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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.

IN THE SWING WITH CROQUET

Resort pro Mike McDonnell has a career teaching the game's finer points

BY CHRIS MACIAS | cmacias@sacbee.com

ST. 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's brow furrows slightly underneath his cap. He swings his mallet slowly at first like a pendulum, then takes a full swing.

Bonk!

The blue ball sails over the red ball and passes right through a wicket that allows a mere 1/16 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 stomping grounds are right outside, with two lush croquet courses measuring a regulation 84 feet by 105 feet. The lawn itself is trimmed to a buzz 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."

Bonk!

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Teach yourself how to play six-wicket croquet. **Page | 12**

SET YOUR WICKETS

Entry-level croquet sets can be had for as little as \$20 at your favorite sporting goods store. If you're more serious about your game and looking for a sturdier set, try www.oakleywoods.com where you can spend upward of \$1,300 on a tournament-quality setup.

Want to splurge? Book a room at the AAA four-diamond Meadowood Napa Valley, 900 Meadowood Lane, St. Helena; (800) 458-8080.

www.meadowood.com; and schedule a lesson with Mike McDonnell. Rooms start at \$625. Croquet lessons cost \$60 per person for a two-hour session, and they are available to Meadowood guests and members only.

Other croquet clubs in Northern California include the Oakland Croquet Club in Lakeside Park, Grand Avenue at Bellevue Avenue, Oakland; (510) 465-2955; and the San Francisco Croquet Club at Stern Grove, 19th Avenue at Wawona Street, San Francisco; (415) 333-7982.

To catch up on the latest in the world of croquet, visit Croquet World Online Magazine (www.croquetworld.com) or the United States Croquet Association (www.croquetamerica.com).



McDonnell stands with a modern wicket, mallet and balls. A ball passes through the wicket with just 1/16 inch of clearance.

FROM THE COVER

Croquet: Many game variations exist

FROM PAGE 11

England is the motherland of croquet, with Wimbledon founded in 1868 as the All England Croquet Club. Once tennis emerged as Britain's national craze, 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 popularized as, shall we say, a less refined backyard game using scaled-down equipment. Think of the movie "Heathers," in which games of croquet were more like blood sport and smacking an opponent's ball off the course was a pure power trip.

Variations on a theme

"Croquet became this wild and woolly game of whacking wooden balls through these wide wire wickets," 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 with six or nine wickets, but many variations of the game exist. International matches use a complicated "association croquet" game, while the U.S. Croquet Association uses its own rules.

Though adept at all of them, 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 20 minutes to teach.

One team uses the blue and black balls (also called "the bruisers") and another takes red and yellow ("the condiments"). Meadowood adheres to croquet tradition, so players must wear white attire, though light beige pants or shorts will do.

Using methodical swings of the mallet, the players work their way clockwise around a course and score points by knocking balls through wickets. The first team to score four wickets is the winner and gets bragging rights. (See graphic on this page for full rules and a diagram of how to play at home).

"It's the easy access version of croquet," said McDonnell. "You can be 8 or 80 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 trumpeter. Following that gig, McDonnell played bass with pop singer Tom Jones and served as musical director for the band.

He is 50 years old now, has never been married and has no kids, a bachelor to the core.

"All that traveling as a musician made it hard to settle down," said McDonnell.

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 on the West Coast.

While living in Southern California, the elder McDonnell would play croquet at the family house with such



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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.

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 familiar face at the McDonnells' home. Tom McDonnell even kept Humphrey Bogart's mallet as a memento.

"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 outdoors."

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 stalking" a shot at a croquet tournament in San Francisco.

After his stint as a professional musician, Mike McDonnell returned to the mallets in the mid-1990s, working as an assistant croquet pro at Meadowood. He was named Meadowood's full-time croquet pro in June.

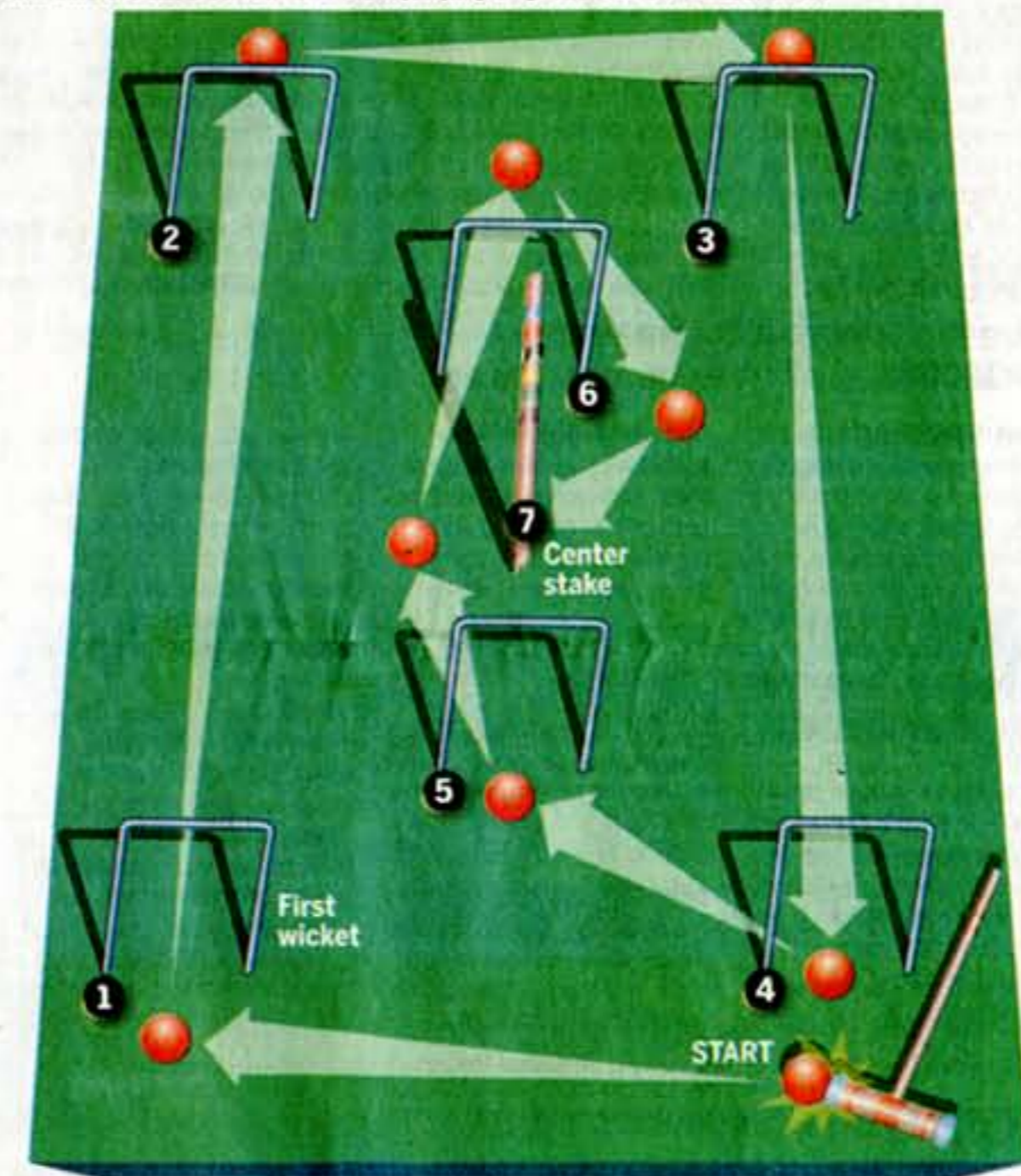
"He's the perfect guy for the job," said Bob Alman, the founding editor of Croquet World Online Magazine. "He's a very good player, in the top 5 percent" of the United States Croquet Association.

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 Huey Lewis and the News. McDonnell knows the croquet gods have been exceptionally good to him. Consider that the International Polo Club Palm Beach's recent golf croquet challenge offered just \$3,000 for first place.

"There's no money to be made in tournaments," said McDonnell. "You can't make a living playing croquet, and there's less than 10 pros in the whole country. But people have those memories of their childhood, being in the backyard with your

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 blue balls (call them "bruisers") 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 colors 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. No other balls have to go through that wicket once the point is scored. Move on immediately to the next wicket. The first team to score 4 points is the winner.

D. The game starts with all four players taking their first shot toward wicket No. 1 from a defined starting area near corner 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 ruthless - in a dignified sort of way, 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 by using the length of one mallet head at the point it crossed the line. Play your next turn from that spot.

Source: Meadowood Napa Valley

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cousins playing croquet."

Enduring pastime

Croquet remains a popular pastime at country clubs, resorts and backyards across the country. More than 3,000 people are members of the Florida-based U.S. Croquet Association, and Alman estimates that at least 10,000 play croquet using association rules.

Over at Sun City, the "active adult" community in Roseville, the grounds include courts for six- and nine-wicket croquet. They take the game especially seriously here, playing croquet using international rules.

"It's a courteous, blood-thirsty game," said Carolyn Miller, an avid croquet player and resident at Sun City. "We started this small little group about four years ago and it's grown and grown to about 85 members. We've been getting calls from around the country from people who want to play here."

Back at Meadowood, there's no shortage of people who want to hit the croquet courts. They all play on a course dedicated to Jerry Stark, Meadowood's former croquet pro who passed away last year.

The matches and lessons can turn spirited quickly, especially with a little wine or a Pimm's Cup in the mix. McDonnell remembers getting paged during a hailstorm from a couple who insisted on getting their lesson.

On an adjacent croquet course, one group of players whooped it up after a tricky shot. No wonder Meadowood doesn't allow croquet before 10 a.m.

"One of the hardest jobs is getting people to stop," said McDonnell. "On weekends we have these large groups coming in, and I say, 'Hey, we've gotta stop,' and they're like, 'No, we don't want to.' They're so into it. This is a home run."

Bonk!

Call The Bee's Chris Macias, (916) 321-1253.