

Lawn Bowls – Notes for beginners

The following is an informal guide to the game of Lawn Bowls (or Flat Green Bowls), which is played throughout the English-speaking world. A similar sport (Crown Green Bowls), played primarily in the north of England, has some differences.

Lawn Bowls is an ideal sport for the Algarvean climate, where outdoor play is possible all year round. It is suitable for all ages (at least from teen age upwards) and provides gentle exercise in the open air, social interaction and as much or as little competitiveness as you wish. It is very easy to learn – but difficult to master, so you can begin to enjoy playing in games after just one or two lessons, but can spend a lifetime getting better at it.

The only equipment you need is a set of woods (and these can be hired at most bowling venues) and suitable clothing, of which the key item is a pair of (comfortable) **flat-soled**, heel-less shoes. For formal matches, white clothing is the norm, but for more casual play a more relaxed dress code is followed.

The playing area (or “rink”) is a strip of about 35metres by about 5metres of natural or synthetic grass or sometimes of carpet. A rink is usually part of a square which can accommodate several rinks side-by-side. This enables the playing rinks to be moved from time to time (laterally or orthogonally) to spread the wear on the playing surface.

A game of bowls is played between two teams, usually in one of the following formats:

- Singles – one player per team, with four woods per player; first to score 21 shots is the winner;
- Pairs – two players per team, usually with four woods per player, played over a set number of ends (usually 18 or 21);
- Triples – three players per team, usually with three woods per player, played over a set number of ends (usually 18);
- Fours (“Rinks”) – four players per team, with two woods per player, played over a set number of ends (usually 18 or 21).

(A match will usually comprise several separate games – thus a match in the main Winter League consists of three triples from one club playing three triples from another.)

The two teams take turns in bowling woods from the mat at one end of the rink towards the jack (a small white ball) at the other end. When all woods have been bowled, the team holding “shot” (ie the wood closest to the jack) scores one point for each of their woods that are closer to the jack than the best of the other teams’. The jack and the delivered woods are known as the “head”. The team winning one end then bowls the jack for the next end. Ends are played in alternating directions along the rink.

Woods (or bowls) come in matched sets of four, in a range of sizes and weights. Although traditionally made of wood (lignum vitae), modern bowls are usually made of a plastic composite material. Sizes range from “00” (the smallest) through “0”, “1” to “7” (the largest), and within each size range may be medium or heavy. There is a (very small) advantage to using the largest and heaviest woods that you can, but it is far more important to choose a size and weight that is comfortable for you to handle.

Most clubs hold regular “roll-up” sessions – these are the most relaxed form of the game, where the players who turn up by the scheduled start time are organised into teams (usually triples or fours) to play a game purely for enjoyment (and practice). With nothing at stake – other than the pleasure of playing well (and possibly of winning) - there is no pressure. These games are an ideal way for new players to get into the game. On a progressively more competitive basis, clubs will:

- Participate in friendly matches against other clubs

- Host friendly matches against touring bowls groups from UK clubs
- Compete with other clubs in leagues and other competitions, often with trophies and other prizes to be won
- Run internal club championships and other competitions, either open to all, or restricted to club members.

There are also opportunities for the better players to represent regional or national teams.

What makes bowling interesting is that the woods are **biased** – that is they are slightly flattened on one side so that they will roll in an arc, rather than a straight line. Each wood has a design featuring a small circle on one side and a larger circle on the other - the smaller circle marks the inside of the curve that the rolling wood will follow. So, delivering the wood with the smaller circle facing to the left means that the bowler must aim to the right of the target, and vice versa. The bowler has to develop the skill to judge both the pace with which to deliver the wood (the “weight” of shot) and the amount of deviation to allow (the “line”). These factors will vary according to the particular surface being played on, the atmospheric conditions, the set of woods being used, etc., and are likely to be different for the two directions of play. Most competitive matches therefore start with two “trial ends” which don’t count towards the score, but allow the players to get the “feel” of the conditions. Often, for less competitive games, instead of trial ends a maximum score of one shot is counted for the first two ends.

When delivering a wood, it is a rule that one foot must be on (or directly above) the delivery mat at the moment of release. To achieve consistency, one should try to release the wood smoothly along the playing surface; dropping the wood from above the surface, apart from possibly damaging the green, makes it more difficult to judge line and weight.

In a team of four, the bowlers have prescribed roles:

- **Lead** places the delivery mat (if his/her team is bowling first), bowls the jack to whatever length the skip indicates, then delivers his/her first wood;
- **Number Two** bowls his/her woods after the leads have bowled all theirs; conventionally (but not necessarily) the number two for the home side keeps the scoreboard up to date;
- **Number Three** bowls his/her woods after the number twos have bowled all theirs; number threes are responsible for agreeing the score for each end, including any measurement necessary;
- **Skip** directs the rest of the team, standing just behind the head and indicating what he/she wants each of the team to try to do; after the rest of the team have bowled all their woods, the skips return to the mat and deliver their woods; following a recent rule change by World Bowls, the skip is responsible for keeping the score card.

In triples, the roles of number two and number three are merged. In pairs, the lead takes on the measuring and scoring duties. In singles, a neutral “marker” is normally called upon to centre the jack, adjudicate the scoring and keep the scorecard.

There is also a popular format known as “Australian Pairs”, in which the two players of a team each take the role of lead and skip on alternate ends.

The foregoing is a brief outline of the game. There is an authoritative set of Laws of the game, maintained by the World Bowls Federation, which are available in published form or via the World Bowls website (www.worldbowlsfederation.co.uk). In addition to the Laws, there is a code of etiquette outlining acceptable behaviour on the green (e.g. see www.valverdebc.co.uk/bowls-etiquette.asp) – generally, these are common sense rule, amounting to respect for other players.