

2015 Maunganui World Golf Croquet Championships

The Definitive Unofficial Statement

A Report from Evan Newell

(A Chris Clarke defence of Atkins)

Nobody really told us about Atkins Quadway:

I had heard rumour of these stainless steel hoops but now there was the reality. These hoops are not the same as others! I am not saying they are worse, I am not saying they are better. I am just saying they are not the same. For those (most of the players) who met them for the first time, it was a battle. In my case there was little contest and the hoops won. Of course once mastered through practice, one can adapt and they become perfectly playable, just different.

So what happened? Along with many others, I resorted to manoeuvring around these obstructions and only risked a shot when arriving directly in front and not very far away. Matches lasted up to 5 hours and what few spectators remained had become very very old indeed.

The only thing that was wrong with this strategy was that it was a completely wrong strategy! I did not know this at the time but realized by the end of the Block Play and (in my case) that of course was also the end of my competition. I was ready to start again as an experienced Atkins hoop Player: unfortunately this is not allowed in the Competition Rules! The Top Players were much less affected: and of course they were still the top players. I understand most of them (including the Egyptians who apparently manufactured their own "Atkins") were familiar with the hoops. Their games probably took 15% longer and in the block play they were generally careful not to risk excessively angled shots and instead often resorted to quiet shots into the jaws. Another particular characteristic of Atkins hoops with which they would have been familiar is the totally different reaction of clearing (or bouncing) an opponent ball into the hoop (where it is close by). With "normal" hoops if you hit hard enough, the opponent ball skids off to some distant corner. Not with these hoops though as the opponent ball tends to just bounce back a little (and on at least 73 occasions in my games, the bounce back allowed my opponent to immediately run the hoop and score the point!).

If I had been a little bit wiser, then it would have dawned on me earlier that this unfamiliar characteristic also applied of course to my own ball being aimed directly at a hoop. Struck firmly, (even if you hit the wire) the ball just bounces back slightly and you were still competitive. It was the silly little quiet "hoop shots" that failed, often sticking against the wire in an un-runnable position: advantage to one's opponent. The answer of course was not to be intimidated; Play more or less normally with extra care needed for (quiet) angled clearances of the opponent away from the hoops.

So should they have been used? **In my opinion, the answer is NO: And why?** Because the idea of the Championships was not to surprise (particularly ordinary) Competitors with a new and different standard.

Nor is it a correct idea that **"a more exacting standard is desirable to sort out the really good players from the rest"**. Quite simply the Best Players have always won at Golf Croquet (there have been very few if any major upsets in past Championships). And this Championship is no exception as the Best Players kept winning: The only surprise in the eight players who reached

the quarter finals was Shoukry Aziz (who I suspect has never played better) but he was smartly set aside by one of the pre-tournament favourites, Chris Clarke. Possibly the only "seed" missing was Mohamed Nasr but in turn he was also a victim of Chris (who said afterwards he had to play one of his finest games to narrowly win).

Before the Tournament started I believed and stated there were only six players who could possibly win and all of these six were still there at the quarter final stage. It continues to my belief that there is still a "gulf" between these six Top Players and other good players. And that of course is why Golf Croquet is such a wonderful game: Good players and even quite ordinary players can play these potential Champions in a competitive environment and every now and then one of us (such as Hamy Erian) manages to bridge the gap and join this small group of elite players.

So nothing was gained by using Atkins Hoops and the good players kept on winning. I believe they may be fine for Association to toughen up a game that probably needs toughening up. But Golf Croquet doesn't have this issue.

But there is of course a different problem. Ask the poor unfortunate Ground staff who have to hammer them in. Ask the poor unfortunate Tournament Administrators who have to get block games finished. Or maybe Club Administrators who feel the pressure to buy half a dozen or so sets on tight budgets. And don't forget all those who now have to listen to me complaining about Atkins Quadway hoops or worse watch me trying to get through one! (Just for the record there is a slight issue even for Association players and you might be interested to know that at the last New Zealand Association Championship where tightly set Atkins Hoops were used, the final produced not a single finished game despite the usual generous time limits of 4, 3 and 2 hours!)

That is all I have to say about Mr Atkins and his mechanistic space age robotic hoops. Somebody did say that if you pour water over them they are really easy to run. An intriguing idea no doubt, but on balance I would rather leave them as challenging as they are and just concentrate on providing them with at least a touch of Class by painting them white.

The other topical issue (for this tournament and in general) that I have strong views upon is the wrong ball rule. It is obviously a shambles at present but the good news is that it can be another days chat to sort out (and believe me, it is really easy to sort out !?!) So back to the Championship itself:

Oddly enough in some ways I have actually said about as much as needs to be said. Only the best players got through. Reg Bamford had to up his game to a top level finish against Hemi McClaren in a second round match (definitely an up and coming New Zealander who exhibited impressive composure before just succumbing in the last few hoops at game all). This was followed by a fine quarter final between Ahmed El Mahdi and Reg where the last game was a prescient 7:1 to Ahmed: this was one of the most perfect games I have seen. In the first semi-final I suspect Stephen Mulliner's workman like efficiency was never going to master Ahmed El Mahdi. The other side of the draw saw a slightly hoop spooked Mohammed Nasr (as was his brother Ahmed Nasr in a prior round against Stephen Mulliner) fail to a very solid Chris Clarke in the quarter final (who, as I mentioned before thought this was one of his better ever games and it certainly looked that way with some intriguing tactics that suggest a fine understanding of

consequences of different types of shot). And then a really high class semi-final where I have no idea how Hamy managed to contain the rapidly consolidating and improving Chris.

The final has been well described elsewhere. This was a match to treasure and of the absolute highest quality, (entirely unimpeded by Mr Atkins!). Full of Drama, misfortune (for Ahmed El Mahdi) when Hamy Erian accidentally peeled his own ball through hoop 4 from a great distance to soon set up an unassailable lead, only to be followed by the inexorable brilliance of a Champion's recovery all the way to hoop 11 where we witnessed a sublime moment of perfection: such a difficult angle from at least nine yards (remember these are Atkins hoops and Ahmed could have gone for a much easier clearance), the quietest of shots, it was almost as if the crowd willed the ball forward, then with the faintest of sounds the black flicks through the hoop allowing the pace of Lawn to usher the ball nicely past the peg in front of 12. Somehow that was the end of the game even though there were still a few clearances and counter clearances before matters were concluded:

Ahmed El Mahdi is Champion and his recovery was in my view even greater and certainly the equal of Reg Bamford's amazing recovery from 2:6 down (final game) in the final two years ago in Cairo against Ahmed Nasr.

On both occasions the eventual Champion won 5 hoops in a row to win: but the difference is this. Reg was 2:6 down. His recovery was an act of desperation where almost any single shot (either bad from Reg or good from Ahmed Nasr) could conclude the match in favour of Ahmed. All Reg could do was to produce a succession of miracles all the way to hoop 13 where a shell shocked Ahmed watched the final horror blow of an entirely engineered (although still angled) hoop run off the boundary.

On the other hand in this recent final Ahmed El Mahdy was in a very different situation: badly down without a doubt but still with a small margin to play with, as with the score 2:5 his opponent Hamy Erian still required two hoops to win. This allowed Ahmed a small but vital margin of error. Ahmed didn't need miracles, he needed perfect play. There was room for normal strategy, for careful position, for choice between manoeuvre or hoop run, and of course for the timing of the Champions shot at hoop 11. As opposed to a finale of wonderful miracles we witnessed an exhibition of supreme skill. Many who had travelled so far for this Championship, said it was worth travelling just to see that.

And this Report could not conclude without remarking on and appreciating the spirit of the Final where each of the two contestants acknowledged the fine play of other at all times and Hamy Erian exhibited a wonderful courtesy on conclusion of the match when his very first act after congratulating Ahmed was to calmly walk across the lawn to simply thank the scorer and sign the score card. That takes a lot of doing when you have just lost the un-losable!

Evan Newell

Chris Clarke on Atkins hoops

Atkins hoops do play differently to Jacques hoops. Likewise, Wood hoops play differently to Jacques hoops. When I played in Egypt for the first time 2 years ago, the Egyptian hoops played differently to any other hoops I had used (very difficult to jump and very easy to jaws, unless they were on a hill). The hoops used for the 2011 Worlds were much easier than the

average hoop – you just needed to hit them at mid-pace at the centre of a wire and you were fine.

So, hoops tend to vary. This year, the event was held in NZ, where not only were different hoops used, but the ground is firmer than other venues around the world. This led to the hoops having different characteristics to the variety described above.

NZ have played their Nationals (AC and GC) with Atkins, their invitations (AC and GC) with Atkins, their National handicap GC finals with Atkins for the past two years plus a host of other events. 70 sets have been sold worldwide and the feedback is positive. They are easier to set accurately than other hoops and remain firmer in the ground for longer, meaning that you can run hoops down to the next without rattling around in a floppy hoop. They are more similar to “normal” hoops to jump through than Egyptian hoops.

Evan mentions the length of games and difficulty in clearing balls in hoops. It is important to note that the firmer NZ ground has a significant impact on both these aspects, irrespective of hoop type. It is also relevant to note that the 5 game semi between Hamy and myself and the 5 game final were both substantially faster than the 2013 final.

When I wrote Canterbury’s bid document for the GC Worlds over 2 years ago, it stated that Atkins hoops would be used. Everyone who wanted to know should have known that they were going to be used. Ireland’s Ed Cunningham has been using them every time he has played for over a year now.

In Canterbury, we would struggle to hold a World event without Atkins hoops, because that’s what the major clubs use. It is almost impossible to buy a set of 3 11/16” hoops now, unless you buy Atkins.

I remember practising for the 2003 MacRobertson Shield. I had to get a set of Sunshiny balls because that was what the event was being played with. I got a set of Sunshiny balls and GB won on day 9 of 15. I remember some GB players practising with old Dawson balls before the 1997 AC Worlds. I remember one of them winning. I remember other players did nothing, but complained afterwards.

I know other players who got an Atkins hoop to practice with before the Mac and before the GC Worlds. I know others who did nothing, but complained afterwards.

Are Atkins hoops different – yes. Are they here to stay –absolutely.