

Beginners Guide to Shooting

The 'Tir' or shoot is fundamental in Petanque. Shooting is an aggressive (but not necessarily forceful) shot aimed at displacing a boule from the head to gain a strategic advantage. In later factsheets we will examine the tactical reasons for shooting, but this factsheet focuses on technique. Before reading this factsheet you should have read the 'How to Throw a Boule' factsheet.

Stance

We have already touched on stance. Most commonly players will stand while shooting. Whilst it is not un-heard-of to see shooting from a squatting position I generally do not suggest it as I believe there is nothing to be gained from shooting from such a low position.

Make sure your stance is comfortable and your weight is distributed evenly. Remember that you are not allowed to step out of the circle while you play, therefore your stance should be sufficient to enable you to throw beyond 10 metres without losing your balance.

The Shoot

The aim of the shot is to displace other boules from the head. Most commonly this is achieved by striking the target boule. Given that the target boule could be very close (less than 6 metres) or very distant (beyond 10 metres) the player has to be able to adapt their technique to hit boules at any distance.

There are a number of different types of shoot and there is not really any right or wrong way. You will see a wide variety of techniques and ultimately the best technique is the one you find most successful.

Some players will shoot 'along the ground', that is to land their boule short (sometimes well short) of the target and the forward momentum causes the played boule to roll forward, ideally crashing into the target. This technique can be pretty devastating in certain circumstances as boules can fly off in all directions. It does however introduce a variable, in that the course of the played boule is subject to the variances in the terrain (slopes, thickness etc). Using a rolling technique increases the likelihood of missing the target, striking obliquely or even removing the wrong boule (which could be one of your teammates'). Shooting along the ground does not work at all if the target is 'covered' by a blocking boule in front of it. Finally, the advantage of backspin is lost quite quickly on a rolling shoot (the importance of backspin will become apparent later on).

I prefer to always aim to strike the target boule directly with a looping shot (boule-to-boule). There are a number of very strong reasons for this:

- It overcomes the difficulties of 'blocking' front boules. The trajectory of the shot is such that it carries over blockers.
- Backspin is maintained throughout the throw. This means if you do land slightly short the backspin works to reduce the possibility of 'bouncing' over the target.

- A direct hit with a looping shot in the right spot on the target boule can produce a 'carreau' (*cah-roh*). The played boule removes the target and remains in the head, or a 'carreau sur place' where the played boule remains exactly where the target had been. Even if you do not achieve a carreau the looping trajectory and backspin mean that even after an oblique hit your boule may stay in the head.
- The chances of directly hitting the wrong boule are reduced as there is no terrain influence on the shot (that is not to say it never happens though!).

Basic Practice

The best ways to practice shooting boule-to-boule are as follows:

- **Elevate the target.** Place the target boule on top of a house brick (the holes in the brick keep the target in position). Aim to hit the boule without disturbing the brick. Do this over a wide range of distances (5.5 metres to 12 metres). You will find the only way to hit the boule is to elevate your shot and hit it directly.
- **Block the target.** Place a line of house bricks or a piece of wood about 1 metre in front of your target boule. A shot which hits the blocking wall before the target boule is a foul. Again do this over a variety of distances. As you get better, reduce the distance between the wall and the target boule, making it more important to strike the boule rather than the ground in front of it.

It is very important to practice shooting at all lengths. You will find, as you become more renowned for being a good shooter, that your opponents try to make life difficult for you by playing at the extreme lengths 6 metres or beyond 9 metres. This is because commonly shooters tend to be more accurate at medium lengths of 7-8 metres. Try to practice out of your comfort zone, after all it does not matter how many shots you miss in practice, it is whether you are improving or not which matters.

Looping action

It is quite possible to become proficient at shooting without the classic looping action, but you have to accept that the probability of the double advantage of a carreau is much reduced if you don't loop. By this I mean the looping causes the boule to fly in an arc - after contact your boule is more likely to remain in play (as opposed to following the target out of bounds). The more boules you have in play the better your chances of scoring.

Look at the picture below. This player (Phillipe Quintais, multiple World Champion) is shooting. Very clearly we see his playing hand has the fingers pointing upward and the palm pointing forward at the point of release. This action imparts a great deal of backspin and loop.



The loop comes from a rotation in the arm at the elbow and a rotation in the wrist to point the fingers up the way. There is a French saying 'if you raise your arm you hit the boule, if you raise your elbow you miss the boule'. My interpretation of this is by rotating the arm about the elbow before release (as opposed to 'lifting' your whole arm) you will generate the loop needed to improve accuracy.

The looping action is easily practiced – shoot some boules into the hole in an old car tyre. If your boule lands in the tyre without touching the sides, give yourself a point, if it touches deduct a point. Keep going until you score 10 points. Keep a note of how many attempts it takes you to reach 10, you should over time see gradual improvement. Always concentrate on emulating the fingers up, palm showing action shown above.

Trajectory

Look at the picture above again, you can see the played boule in the air at head-height. The trajectory of the shot will affect how far it flies and the angle of descent. The steeper the angle of descent at the point of contact, the greater the chance of the played boule remaining in the head.

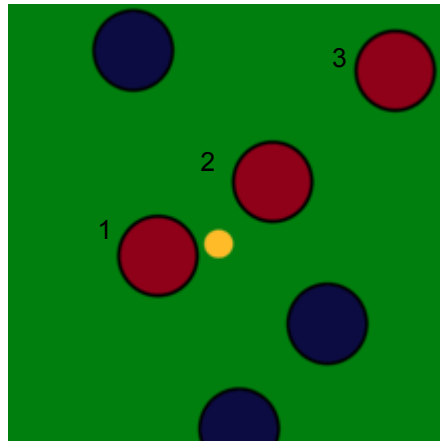
Shooting 'the ear'

This bizarre sounding phrase is the term used to describe striking an opponents boule deliberately off centre (on the side). Why would you choose to do this – surely this increases the chances of missing and makes shooting harder? Yes, this is true. However, look at the picture below.



Your opponents boule is next to the jack and your teammate has two boules at the back. A direct shot onto the front boule might cause it to crash into the back boules, removing them from the head. However this can be overcome by hitting the target boule on it's right 'ear'. This will cause the target boule to fly off to the left of the back boules and your boule to pass to the right of them (snooker and pool players will understand the principle very well).

Shooting on the side can also help you hit two or more opponent boules with one shot (this is a real crowd pleaser). Look below:



The blue team may decide to shoot in this situation to reduce the amount of points held by the red team (currently 2). If the shooter aims to strike boule 1 on the right-hand-side, boule 1 will fly off to the left. The played blue boule will then be deflected to the right and could strike boule 2, and if very fortunate may remove boule 3 too. Of course there is the risk of jack movement here, but the risks may be acceptable for such a return... Worst case, blue misses and loses 2. Best case all red boules are removed and a carreau on ball 2 results in 4 shots to blue (a possible 6 point swing from one shot!). Reserve this type of shot for very obvious situations like this, your teammates may well become frustrated if you try these kind of 'trick-shots' all the time!

Common misconceptions

The greatest misconception is that throwing with greater force makes your boules fly further. As any discus or shotput thrower will tell you a long shot is the result of rotation and trajectory, not brute force. Many players complain that they do not have the strength to shoot over 10 metres as they think it requires a great deal of force to heave the boule that far. In many cases these people are surprised to find they can throw that far and beyond, if they concentrate on their backswing and trajectory. Shooting is about line, length and trajectory, not about force. A 'gentle' shoot is devastating if the point of contact is correct, introduce force and you increase the probability of throwing off-line.

Another common misconception is that shooting is more difficult than pointing. This is simply not true, shooting is repetitive and to shoot the player only needs to practice one type of shot. The pointer however needs to be able to allow for terrain variances, slopes, landing spots, distance, trajectory, blocking boules etc. Being able to consistently point well is, in my opinion, a far greater level of skill.

Summary

As ever it is important to practice, practice, practice. Remember to practice boule-to-boule shooting mostly, thinking about stance, loop and trajectory. Don't try and smack boules all over the place, satisfying as that can be sometimes. Concentrate on your weakest areas and shooting at extreme lengths (6m and beyond 10m). If you can become proficient at shooting you will find you win more games as a result.

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