"Croquet for Christmas" Belgian Indoors 1998

Even the Egyptians don't play croquet IN the pyramids. The Belgians apparently do, however! The first Belgian Indoors took place last weekend in "Les Pyramids", a congress centre right in the heart on Brussels. Despite the location, however, this new and exciting addition to the continental European croquet calendar was played to the rules of association rather than golf croquet.

Unless I am mistaken, this was the first ever indoor tournament played on a full size surface (actually full length but 2 metres short in width, but we're not here to quibble!). It was also the first tournament to be played on a red "lawn", which was, I must admit, rather disconcerting to begin with! Permission had been given to drill holes in the concrete floor to fix the hoops and peg, and although this stopped them moving as such, it also meant that it was very (sorry, VERY) difficult to actually get a ball through them. A hardish shot at hoop was liable to see the ball bouncing straight back off the hoop and ending up several metres behind the striker, and some nifty footwork was evident from all players over the weekend, as they scrambled to avoid rapid rebounding balls!

The event, organised superbly in a record breaking two weeks by the Croquet Federation of Belgium, attracted competitors from as far afield as Wales, Switzerland, and Yorkshire, along with a strong contingent from the southern half of England. The 8 places available were swiftly taken up, leaving just one place for hosts Belgium. However, due to the unfortunate withdrawal of Luxemburger John Davis, the remaining place was taken by a "rotating" Belgian player (no, not a Belgian walking in circles, but a different Belgian - of approximately identical talent - for each match!).

The very warm welcome from our Belgian hosts, and the hours spent in the bar of the Sheraton Hotel on the Friday evening, put everyone into the right frame of mind for the culture shock to which we were subjected on the Saturday morning. The very rapid red lawn and the totally unforgiving hoops put paid to any notion of strong players and weaker players and some surprising results were recorded. The tournament was played to the 14 point advanced rules, with 50 minutes time limit and 6 Wharrad turns each thereafter. Over the whole weekend only one advanced match finished with a peg-out (and one handicap match in the plate) and many matches were decided by a single hoop. With only 130 points being scored in 15 matches, this must be one of the lowest scoring events ever. With the help of a few bisques, the plate event managed 100 points in 7 matches.

The eight players were split into two groups of four. In block A, top seed Phil Cordingley was subjected to two plus-one-on-time defeats, to Jim

Potter and Jonathan Lamb, before beating eventual group winner Syd Jones in his last match (+7). Syd had already won the group however, with wins over Jim (+2) and Jonathan (+5). Jonathan came second with two wins and Jim with only one win came fourth. In block B, Peter Payne started with convincing wins over Mike Town (+6) and "The Rotating Belgian" (in the guise of Charles-Eric Vilain XIII: +12) before being soundly beaten by Chris Tuthill (+4). The Rotating Belgian also lost to Chris (Gabor Weiner: +1) and Mike (John Swabey: +4), leaving all three on two wins. Peter and Mike qualified for the semi-finals on a better net points difference.

On the Saturday evening, the visitors were all invited to join the members of the Brussels Croquet Club for their annual end-of-season dinner, which took place in a 14th century Carmelite cellar in the centre of Brussels old town district, near the Grote Markt (Grand Place). Those of you who know John Swabey (first hand or by reputation!) will understand that we were not going to be able to leave the restaurant without having first sung a "JS Special" croquet song. For the melodically minded, the following should be sung to the tune of "Mon coq est mort":

Le roquet c'est quand j'ai cogné;   Le croquet c'est c'qui fait gagner;   Que ce sport est gai, faisons des rocochets;   Allez les amis, nous allons commencer;   Roquet, Croquet, Con-tin-u-a-tion,   Roquet, Croquet, Con-tin-u-a-tion.   (c) 1997 (?) John Swabey!

Sunday morning saw two very close semi-finals, with Mike Town getting the better of Syd Jones (+1) and Jonathan Lamb toppling Peter Payne (+1). The final was another close affair, with Mike taking the honours (+1 – sudden death!). The plate was won by Jim Potter who beat Chris Tuthill in a comparatively high scoring game (but still +1!).

Despite having already made croquet history on several accounts, the Belgians had one last joker up their sleeve. This is surely the first croquet tournament ever in which the winner has won (and taken home on the train) a lawn! Although not full size (about 6 inches by 4 actually!), this has to be a first!

This event really must be one of the most original tournaments in which I have ever played. "Bon humeur" was in evidence throughout the weekend, and I sincerely hope that our hosts will be able to repeat the experience next season. Most of the participants now have an excuse to come back anyway, having entered the Croquet Federation of Belgium's "Pousse Croquet" contest, in which participants grow their own "cabbage stick" (Brassica Oleracea Longata) croquet mallet, with prizes for the longest,

most like a croquet mallet, most interesting and most curved ("for the really bent"!). Watch this space for regular updates!
Many thanks especially to John Swabey (Manager), Charles-Eric Vilain XIIII and Jonathan Lamb for their hard work.
Peter Payne   Still recovering!   13th December 1998