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NOT YOUR PICNIC CROQUET MATCH

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How does an auto assembly plant worker from Kansas City decide to grab a \$500 mallet and hit the pro croquet circuit? Five-time champion Jerry Stark has never looked back after donning white.

Tom FitzGerald, Chronicle Staff Writer

His nickname among his playing peers is "The Barbarian." Two of the best players in the world are "The Beast" and "Kruncher." The Barbarian calls his sport "a war out there."



Chronicle / Chris Stewart

Jerry Stark, 52, carefully lines up a shot on the Meadowood croquet court in St. Helena.

This brutal spectacle is -- croquet? Yes, that genteel game of mallets and wickets played in the backyard while the hot dogs are sizzling on the grill is actually ferociously competitive at the elite level.

And that level is where you'll find a portly, congenial fellow named Jerry Stark. Whether at work in Napa Valley or at tournaments around the world, he dresses from neck to toe in white, the traditional croquet hue. The color accentuates his ruddy complexion, blue eyes and orange hair and beard.

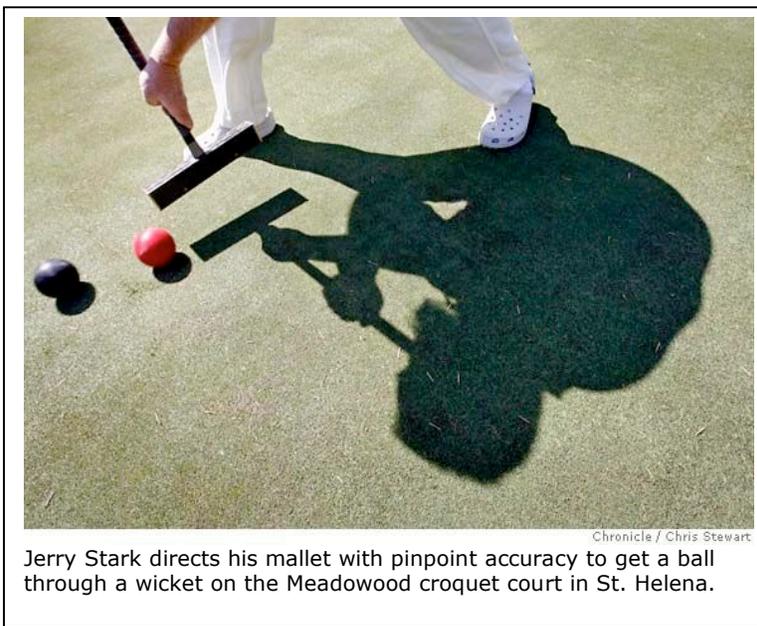
Stark, 52, has won five national titles, two in singles -- including last year's -- and three in doubles. He's ranked second in the country and 42nd in the world, and will defend his national title at the National Croquet Center in West Palm Beach, Fla., in a six-day tournament that starts Monday.

There's rarely any prize money in croquet -- winners at the nationals get no checks, just trophies -- so each year, Stark teaches the game to thousands of people as resident pro at Meadowood Napa Valley, a resort and country club in St. Helena, where his pupils often enjoy a glass of wine while they play.

"What makes it nice is the social aspect," Stark said in his cozy office next to the croquet courts, essentially a large rectangular golf green with wickets.

"I can get 32 people out here and they're all interacting," Stark said. "They change 20 minutes after one game and play new opponents. Men and women can play together. Everybody dresses in white, and the ambience is fabulous. And you don't have to go chase your ball in the woods."

What Stark teaches mainly is a simple, more social variation called golf croquet, but what he plays on the national and international level is association laws or English rules croquet. The game involves six wickets and a peg, and the idea is to pile up points by moving two one-pound balls -- yes, two -- through all the wickets twice and hitting the stake. You get an extra shot for making a wicket and two for striking an opponent's ball; mercilessly whacking the other player's balls out of easy range of the wickets is part of the game.



Jerry Stark directs his mallet with pinpoint accuracy to get a ball through a wicket on the Meadowood croquet court in St. Helena.

"The cliché is, it combines chess, pool and war -- because it is a war out there," Stark said. "It's blood and guts, but you don't see it spilled on the ground."

Forget those skinny mallets, six to a box. Stark's favorite is a \$500 custom baby with brass faces. It's a surgically precise instrument, and it had better be. In tournaments, the clearance a ball has to get through a steel wicket is the width of a credit card -- without the imprinting.

What if your opponent's ball is halfway through the wicket? How do you get yours through without pushing his through, too? Stark showed how it's done, by popping his ball over the other one on the fly and through the wicket -- which has more clearance on the vertical end than the horizontal. Now, that's what you call "touch."

"It's like pool, except you're standing on the table," he said.

Peg shots can be the stuff of glory, too. During the world championships in England in 1988, Stark hit the peg from 60 feet away, a shot he had to make to keep him and his partner in the tournament.

The prospect of international glory had nothing to do with why Stark started playing the sport. He was in it for the beer.

A former high school tight end, he was working on an assembly line at General Motors in Kansas City, Mo., when friends invited him to a croquet tournament and weekend camp-out on a farm. He was reluctant until he heard, "There's going to be a beer truck with 35 kegs."

"I'm in," he said.

He quickly got hooked. "There's a competitiveness to it," he said, "but I liked the morals, too. You don't cheat. There's no gamesmanship. There's not much of that in the world nowadays, unfortunately."

After GM laid him off and his marriage ended, he moved to Phoenix in 1983 mainly to play croquet. "My friends thought I was crazy," he said.

He remarried and became a sales rep for a paint company. A few years later he played at Meadowood in the world's first prize-money tournament. He joined the resort's staff in 1990.

World-class croquet may not have made him rich, but he spends his days on sun-kissed, bent-grass lawns in a pristine world where nobody cheats. His friends no longer think he's crazy.

Online resources

For more on the U.S. Croquet Association:

croquetamerica.com

Man with a mallet

Name: Jerry Stark

Nickname: "The Barbarian"

Age: 52

Job: Professional croquet player, coach

Home lawn: Meadowood Napa Valley, St. Helena

Honors: Five-time national titlist

Fancy mallet: Stark's custom mallet cost \$500.

Career arc: High school football player, auto assembly line worker, paint salesman, croquet pro

Quote: "The cliché is, it combines chess, pool and war -- because it is a war out there. It's blood and guts, but you don't see it spilled on the ground."

Main event: Stark competes in the U.S. Croquet Association championships in West Palm Beach, Fla., beginning Monday.