

Croquet News from Harry

Hello, I've been asked to write an update on what I've been up to, croquet wise, while I've been at university. It has been an exciting time and this year I've gotten more involved in the Oxford University Association Croquet Club (OUACC) than in any other year.

Each year the club runs an intra university competition that we call croquet cuppers, and this year I was in charge of organising it. It's a great event and in a normal year would take up to 512 teams for a knockout draw. We're lucky that most Oxford colleges have lawns; we take advantage of that to run the huge event. This year, with colleges having restrictions on guests entering colleges and some colleges having put up marquees, to increase dining space, on their lawns, we couldn't run the usual event. Instead, we ran a smaller 32 team event and played all the games on OUACC's lawns. It was a bit of a shock to some players as they haven't seen full size lawns or even proper competition hoops before, but it worked out well. Everyone who entered had a good time. I took part with a few friends from my college, but we got knocked out in the quarter finals against the team that would go on to be the runners up.

OUACC's coach, Ian Plummer, put on intermediate training sessions throughout this last term. They were fantastic to attend and went from putting 'icing,' as Ian likes to call it, on your four ball break, through three ball breaks and finally to building diagonal spreads and vertical leaves to use in advanced games. There were six students attending the sessions, which were great fun. Usually ending with us playing some games against one another if we had time. Of course, Ian did have a plan for us six. To train us up for the varsity match against Cambridge at the end of the term!

The varsity match is a great event to take part in, and this year was my second one. Last varsity we lost to Cambridge. I was beaten in all my games, so I was looking to get at least one win this year. We play the event at the Hurlingham club in London, where we have been kindly hosted by several alumni from both Oxford and Cambridge for a number of years now. This takes away any bias of knowing the lawns and that's why we do it. It's nothing to do with Hurlingham's wonderful lawns, on which balls just keep rolling on, the amazing scenery, or even just the chance to enter this prestigious club; why might you think that?

In the morning we played three doubles games, of which we won two. I lost with my partner, though we were chasing down our opponents as we went to time. Nerves had a hold of both us, but we settled into it for the afternoon. That may have been in part due to the alumni we met plying us with alcohol over a small lunch of sandwiches. Lunch is the nicest part of the day, it's a chance to chat to the Cambridge players and the alumni who are sponsoring us. There is a lovely atmosphere. The competition stays on the lawns and everyone chats away happily about future plans, where they are in academia currently and how they came to play croquet. In the afternoon we played six singles games, with Oxford winning five of them. I finally got a varsity match win and Oxford won seven games to two overall. It was a very close game between me and my Cambridge counterpart, Felix. Testament to the standard of the game was me leaving the best diagonal spread I will ever manage to set up in my life, and my opponent taking the lift and managing to hit in anyway. We had a great back and forth and I'm glad I'm not around next year to be playing an even more improved Felix! After this, all competitors had a few more drinks from the Hurlingham bar together before the Oxford team set off for a celebratory train ride home.

After this I had a bit of a break from croquet before coming back to play in a few league games for OUACC, where I managed to get my handicap cut from fourteen to nine in a few level-advanced games. Ian's coaching really is amazing.

Then in the later half of July, OUACC hosted the AC Student Championships over a weekend. I helped organise them, which was fun, but I'm glad I had past organisers telling me to be very careful about scheduling. Actually putting names into the slots you have planned for games usually throws up a few issues. We sorted these out before the weekend and it all ran smoothly, so I'm thankful for the warnings.

Eight players came to play in the singles, and Aston Wade of Exeter University, a fantastic player playing off of zero, won undefeated. In the doubles we had four teams. One from Oxford, two from Cambridge and one from Imperial College London. I played in both events and my partner, Nick Orr, and I managed to win the doubles competition. We were very lucky to have the CA president, Quiller Barret come down on the Sunday to present the prizes. It was a lovely weekend of croquet, and we all went for a meal and a few pints together on the Saturday evening. This was great fun, and it was nice to see some of the Cambridge players from the varsity match again.

That pretty much sums up my croquet exploits this year. Though I have been lucky enough to get a small placement in Oxford this Summer in the physics department labs, only 2 minutes walk from the lawns. So after five o'clock you'll catch me on lawns practicing and playing some casual games with friends from the club.