

Pétanque Essential

A guide for progressing



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Introduction

This guide outlines my approach and attitude to playing pétanque. I hope it will be useful to improving your game.

Above all, take pleasure in every boule, every end and every game.

Choosing the right boule

Diameter

The right diameter helps you hold the boule correctly. The only one who can tell what is the right diameter is you. I would not recommend measuring your hand to choose the diameter. I see many players with boules that are too big, especially women. Hold and throw boules of different sizes. Then select the size that feels best to you.

When testing different boule diameters, it is important to throw with the fingers touching (no spaces between). The thumb should not apply any pressure. Bigger is not better regardless if you are a pointer or a shooter. A boule that is too big requires more pressure to hold it. It makes it more difficult to release the boule smoothly for an accurate throw.

If you have no idea where to start, try a diameter of 71mm or 72mm for women and 73mm or 74mm for men.

Weight

Most players select boules with a weight of 680 or 690 grams, and rarely above 700 grams. Pointers might select heavier boules than shooters because a heavier boule (higher density) will travel slower on the ground. It will track well and stop. Whereas a lighter boule tends to continue rolling. However, playing with heavier boules is more tiring.

You need to think about a typical day-tournament and after six or more games, you find yourself in the final. Fatigue could prevent you from performing your best as your boules will feel heavier than they did that morning.

A weight of 670g or 680g and no more than 690g is probably best. Take the time to play a full day with the weight you think you need before deciding.

Material

Your choices are carbon or stainless steel. It depends on which one feels better in your hand. Carbon boules are usually in the black shades and adhere more to your hands. They tend to rust, particularly when not in use. Stainless steel boules are smooth, glide more easily and usually do not rust.

The striation on a boule is also a personal preference. A boule with striations will have more grip in your hand and on the ground. Does the boule feel good when you release it and when it rolls off your fingers?

Hardness

The hardness (kg/mm^2) affects the boule's behavior, especially upon impact with another boule or the ground. A soft boule will have less rebound than a hard boule. Here are the main choices: 110 kg/mm^2 very soft, 115 kg/mm^2 soft, 120 kg/mm^2 semi-soft, 125 kg/mm^2 hard and 140 kg/mm^2 very hard.

Another option is to select anti-rebound boules. They are usually around 120 kg/mm^2 . The inside structure of the boule is different (not smooth) allowing a better absorption of the energy upon impact.

The very soft 110 kg/mm^2 , the soft 115 kg/mm^2 and the anti-rebound are my recommendations for both shooting and pointing. An issue with the very soft 110 kg/mm^2 is that the engraving may not be visible after a while. The maker and the weight must be visible on every boule in any official tournament.

Holding the boule

A majority of players hold the boule in the palm of their hand and bring their fingers over the boule. For better performance, hold the boule on your fingers and bring the boule into the palm of your hand. Your fingers should be touching with no space between them. Put light pressure on the boule, just enough to hold it.

The thumb can be anywhere as long as it applies absolutely no pressure on the boule or the other fingers. The thumb should not help to hold the boule and should

not do anything. If you are not sure, try resting the thumb lightly on the side of your forefinger.

The circle

Step into the circle

Take a deep breath in and let it go; relax your shoulders. Step into the circle with your right (for right-handed players) foot first and forward.

For those who have a tendency to touch the circle with their left (back) foot, I would recommend to step into the circle with your left foot first. This way you can make sure the back of your left foot does not touch the circle.

You do not want the distraction of having to check to see if the back of your left foot touches the circle when you need to have all your attention on throwing your boule.

The first time you throw a boule while touching the circle you get a warning. The second time your boule is disqualified. The third time you are disqualified from the game.

Foot position

It is important to have both feet anchored on the ground and to feel very stable. Your shoulders should be relaxed and facing the direction of the game. The foot on the side of the throwing arm should be slightly forward, 3 to 5 inches, and pointing in the direction of the target. The gap between the front and back feet creates a weight transfer during the swing helping you reach longer distances without forcing the movement.

Your feet should be 3 or 4 inches apart for stability, but not so much that it impacts the pendulum motion required for a good throw.

These recommendations are only guidelines to help you find your optimal foot position.

Mechanics of the throw

Pendulum

The arm swings back and forth like a pendulum to throw the boule. This pendulum motion allows you to throw with minimum effort in a relaxed way. Contract your triceps fully to lock your elbow so your arm is in full extension. The arm from the shoulder to the wrist moves as a single, rigid lever, with all pivot motion occurring at the shoulder. The motion comes from the larger, more stable shoulder joint, resulting in a smoother, more controlled throw.

At first, your arm will feel stiff and uncomfortable. After a few days you will notice a sensation of precision in the direction the boule travels. This pendulum motion uses the momentum generated by the speed of the forward swing without forcing the arm.

The difficulty is to find the right speed and angle of release.

For example, most shooters release the boule at the same angle (point of release) when shooting a target at 7 or 9 meters. The difference is to use a faster forward swing for 9 meters. Therefore, to throw a boule further, accelerate the forward swing.

Weight transfer

The throwing motion involves a subtle but important weight transfer. As the arm begins its backswing, the body's weight naturally shifts onto the back foot, the leg opposite your throwing arm. This shift helps you stay grounded and maintain balance during the preparation phase. As the swing moves forward, the weight transitions onto your front foot, guiding the body into a stable and aligned position at release.

This smooth transfer of weight enhances accuracy and control, using the power of your legs.

This is of particular importance for women who may have difficulty playing long distances. To gain even more distance without forcing, you may start with your boule higher in front of you, level with your eyes and go as far back as possible with your backswing. Bend your body forward, just enough to feel comfortable.

Execute the forward swing accelerating with your arm straight and your elbow locked. Starting higher at eye level may give you the extra punch you need without forcing the throw.

The forward leg should slightly flex during the forward swing to absorb the energy. This prevents you from lifting your back foot off the ground.

The first time you lift your foot before the boule touches the ground, you receive a warning. The second time your boule is disqualified. The third time you are disqualified from the game.

Non-throwing arm

The arm opposite of your throwing arm should not be resting on your body or bent behind your back during the throw. It should be extended outward naturally to help you balance. As you release the boule, this opposite arm should not swing forward. It should continue to anchor your body in the circle. Holding a boule in your non-throwing hand may also help to anchor/balance you in the circle.

Backspin

Backspin is created by flexing and opening the wrist similar to the digging action of an excavator or backhoe. As you begin, or during the backswing, bend your wrist downward. Keep your wrist cocked during the forward swing. As you release the boule, the wrist straightens in a smooth and natural motion letting the boule roll off your fingers. Finish your throw with your arm straight and your fingers up.

If you force the backspin, you introduce perturbation in the movement and that may alter the boule's direction. The backspin makes the boule rotate backward against its forward motion. This rotation minimizes the rebound and the distance traveled after hitting the ground. The result is a more controlled throw.

The execution of the backspin releases the boule at a higher angle and that may be the difference between shooting too short or hitting the target boule directly (plein fer).

Pointing

Overview

First have a look at the court from the circle as an overview: does it slope left or right? Then read the ground by examining its subtle irregularities to identify soft or hard patches, humps, and depressions.

You may want to walk all the way to the cochonnet for a closer look.

The landing spot

Pick the landing spot “donnée” that will enable your boule to reach the desired position. It should be as flat as possible; if it is slanted, your boule’s direction will be altered.

You also need to think about the first bounce after your boule touches the ground. The landing spot has the most influence on the direction of the boule. The first bounce has some influence as well.

If the ground slopes to the left; you need to play on the right side. If the ground is wet or uphill you need to land further out than usual. If the ground is very dry or downhill you need to land closer to you.

The landing spot or “donnée”, should be very specific; about the size of the boule. Always compare your actual landing spot with the one you aimed for. That way you can properly adjust it with your subsequent boules to better reach your target.

When you are ready to throw your boule, look at the landing spot with intensity for a few seconds, then look at the cochonnet briefly (for the distance); then look back at the landing spot and throw your boule.

To throw with precision, it is important to look at the landing spot and not the cochonnet. That is because the direction, and therefore the landing spot, is more important than the distance and the cochonnet. And you must do this with focus and intensity to help your brain execute the correct throw.

The brain

The way our brains work is to use the left side for analyzing, talking and reflection, and the right side for action, images and visualization.

So, after you have analyzed all the information (left side) you need to switch your brain to the right side by focusing intensely on the landing spot to be ready for action.

That means you cannot talk, listen or look at anything else while you are preparing to throw your boule. If anything happens during your routine preparation, start over. You need all your focus on the action.

Throwing the boule

The throw of the boule is always done with the palm of your hand facing the ground. Your arm must be straight and act as a pendulum when releasing the boule. The three types of throws for pointing are the roll, half-lob and high-lob.

The roll

The roll consists of throwing the boule low with no curve, no backspin and letting it roll all the way. This is the easiest throw.

This throw is often done in a squat position to start as close to the ground as possible. For those who don't feel comfortable in a squat position, simply throw the boule low with a landing spot close to you.

This is what most beginners do naturally. You can become very good using this technique but it will not work on a court with rocks or deep gravel. This is why you must also learn the half-lob.

The half-lob

The half-lob requires giving an arc to your throw with controlled backspin. As you start or during your backswing, cock your wrist and open it only upon releasing the boule.

Finish with your arm extended at shoulder height and your hand open with your fingers together pointing upward. This action of the wrist gives your boule an impulsion and a higher trajectory.

The landing spot is usually about half way to the cochonnet. This throw can be done in the squat position or while standing up.

The high-lob

For the high-lob, standing up, the boule is thrown straight up in the air with a lot of backspin to land close or very close to the cochonnet. The height and the backspin minimize rolling after the landing. This is a difficult throw to master but accessible to anyone willing to practice.

In a downhill situation, you should not play high when pointing. The higher you play, the more speed your boule will gain as it descends. And when it lands, it will accelerate on the downhill slope and likely roll too far.

You select the roll, half-lob or high-lob depending on the courts and your abilities. If the court is rough or uneven the high-lob is a good choice, but only if you have mastered it.

On a fast rolling and smooth court, you should roll your boule or use the half-lob. The half-lob is the go-to throw that works in most situations.

Side spin

This technique allows your boule to curve to the right or left after hitting the ground. This is useful to avoid hitting another boule or any obstacle. The side spin is also an efficient way to counteract the slope.

Release the boule with your hand perpendicular to the ground, the thumb on top, as if you are shaking hands. That creates a clockwise rotation and curves the boule's direction to the left for a right-handed player. A left-handed player creates a counter-clockwise rotation curving the boule direction to the right.

The opposite side spin is less natural and requires more practice to master. Release the boule with your pinky finger on top and your hand perpendicular to the ground. This will spin your boule to the right or left respectively for a right-handed or left-handed player.

Do not force the side spin by rotating your wrist. The release should be smooth. The position of the hand sideways is enough to give the necessary rotation.

The boule curves to the side as soon as it lands. Be aware that there is no backspin to slow down the momentum of the boule. That means your boule may go further

than expected, so pick your “donnée” accordingly. Practice regularly to become comfortable using this technique. It looks harder to do than it is.

Shooting

Decision

Take the time to decide whether or not to shoot. Imagine the possible outcomes. Quite often, the results are not exactly what you originally thought. You think a “carreau” would be perfect. Great! But think about all the other possibilities as well.

If your boules or the cochonnet are behind the target be aware of the “contre.” Meaning the secondary impact may take out your boule or move the cochonnet.

Once you have decided, focus all your attention on the action. To help your brain switch from the decision-making process to the execution of the action, focus intensely on the target for a few seconds.

Choose a precise point of impact: the center of the boule, the left or right side or maybe the ground in front of the boule.

Shooting straight

To shoot straight on the target you must learn to lock your elbow. This will enhance the pendulum and you will be more consistently accurate.

You may think you shoot with your arm straight but that is not enough. Locking your elbow may require some changes in your throw. After a few days of practice, you will feel the difference.

Distance

Judging the distance to the target is critical, especially if you want to land on the target boule “plein fer.” This is the best way to increase your chances of making a “carreau” or at least to stay close to the point of impact (palet).

The earth’s gravity pulls the boule toward the ground. Often the boule lands short, in front of the target and bounces over it. To shoot “plein fer” cock your wrist,

swing your arm backward slowly as high as possible without bending your body forward too much. Then accelerate the forward swing.

Finish with unfurling your hand, creating backspin and giving more height to the boule's trajectory. This combination of speed and height allows you to shoot further without forcing.

“Carreau” or “palet”

To maximize your chances of making a “carreau” or a “palet,” shoot directly on the target boule (plein fer) without touching the ground first.

A “carreau” is the perfect shot where your boule replaces the target boule and stays in position. To make a “carreau” you need to hit the target in the center of the boule. The energy is then fully transferred from the shooter's boule to the target boule, resulting in a “carreau.”

A “palet” is a very good shot where you knock out the target boule and your boule stays close to the target's original position.

“Do you point or do you shoot?”

This is the phrase that best represents pétanque, both in all its simplicity and in all its tactical possibilities.

As a general rule, shooting is favored when you have the boule advantage. That is, your team has more boules to play than your opponent.

Keep in mind that the best shot in pétanque is the one you succeed. A failed attempt is worthless. It is therefore often more effective to play the simplest shot with the highest statistical chance of success.

The captain must know his or her teammates well to suggest appropriate playing options. Decisions are made collectively, but the final decision must be made by the player with the boule in hand. A boule played without conviction is a lost boule in most cases.

Strategic throws

Throwing the cochonnet

Choose the distance and direction you want to throw the cochonnet, based on the ability of your shooter and the opposite team's shooter. When a shooter misses, his boule is lost. A pointer may not take the point back, but his boule will still be in the game.

Then consider the distance and especially the “donnée” for your pointer. And if possible, make it difficult for their pointer, e.g. rocky “donnée.”

You can destabilize a team by alternating very short (6 meter) and very long (10 meter) ends. You can also simply throw the cochonnet on a diagonal.

Playing close to the sideline may be very stressful for some people. It is also an easier way to knock the cochonnet out of bounds if necessary.

Concentrate and throw the cochonnet with your strategy in mind.

“Boule devant, boule d'argent”

A boule in front always pays off (money boule.) The idea is that your boule in front of the cochonnet protects your point. The other team needs to get around your boule and if another boule touches it, your boule in front moves closer to the cochonnet. Even if you do not hold the point and have no more boules to play, you may end up with the point if your boule in front is pushed by mistake by the opponents.

A boule behind the cochonnet is not as valuable. The other team can use that boule as a backstop. Not only do they take the point, but they are protected by your boule right behind. You cannot shoot because your boule would go away and their boule would stay if the two boules are very close together.

Advancing your team's boule

This is a common situation where you have the option to advance your team's boule. You need to play high with minimum or no backspin and land a couple of feet in front of the boule to push it just enough to make the point and maybe make two. The key here is to play high right in front of your team's boule.

Push and replace

Your opponent's team made a very good point. You don't want to shoot because you want to make sure your boule stays in the game, not too far from the cochonnet.

You can push and replace that boule with the following pointing technique. Play high or very high (high-lob) with backspin and land just a few inches in front of the opponent's boule. Your boule will push and replace the other boule and take the point.

The opponent's boule will not be far behind but this is a protection for your boule. If they shoot your boule there is a risk of taking out their own boule (contre) as well since it is not far behind.

Even if you miss the target boule when pointing on it, your boule should not go too far with the height and backspin, thus limiting the opponent's ability to score.

Point to align with the opponent's boule

Aligning your point with your opponent's boule may prevent them from shooting it. There is a risk of "contre." That means your boule may end up knocking out their boule. In this scenario you would most likely keep the point.

In the same way, you can point in line with the cochonnet. This is very useful against a team that is likely to shoot your boule.

Mix them up

A good defensive tactic is to point close to your opponent's boules, even if you don't get the point back. By mixing up your boules with their boules you make it harder for them to shoot. This is effective against teams who prefer shooting.

Shooting the cochonnet

You should shoot the cochonnet as a last resort not to lose the game. Of course, shooting the cochonnet is one of the most difficult throws in pétanque. Practice and be prepared so you feel confident enough to do it. It is about as difficult to shoot the cochonnet at 6 meters as it is to shoot a boule at 10 meters.

Another option is to shoot the cochonnet when only your team has boules left to play. This is a good option if you are more likely to have at least one point in case you miss.

Make them play

During the game your decision to shoot or point might be based on the idea of forcing the opponent's team to play. You want to put the pressure back on the other team. Many things can happen, and they may make a mistake.

With less boules in hand than your opponent, the logic would be to point and tighten the game defensively. The issue is you may play all your boules and leave the other team with many boules in hand, and a lot of options at the end. So even though it is risky, you shoot to make the opponent play again.

That's impossible

Here you are in a situation where everybody thinks it is an impossible shot. And yes, it will be difficult to succeed because you need to be very precise.

It is "impossible" until you consider how each boule will connect with the other boules. Then, you realize it can be done and will result in points for your team. Of course, it does not work very often but it does work sometimes. These opportunities are a good way to learn and progress. It's thrilling when your coup succeeds!

A good example is when you have your boule right behind your opponent's boule. If you shoot, both boules will go away or worse only your boule will go away. There are a couple of ways to shoot the boule in front alone:

- Shoot straight up very high so your boule comes down almost vertically on the front boule.
- Another option is to shoot the front boule softly with a lot of side spin and landing about one inch in front on the side of the boule.

Another example is to shoot three boules at once. Two of the three boules are close together and the third one is aligned in a diagonal further back. Shoot in the middle of the two boules next to each other and if you have calculated the angle correctly the third boule will be knocked away by one of the two boules.

I am sure you will find situations like this, and you will learn to profit from them.

Focus

Boule in the middle

You need to focus on the action to accomplish. Never focus on the action to avoid. A good example is a boule in line with your pointing trajectory. This boule is really in your way and that bothers you.

Do not look at that boule anymore. Decide where to play, right or left with a wide margin. Look at the path your boule will travel. Focus on your landing spot for a few seconds with intensity, then play.

Your brain needs to focus on the landing spot and not on the annoying boule. Also, make sure to allow a lot of space on the side of the boule. A common mistake is to try to pass very close to the boule.

“Don’t shoot my boule”

Another example is shooting a boule next to your boule. It is important to focus only on the target boule.

Do not think about hitting your team’s boule. Instead, put all your attention on the boule you want to shoot long enough for your brain to register it as the target.

The same idea applies to what you say to your partners. Instead of saying, “do not touch the cochonnet,” say, “play on this side.”

Muscle function

Muscles in the body work in pairs to create movement at a joint. Within these pairs, the muscles have opposing actions and are classified as agonist and antagonist muscles.

The agonist muscles initiate the movement. When you want to move a body part, your brain sends a signal that tells the agonist muscle to contract, causing it to shorten and pull on the attached bone.

When you bend your arm, your biceps contracts (agonist) and acts as the main muscle doing the work, while your triceps loosen up (antagonist) and allow the movement to happen. Antagonists help control the speed and smoothness of movement and prevent overextension or injury by balancing the force exerted by the agonist.

If the antagonist muscles are overly tense, they can resist the intended motion, acting like a brake on the agonist muscles. This creates inefficient, jerky movements and compromises the fluidity and accuracy of the throw.

Deliberate breathing will help you relax and minimizes the perturbation of unwanted tension in the body and mind.

Breathing

When you consciously slow down your breathing, focusing on a deep inhale and a complete exhale, you're essentially signaling to your body that you're safe and that you can relax. This deep breathing should be part of your routine while preparing to throw especially when it is an important boule.

Holding your breath while throwing a boule creates unnecessary tension throughout your body; especially in your upper body.

Use your breathing to create a rhythm: inhale during the backswing and exhale while you swing forward and release the boule. Your respiration is in synch with your action:

- Taking a breath in during the backswing, a preparatory movement, can contribute to a more stable backswing, which is crucial for a controlled throw.
- Exhaling during the forward swing and release helps your muscles perform, allowing a more fluid and powerful throwing motion.

This breathing rhythm can help you create a routine in the circle that will enhance your focus and result in consistent throws.

When there are distractions around, it is more difficult to keep your concentration. Inhale and exhale deeply and slowly. Listen to your breathing, open your chest and relax your shoulders.

Look at your boule, maybe read the engraving of the serial number. This unique and familiar reference is reassuring. Now you are ready to start your routine and play your boule.

Observing

You can learn a lot by observing the players. After the first end, you should be able to tell who is the leader on your opponent's team. Who is left or right-handed? Are they tall or short? Do any of the players add side spin when they throw? Do they play standing up or in a squat position? At what distance did they throw the cochonnet? How confident do they feel when pointing or shooting? Analyze the throw of each player to detect their weaknesses.

Use every piece of information to your advantage. You may play at 6 meters if their leader is 6 feet tall. Or at 10 meters if the shooter is very rigid. A slope from left to right will be more difficult for a left-handed player. Play downhill if the pointer uses the high lob.

Try to force the opponent's team to point if their strength is shooting. Get into second and third position. Then shoot and you end up with two points. That will probably force them to point.

Be alert throughout the game for ways to capitalize on your opponent's weaknesses.

Winning

The goal is to score 13 points to win the game. Of course, you want to score as many points as you can in every end. Or maybe not?!

The key is not to lose the game. Whenever you take a decision, it is most important that the opponent team never scores more than 1 point or 2 maximum. Take the time to think about it and make appropriate decisions.

This is how you can manage to be losing 2-10 and still win the game 13-12. Have you ever wondered why some players often find a way to win a game even when it looks like they are losing this one for sure?

The first goal when you start an end is to finish with one point. When your opponent has no more boules and you have the point then you can consider taking a risk. Otherwise, you need to make the point first using the action most likely to succeed.

Believing and acting like a winner can only help you to win. Control your emotions. Do not show frustration or disappointment. Do not be too cocky. Encourage your teammates. Be positive and confident. All of these contribute to your winning attitude. Pétanque is also a mental game.

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Focus on the next boule not the previous one.

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Comments and suggestions are welcome:

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