

A new set of rules?

Rumours are fluttering round that the governing body are going to rewrite the rules. About time too!

The current rules are a mess. They concentrate on top level games and aren't relevant to local clubs yet many clubs try to play to these rules but end up with disagreements, different interpretations and bad feeling between teams.



There's no need for a baby/bathwater solution but many of the rules are badly written and almost all those regarding infringements are unenforceable.

First of all there should be a distinction between social games and international games. Water filled multicoloured boules bouncing along the sand are different from the top quality bespoke boules thrown by a top player in an international competition. The mindsets of the throwers of these boules are also miles apart. The rules should recognise this.

The best advice for those playing on the beach with plastic boules is enjoy yourselves. Closest wins. Don't worry too much about anything else.

Next level is the group of people who buy a set of boules without thinking too much or spending too much. In the UK they end up at JB sports or the Range and find 2 sets in a wooden box for £12 which looks really good value. There are manufacturers and retailers in this sector who try to upsell their product with fancy packaging or heavy use of higher level vocabulary yet they package their 'quality' boules in twos. They generously include a piece of string for measuring despite this being explicitly forbidden in the current rules and a small piece of paper telling you how to play (badly) and after these people move on to play in a club they find their boules aren't actually that good and the rules are even worse than the A5 scrap of paper they once believed.

Then we meet the club players. Generally keen to develop their skills and knowledge and are delighted when they find out that Petanque is recognised by Sport England. So they try to learn the full rules and struggle to cope with the differing interpretations.

Eventually these club players move up another level where they meet better players who have a better but still imperfect knowledge of the rules and who scare novices with their apparent wisdom.

Finally we reach the really competitive types. County level, national and then international level. Here the players know the rules and there are umpires to officiate at matches.

So what do we need in the new rules? Let's look at the old rules. Not the ones that you find on the internet as most of the top hits have plenty of mistakes. These are the rules of La Fédération Internationale de Pétanque & Jeu Provençal.

GENERAL RULES

Initially let's clear out the first few archaic rules which forbid anything but singles, doubles and triples. There are many games played in clubs all over the world where 2 play 3 and there is no problem. There are games with 4 playing 4. There are triples with 3 boules each. There are other versions I've seen on the web for 3 players or 7 players. Unless it's at the top level stopping people playing petanque because the numbers are unbalanced is just bonkers. Scrap it!

Next follows the same logic. At small club level any metal boule is allowed. Allow people to proudly bring the set they bought in Woolworths in 1970 and kept in the garage for 4 decades. If you educate them in the culture of the game and they get hooked they will move onto a 'proper' set in time. Their 'Woollies' can join the club's stock of spares to lend to visitors.

On the same tack any jack will do & you don't need a licence to play at club level.

PLAY, JACK, BOULES, POINTS & MEASURING

Onto the next sections and instantly we hit a problem.

"Pétanque is played on any terrain. A playing area contains an indeterminate number of terrains defined by strings"

The first sentence is right; The second is generally wrong. And the rules go on and on about small issues that don't usually happen in small clubs.

The section on play should have the mechanics of the game, what to do in certain situations and have as its conclusion that players should play with tolerance and good humour and resolve disputes amicably. References to any penalties or Umpires and the like should be kept for the final section of the new rules.

Articles 5 to 29 need rewriting with a large measure of common sense and could come out quite well as a general guide for playing the game.

DISCIPLINE

At the top level there clearly need to be rules which are monitored by match officials who have a range of sanctions to penalise infringements. Big sports have teams of umpires/referees often backed up by TV replays. Football has a team of 4 or 6 officials. Other sports have Referees at all levels. Petanque doesn't.

At petanque club level there is rarely an umpire to be seen. Therefore no real disciplinary action can take place when one individual spots an infringement and no-one else corroborates it as it is one person's word against er... nothing.

In English club cricket one umpire may be allocated to a league match but it is often a volunteer from the players that stands at square leg. With Petanque being such a minority game there are not enough umpires to officiate at lower levels. You might be able to persuade a player from a 3rd club to act as umpire for an important league fixture but if there are a few games being played at the same time he cannot watch them all.

We have to accept that at local petanque club level the game will have to regulate itself. Any rules that the governing body produces involving discipline and penalties will only apply to the top level.

Consequently minor infringements that may be penalised at top level cannot be at a lower level. The articles from 30 to 40 have some good points particularly Lack of Sportsmanship and Bad Behaviour but these have to be delegated to captains of teams at local level. League rules that say the games will be played to the FIPJP rules are setting themselves an unreachable standard. Just by saying it doesn't mean it will happen. Move most of Articles 30 to 40 into a later section.

What is needed after these rewritten simpler rules is a section called COMPETITIONS where you can list the stricter rules about characteristics of boules & jacks and insert the tougher rules including penalties that apply to top level games. Tournaments can then opt to play to the Competition rules and local clubs can continue to play to the General rules.

The rules need a good shake up. There should be common sense rules on how to play that everyone should learn and use but players stepping up to a county or national level would have to work to new set of rules about discipline and sanctions in addition the basic rules.

My worry is that the shake up will be done by older, experienced and top level players who have forgotten what it's like to run a small club on a shoe string with 30 players of different abilities enjoying themselves. They need some help from a small petanque club in the UK.



I have plenty of free time. I have a passport, my suitcase is packed and I speak French and play petanque badly. Je suis ready.