

You've heard of golf and tennis pros at a country club or resort, but how about a full-time croquet pro? That would be McDonnell. And right about now, with summer in full swing, it's the high season for croquet.

He's on call seven days a week to teach the finer points of croquet to groups at Meadowood, where he keeps a small office with a computer and mallet collection. His steaming grounds are right outside, with two lush croquet courses measuring a regulation 84 feet by 105 feet. The lawn itself is trimmed to a buzzer cut of 5/32 inch.

"In this country, people think of the backyard game, but this is like the adult version of croquet," said McDonnell. "When people come in for a lesson they say, "Oh, I've played before." Well, not like this."
Croquet: Many game variations exist

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England is the mother-land of croquet, with Wimbled-on founded as the All England Croquet Club. Once tennis emerged as Britain's national game, the facility's name morphed to the All England Croquet and Lawn Tennis Club, as it's technically still known. Croquet was introduced to the United States about a hundred years ago but populated as shall we say, a less refined backyard game using scaled-down equipment. Think of the movie "Teach- ers" in which sport of croquet were more like blood sport and an0ther's ball off the course was a pure power trip.

Variations on a theme

"Croquet became this wild and woolly game of whack- ing wooden balls through these wide wicker mats," said McDonnell. "In England it's evolved into this very involved tournament on a putting green. The equipment's heavier, the balls are larger and the clearance through the wickets is tight.

This is the kind of croquet that McDonnell champions. Croquet is traditionally played on a croquet mat, but many variations of the game exist. International matches use a complete "association croquet" game, while the U.S. Croquet Asso- ciation uses its own rules.

Through adaptive play, McDonnell opts to teach an easier style called "golf croquet." It's a six- wicket game that's something like lawn billiards and takes about 30 minutes to teach. One team uses the blue and black balls (also called "the bruisers") and another takes red and yellow ("the condiments"). Meadowbrook adheres to croquet tradition, so players must wear white attire, though light beige pants or shorts will do. Using mythical swings of the mallet, the players work their way clockwise around a course parade points by knocking balls through wickets. The first team to score four wickets is the winner and gets brag- ging rights. See graphic on this page for full rules and a diagram of how to play at home.

"It's the easy access ver- sion of the croquet," said McDonnell. "You can be 8 or 90 and pick up a mallet and have a good time.

McDonnell himself is a swinging kind of guy. Before he paid his bills by playing croquet, McDonnell toured the world as a musician. In the late 1980s, he laid down bass lines for Maynard Ferguson, the late jazz trump- eter. Following that gig, McDonnell played banjo with the Grateful Dead, and he served as musical director for Dead and Company. He is 50 years old now, has never been married and has no kids, but he likes the core. "If you are traveling as a musician it made it hard to stay home," said McDon- nell.

Family history

The croquet course has always been like a second home. McDonnell's late father, Tom, was inducted into the U.S. Croquet Hall of Fame for helping popularize the game in Southern California. While living in Southern California, the elder McDon- nell would play croquet at the family house with such Hollywood actors as David Niven and Diana Hyland. Sam Goldwyn, the legendary film producer and studio executive, was also an avid croquet player and a famili- iar face at the McDonnell's." Home. Tom McDonnell even kept Humphrey Bogart's mallet as a momento.

"Every weekend there was a croquet tournament at the house," said McDonnell. "My dad wasn't so much focused on the competition but how social it was and how people come together to play this game with a rich history and enjoy the out- doors."

The family later settled in St. Helena, where Tom McDonnell helped develop the croquet program at Meadowood. One of the pictures in his son's office shows the two in 1984, "walking and stacking" a shot at a croquet tourna- ment in San Francisco. After his stint as a profes- sional musician, Mike McDonnell returned to the mallets in the mid-1990s, working as an assistant croquet pro at Meadowood. He was named Meadowold's full-time croquet pro in June.

"He's the perfect guy for the job," said Bob Alman, the founding editor of Croquet World Online Maga- zine. "He's a very good player, in the top 5 percent of the United States Croquet Association."

McDonnell still lives in St. Helena and keeps a small music studio at home. He even plays occasionally in a jazz band with a former member of Harry Lewis and the News. McDonnell knows the croquet gods have been exceptionally good to him. One of the interna- tional Polo Club Palm Beach's recent golf croquet challenge offered just $3,000 for first place.

C. Place six wickets symmetrically on the court and one stake in the center. Each wicket and stake counts as 1 point, for a total of 7 points that can be scored in a game. Your team's mission is to pass through each wicket in the prescribed order and direction. Going through the correct wicket scores 1 point. If both players are able to get through that wicket, then once the point is scored, move on to the next wicket. To get through all six wickets, score 4 points is the winner.

D. The game starts with all four players taking their first shot toward the center. From a defined starting area near center 4.

E. Each turn consists of one stroke. You don't get an extra shot for hitting other balls or scoring a point. You are not allowed to put your foot on the ball to knock another ball away.

F. Strategy: Knock the opponent's ball out of position so that player can't score a point. This is where the game can get tricky — afieldName of count, of course.

G. A striker may shoot for position at the next wicket before the wicket being contested is made, but cannot earn a point there until the contested wicket is scored. If a player shoots for the next wicket and happens to make it through before the contested wicket is scored, no point is scored. Sorry, pal.

H. When a ball crosses the boundary line, that ball is brought back inside the boundary line by using the length of one mallet head at the point it crossed the line. Play your next turn from that spot."

Call The Bear's Chris Mackey, (916) 321-1255.

Croquet pro Mike McDonnell jumps his blue ball over the red ball for a point at Meadowood Resort. No, you don't get to whack the other player's ball out of the court.

SIX-WICKET GOLF CROQUET

Grab some all-white clothing, break out the croquet set, and turn your lawn into a mini-Meadowood. Consult the accompanying diagram for further instruction.

RULES

A. This game is played with two teams, either singles (one player per team) or doubles (two per team). One team uses black and white balls and the other uses the red and yellow balls (the "condiments"). All four balls must be used in the game.

B. The balls are played in this order: blue, red, black, yellow. If you need help remembering, just look at the color of the center stake from top to bottom.

C. Place six wickets symmetrically on the court and one stake in the center. Each wicket and stake counts as 1 point, for a total of 7 points that can be scored in a game. Your team's mission is to pass through each wicket in the prescribed order and direction. Going through the correct wicket scores 1 point. If both players are able to get through that wicket, then once the point is scored, move on to the next wicket. To get through all six wickets, score 4 points is the winner.

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Source: Meadowood Napa Valley

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Paul Ellings Jr. / pomogphoto.com

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