Golf Croquet Pop-Up Coaching Session 2

Lead Coach – Stephen Custance-Baker

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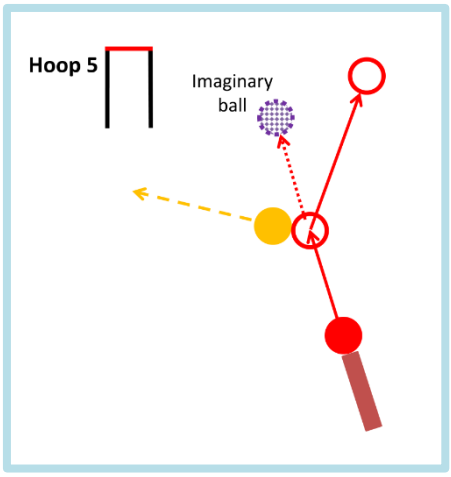
Taunton Deane Croquet Club
30th October 2026

Using an imaginary ball

The Imaginary Ball is an extremely useful concept whenever a target is to be struck off-centre. The basic concept is that it is easier to aim at the centre of a target than at a position to one side of the centre. If you 'place' an imaginary ball overlapping the target ball and fix its centre in your mind, it's possible, with practice, to aim at that centre and ignore the actual target ball.
We'll try three uses of this idea: the cut rush, clearance from a hoop and running a hoop.

The cut rush
This is the most common application of an imaginary ball and will occur many times in a game.

Exercise 1



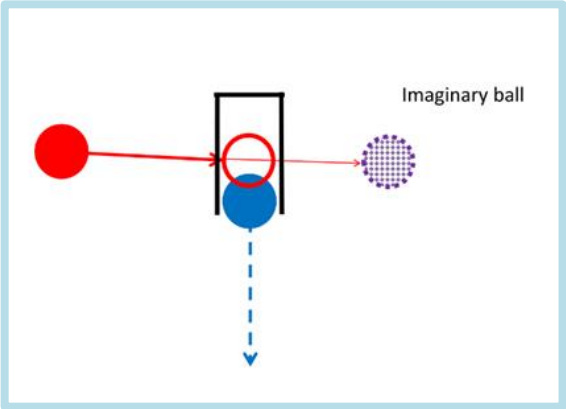
The Yellow ball is be cut so that it finishes in front of hoop 5. This is so that it can run hoop 5 on its next turn.

To identify the correct position for the imaginary ball, picture where you would place a ball, touching Yellow, so that you could hit it in the desired direction. Your imaginary ball must then be placed beyond the target ball, but along the same line from Red. If there is any imperfection on the surface exactly along this line, then it can be used as your imaginary target.
When playing the stroke, try to ignore the Yellow ball completely and aim at the middle of the imaginary ball. It is important to avoid the passing thought 'I must hit Yellow to the left', particularly during the final swing.

Hoop clearance

It's easy to allow the mallet to swing in a curve in an attempt to 'steer' the target ball in the direction you want it to go. One very frequent version of this is when the opponent's ball is in the jaws and your ball is behind the hoop but in a very angled position to one side. You need to play your ball straight across the back of the target ball so that it is driven cleanly back through the hoop. Steering will result in the mallet swinging in a curve towards the direction that the target ball is to go and your ball will hit the near upright of the hoop, with little or no effect on the target ball.

Exercise 2



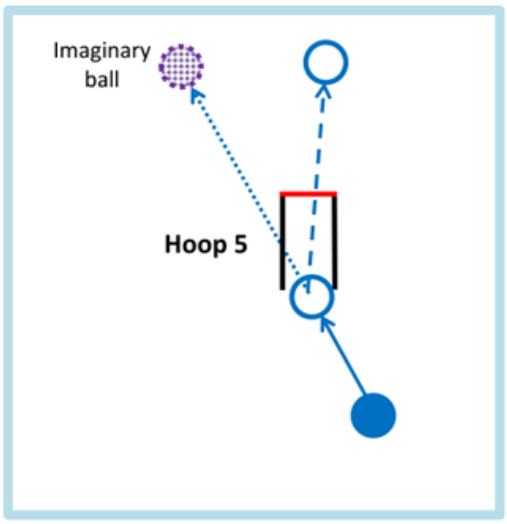
You can avoid this by using an imaginary ball. 'Place' it beyond the hoop and overlapping the target ball by a small amount. Now forget the hoop and forget the target ball; play your stroke firmly towards the imaginary ball and, if you have placed it correctly, you will get exactly the impact you need on the target ball.

Hoop running

In this situation, the idea of the imaginary ball allows the player to ignore the hoop itself during the final swing and increases the likelihood of a clean hoop run.

The first step is to identify the perfect line for running the hoop, which is as close as possible to the near upright, without touching it. Then place an imaginary ball behind the hoop, by a yard or two, exactly on the line through the perfect position in the jaws. The player plays straight at the imaginary ball as though to clear it, which results in a firm, rather than tentative, hoop shot.

Exercise 3

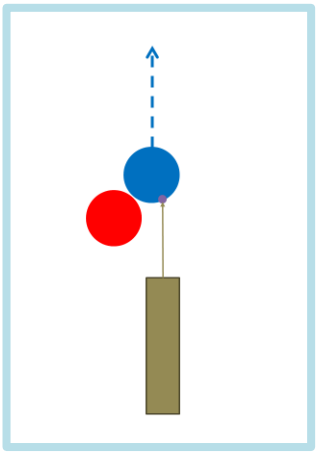


As with the cut rush, the brain must accept that it is the imaginary ball that is to be cleared, rather than the hoop that is to be run. This thought, if kept clearly in the mind through the whole stroke, will give a clean strike in the right direction.

Swinging close to a hamper

If you, or your opponent, are playing straight away from a hoop, from a position close behind it, always call a referee to watch the shot. This is probably the most common of all faults.
If your mallet can only just reach the ball when playing through the hoop, or has to be manoeuvred to fit in the space available, you are likely to hit with the bevel or commit a push.
There are techniques for playing these shots but they do take practice. These include the Punch, the Diagonal and the Swivel but until you have mastered these, you will find that playing to one side is better.

Exercise 4



If another ball, or the hoop, is overlapping the back of your ball, it's very easy to mishit, which is a fault. Identify a point on your ball that is off-centre and fix it in your mind as the target for the centre of your mallet.
With total concentration and your eye glued to the back of your ball, swing to hit that point on your ball and you will find that you make a clean contact and the ball travels straight.

The same principle applies when the back of your ball is overlapped by a hoop upright and you have to play alongside the hoop, or through it.

Hiding and the 2-stage approach

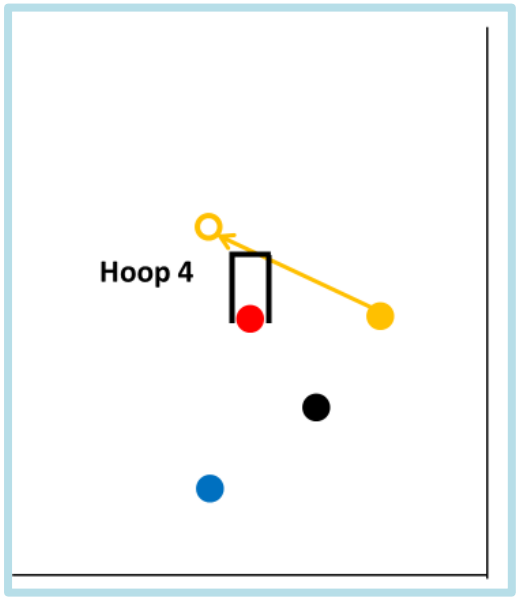
When playing into position, which is the most frequent shot in GC, always give careful thought to the next few shots; I call this Five-shot Thinking.
We'll look at some examples where the thinking is vitally important, but it always pays to look ahead before playing positioning shots.

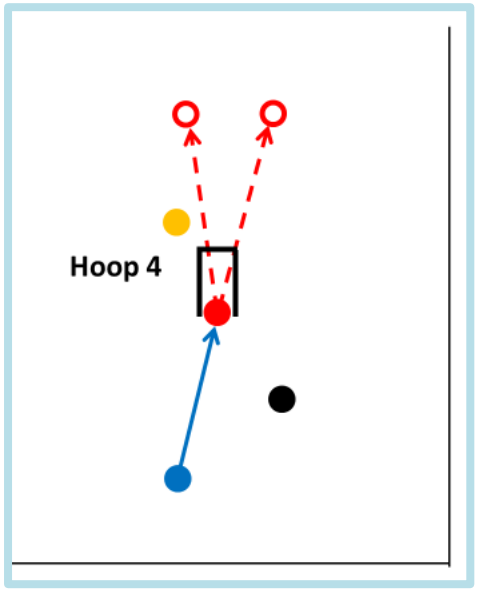
If you have a ball in the jaws, and it's likely that the opponent will clear it, then you have three main options.

- Clear the opponent's ball from behind the hoop.
- Block the opponent behind the hoop.
- Put your ball into a hoop-running position.

In the first two cases, the ball you play will usually finish behind the hoop, whether your shot is successful or not. In the third case, your ball will be in front of the hoop and, if the one in the jaws is cleared, you may be able to return it to a hoop-running position, giving you two in front.
However, you should not attempt to place your ball so perfectly in front of the hoop that the opponent can clear both balls in one stroke. Study the geometry and think carefully about where the ball in the jaws will go when it is cleared and make sure that the ball you are placing is not in that line.

Exercise 5
Where possible, if the other opponent ball is close, choose the side that is hidden from it.

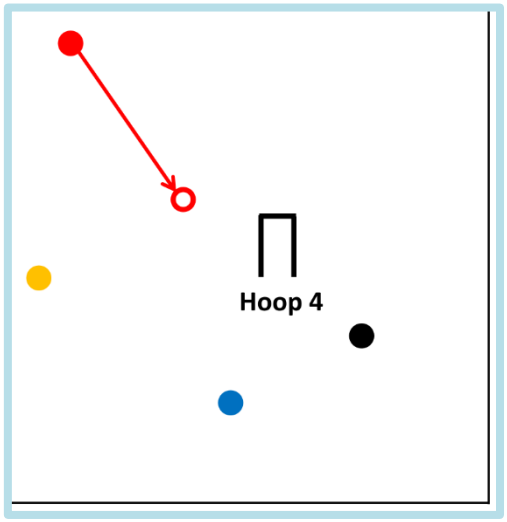


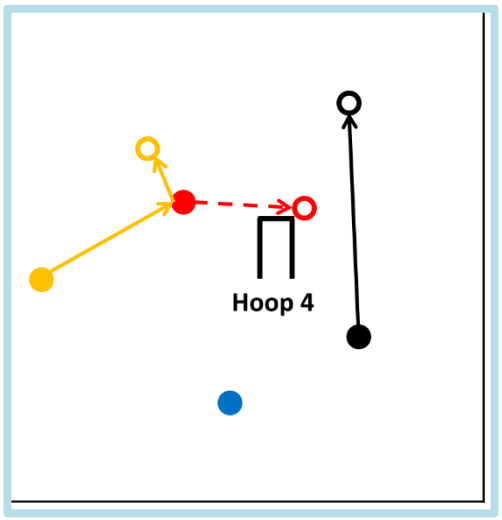


If you have a situation where you can hide your ball from the next opponent to play, but not from both, see whether it is possible to hide with this shot, then promote your ball to another hidden position with your next shot.

Exercise 6

For example, play Red into a position from which Black cannot clear it then, after Black has played, use Yellow to promote Red to a hoop-running position hidden from Blue.



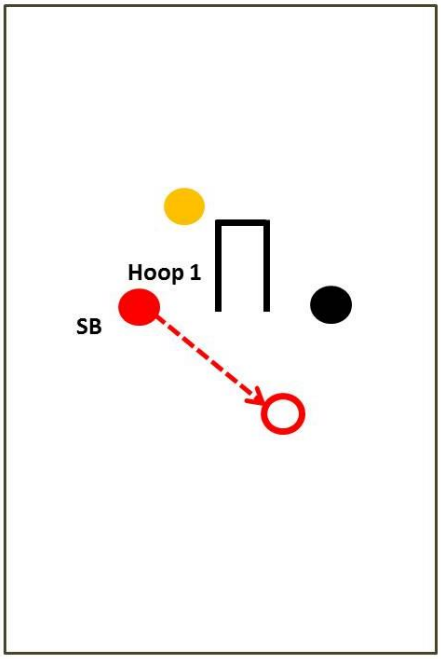


Using a 2-stage operation like this reduces your vulnerability. The opponent's only defence is to use Black to clear Yellow in order to avoid the promotion. This will leave Black a long way away and Yellow can return to a good position.

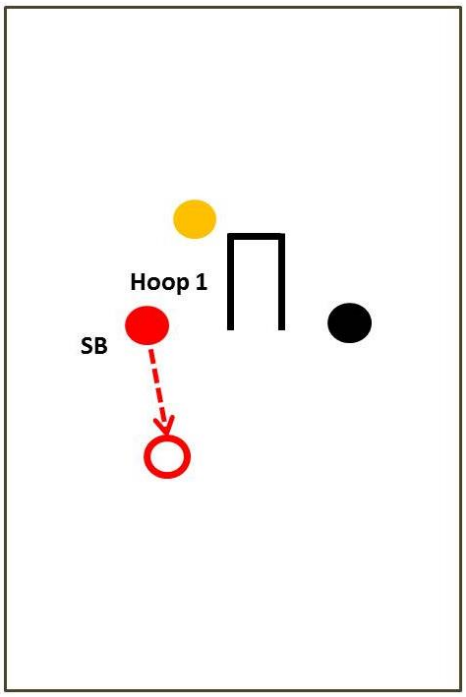
Setting up

Setting up in front of the hoop is often a simple stroke and it may seem that it is necessary if the hoop is to be run. However, there are many situations when putting your ball in front of the hoop helps your opponent more than it helps you.

Exercise 7
It is Red's turn to play and Blue is a long way away.

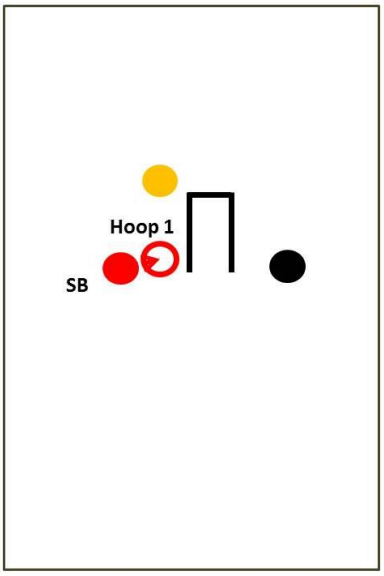


By putting Red in front of the hoop you are giving Black the opportunity of doing a stop-shot and wiring itself from Yellow.



Exercise 8
If you are going to set up then always put your ball on the opposite side of the straight approach from the next opponent to play. This means that Black will be moving away from the hoop when it hits Red and cannot hide from Yellow.

Exercise 9
It may sometimes be possible to gain a much greater advantage by setting up a promotion. Red is played to a position beside the hoop where it cannot be cleared by Black. If Black then sets up in front of the hoop, Yellow will promote Red to a hoop-running position. (If Black clears Yellow then it simply returns to a position in front of the hoop.)



A ball in the jaws

There are four possible scenarios when there is a ball in the jaws of a hoop:
Partner ball or opponent's ball
Odd-numbered hoop or even-numbered hoop

This difference is very important as the next hoop may be straight ahead (odd-numbered) or to one side (even-numbered) and the possibilities open to the ball in the hoop are very different.

Not all of the options shown will be possible but it is very important to be aware of the alternatives and to look for them.

As with all tactical decisions, the key is to visualize what the other balls are going to do for their next shots as well as to plan your own. I keep referring to 5-shot thinking; the 5 shots being your own, the other 3 balls and then your own next shot. If you can work out what the other shots are going to be then you can probably pick the best shot to play.

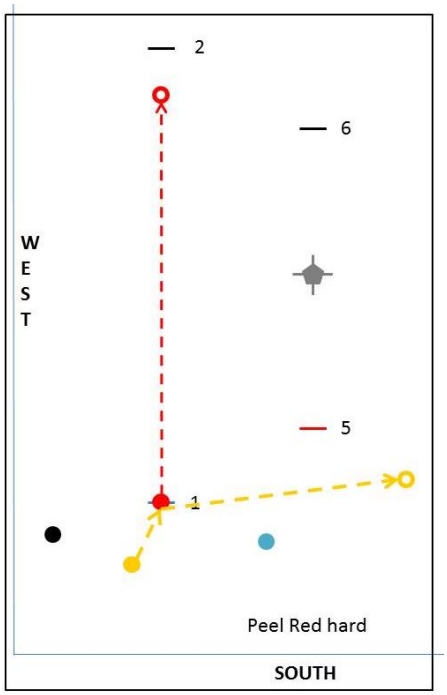
In every case, there is the option to play your ball to the halfway line. This is often the correct decision, but we won't cover it today. Don't try to get within a few inches of the line. It will make almost no difference if you are 2 feet or 2 yards short of it but a big difference if you are 2 inches past it.

Partner is in an odd-numbered hoop

In these cases, Red is in the hoop and Yellow is to play. Neither of the opponent's balls is in a position to remove Red.

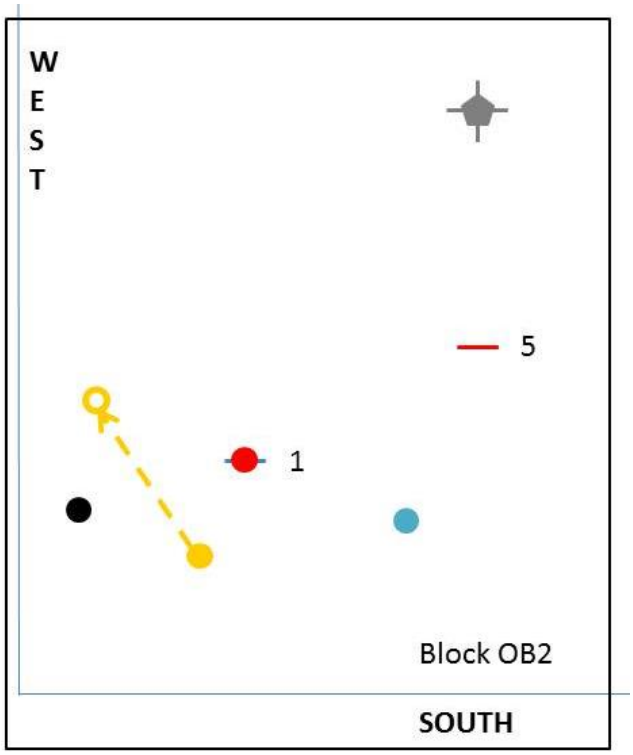
Exercise 10

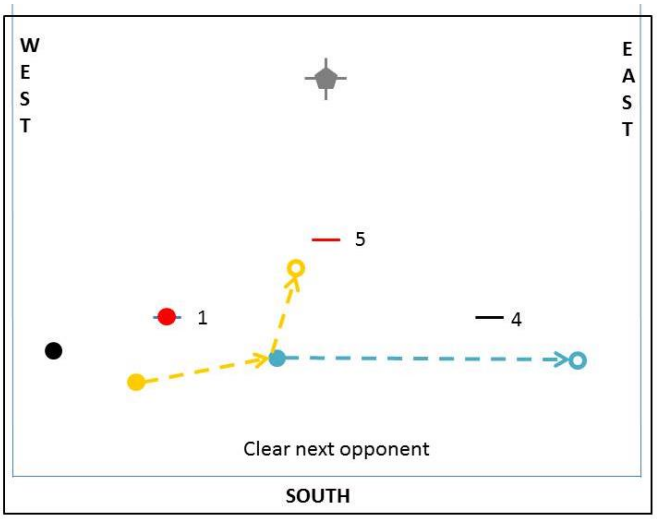
Peel your partner ball hard so that it goes as far up the lawn towards the next hoop as possible. This reduces the opponent's options for hampering, blocking and peeling.



Exercise 11

Place your ball in front of the opponent (Black) who will play after your partner ball so that it doesn't have a clean shot towards the next hoop. This is good as it means that both of your balls will be close to the next hoop before either of the opponents'. Note that there is no point in blocking the other opponent (Blue).





Exercise 12

Clear next opponent to play (Blue) so that it can't hamper, block or peel your partner ball.

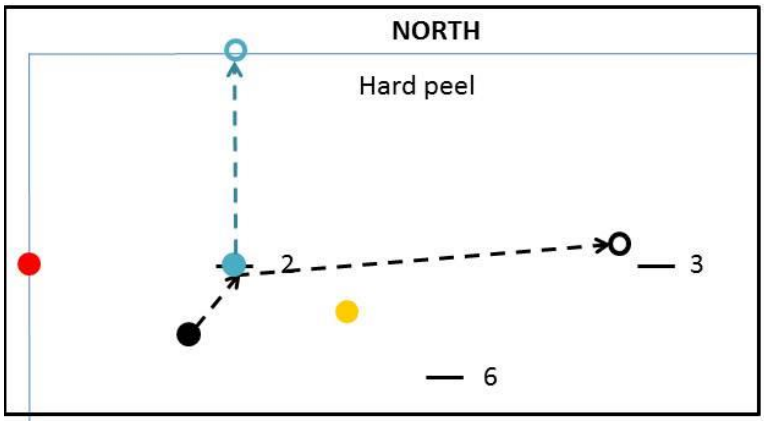
It's a bonus if you can approach the next hoop with this shot.

Partner is in an even-numbered hoop

Black is to play. Blue is in hoop 2 and will definitely score the hoop as Yellow is too far to the side to jump. What should Black do? Apart from going to half way, Your main options are to peel Blue or set up a rush.

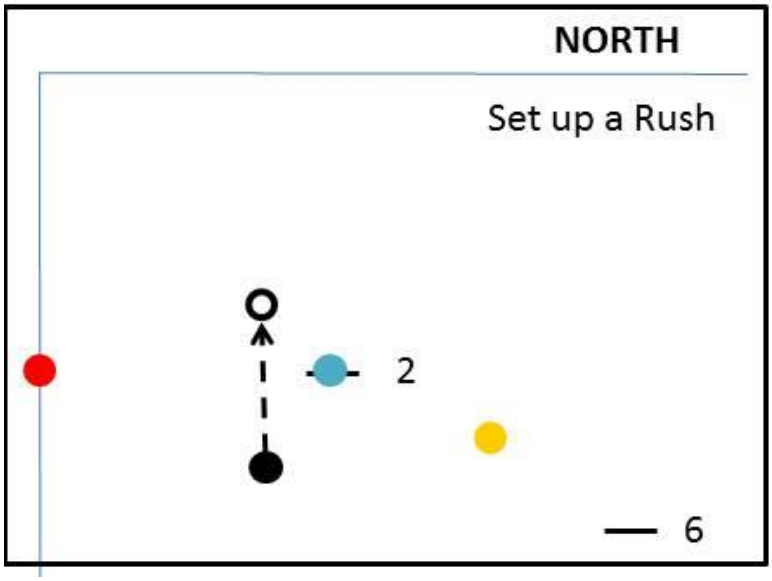
Exercise 13

The hard peel (the 'ricochet peel') can be difficult but could, if played correctly, make the next hoop easy. The opponent will send Yellow to hoop 3 but Black will already be there.



Exercise 14

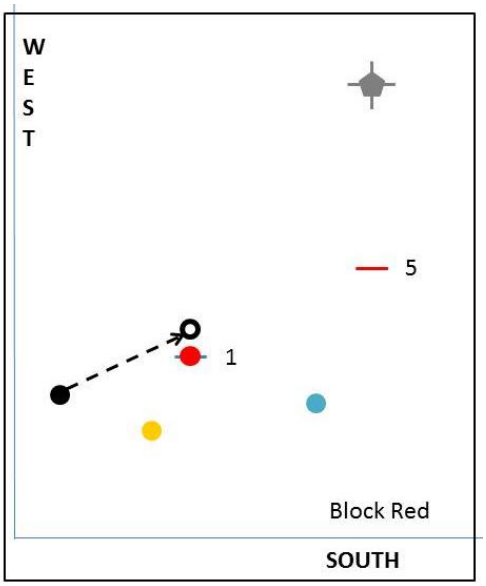
Setting up the rush can be quite easy and gives a good chance of getting Blue across to hoop 3. Red will be there first but, if the rush is good, then Blue will be able to clear it or even attempt the hoop.

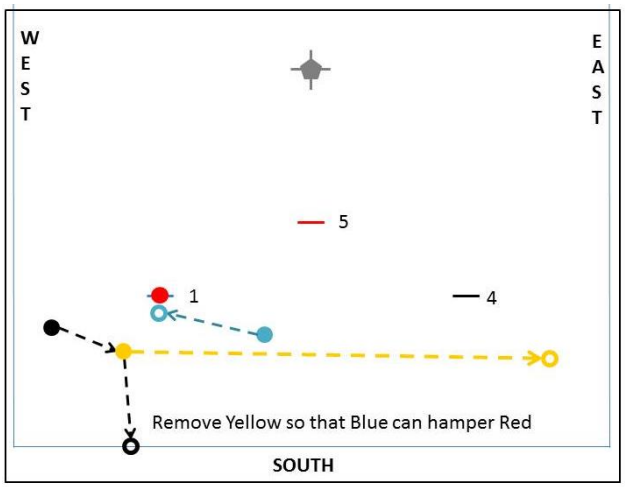


Opponent is in an odd-numbered hoop

Red is in the jaws and Black is to play. The options shown here require you to think about the other balls and what they will, or can, do.

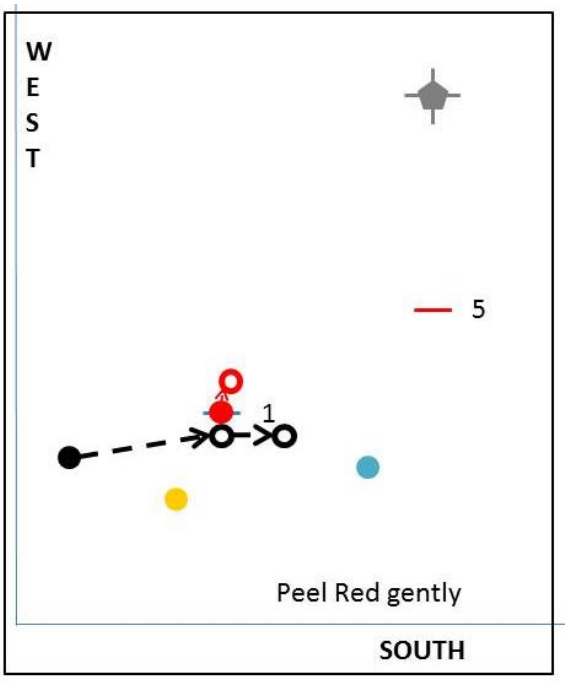
Exercise 15
Put your ball just in front of the opponent in the jaws so that a hard hoop-run, or peel, will promote you towards the next hoop.





Exercise 16
Clear the next opponent (Yellow) away from the area so that it can't peel its partner. This leaves your partner with the option of hampering the opponent in the hoop, or blocking.

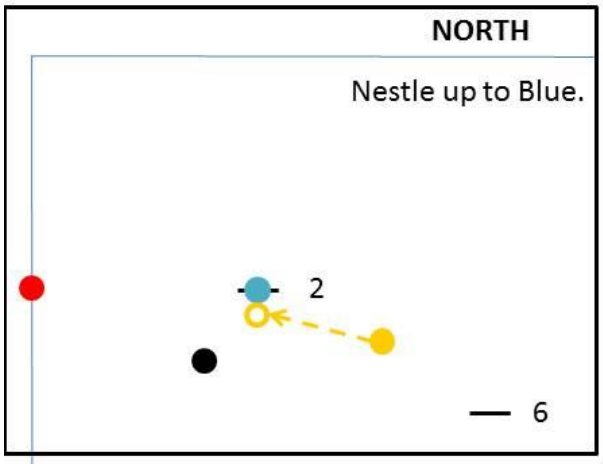
Exercise 17
Deliberately peel the opponent. This must be played at a gentle pace so that your ball runs clear of the hoop but the opponent's is hampered in its next shot.



Opponent is in an even-numbered hoop

Yellow is to play and the alternatives are: nestle up to the opponent in the jaws (Blue) or block the other opponent (Black).

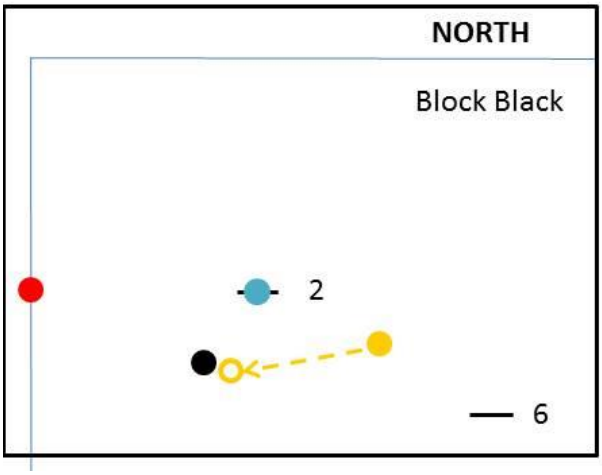
Exercise 18



Nestling up to the opponent is usually very difficult but, if successful, hampers their next shot and may cause a fault. In the case shown, the opponent, (Blue) would probably declare (i.e. not play a shot), to avoid a fault, and rely on Black to hit Yellow and peel Blue on the next turn.

Your shot is intended to give Red a chance to clear Black and set up a jump.

Exercise 19



Blocking the other opponent gives them a difficult decision when Blue has run the hoop and Red has crossed to hoop 3. A perfect position for Yellow is to block Black from going to hoop 3 and also from running to half-way between hoops 3 and 4. It must be close enough to Black to make a jump shot impossible.