

There comes a point...



...when a novice suddenly gets fed up of just rolling in and being knocked out by a shooter. And they fight back. They realise they've got to throw their weight about instead of timidly rolling towards the coche.

This takes some time. Novice players are low on confidence at first and think that the game is just big marbles. They roll and roll often palm up with the sole intention of getting close to the coche. Their attempts veer to the left or veer to the right or fall short or zoom past the head. They become frustrated as the time they get it right and finally end up close a shooter from the opposition team steps up and blasts their boule away.

One day the mouse turns and starts to roar. Then the problems begin.

It's partly our fault as we start novices off with the instruction to roll as near as you can without much guidance. When we do offer guidance we teach pointing technique first. There are half a dozen things to remember to point correctly in the classic style and newcomers forget them or achieve limited success with them. Coaches will tell you that your game will often get worse before it gets better so many give up on technique and revert to being a low roller and spend the rest of their days being shot to pieces (along with their confidence). Some however manage to grasp the concept that a "heavy" point will often achieve advantageous results. If only there was an easy way to turn a pointer into a shooter.

Maybe we should teach shooting first?

Apocryphal stories abound of French youngsters learning how to play with their grandfather and starting by shooting a boule at 2m. When the youngster hits the target consistently the distance is moved to 3m and so on. This also has the added bonus of dispelling the myth of "rolling big marbles" and shooting becomes attractive and essential part of the game.

Shooting to be blunt is just pointing hard. In its purest form it avoids all the pitfalls of bad landing places, blocking boules, stray stones and unfilled-in craters and hits the target boule direct often replacing it. Not every player achieves this level as everyone can shoot in some way but many aspiring shooters stop when they get to the point when they try it and it doesn't work instantly. They revert to timid rolling. Until the time that the worm turns.

The benefits of learning classical pointing technique are easily transferred to the act of shooting. If the pendulum action is in place then shooting just requires a little more in the back swing or in the follow through to generate a little more momentum and power and push the target boule instead of just reaching it.

Many aspiring shooters seem to think that shooting means shooting hard. Sure there is a place for it but a good shot is a shot that gets the job done. Shifting the target boule 6 inches is often enough. A player who tries to generate too much power induces a hook as the arm doesn't follow the pendulum but deviates from it.

Having said that we have seen shooters who hold the boule in the small of their back then throw hard in an exaggerated curl and hit the target regularly.

So onto when to shoot...

Shooting is required when a boule needs moving as it is preventing your team holding the point (or in special circumstances several points). Often you only need to shift the target boule a few inches to regain the initiative so a spectacular shot that smacks the target boule out of the terrain – a carreau - and sits in its place is not necessary. (It still feels really good and amazes small children when you do it so don't dispense with it yet...).

So when do you shoot? The answer is simple – when it's the right shot for the situation. Whenever it's your teams turn to play you should think – Shoot or Point. Often it's an easy decision but let's get out of the easy rut that says the first option is to point. The decision to shoot is not simple, in fact it's analysing the situation and realising a shot is needed. This is where experience comes in. This is when captains come in. Can we set out some basic rules to help us to this realisation?

Scenario 1.

The first team to play puts their boule 6 inches to the left/right of the coche but level with it. Shoot or not?

Scenario 2.

The first team to play puts their boule 6 inches directly in front of the coche. Shoot or not?

Scenario 3.

The first team to play puts their boule 6 inches behind the coche. Shoot or not?

These scenarios have chosen 6 inches because this is in the area of uncertainty. If the above scenarios said 12 inches the decision is probably point. Being 6 inches closer makes you think about shooting. Accepted wisdom says don't shoot anything past the coche. Aggressive players will say shoot out anything nearer than 6 inches. Defensive pointers will say don't shoot. Other factors will also come into play but 6 inches away think about shooting.

Scenario 4.

The opposition points their boule to rest on the coche or an inch away.
Shoot or not?

If this is their first boule the decision takes itself. Shoot! Especially if the coche and boule are very close. You have 2 targets and your chances of hitting something have increased. There are some players who will ask the pointer to “put one in” but if that point is not good enough or blocks the shot you’re in the same situation but with one boule fewer to play. Even if you’re halfway through a game I would still shoot.

Scenario 5.

The opposition has no boules left. They hold the point but you have a few in hand. Shoot or not?

Yes. By removing their boule you create space to roll in a few more winners. A similar situation may apply when you hold the point but they have second or third. By removing their boules you make it easier for your pointer.

Scenario 6.

The opposition is holding several points and almost all their boules are very close. Shoot or not?

Yes. You are facing a large score against you. Change the game by shooting. You may spring the coche a few metres away. You may pinch the point with a lucky ricochet. Pointing will rarely change such a situation. Would you prefer to lose 3 or more points with a lame point that doesn’t even disturb the status quo or risk a shot?

When to stop shooting...

There are some unwritten rules so I’ll defy the petanque Gods and write them down.

1. Don’t shoot more than twice. If you haven’t hit it by now it’s time to slow down and limit the damage. You may lose the end but lose it by just 1 or 2 rather than wasting your boules and losing big.
2. Don’t shoot with your last boule. If you make a spectacular rearrangement of the boules your team has no boules left to take advantage or put right the damage.
3. Don’t use all your boules to shoot; all yours will be waaaay out of bounds and the opposition will score 6.

There's also some unspoken rules.

1. Aim for the side of the target boule. It seems arrogant but sometimes shooting full on would push the coche or one of your well placed boules out of the head. Aiming for the side will push the target to one side.
2. Shooting often has unexpected results. Not shooting rarely has unexpected results.
3. Shooting the coche can also change the game. If your opponents have no boules left and you have many shooting the coche dead may bring a big score.
4. Watch out for Newtons. In snooker they call them plants. You can shoot a boule (maybe your own) and a boule that is behind & touching it will be the one that moves.
5. Remember rules are there to be broken. There are times to shoot out of the box.

So develop more than one style of shooting. Landing in front of the target boule and rolling the rest of the way works quite well. You avoid the obvious obstructions but still leave only a little to chance. Away from your home terrain you might find the boule bounces over or grinds to a halt in thick gravel before it hits but you can adjust your throw to cope with this. Some days though there will only be one route to the target – au fer (or boule to boule in English) – and some days you have to try it and some days it works.

Taking the plunge...

You may think I'll never shoot or I'll never perform a carreau but the players that are doing it now were once hesitant shooters learning their trade. They hit 30% of the time or maybe if they're lucky 50%. It's also worth keeping in the back of your mind that anyone who hits 100% of the time is likely to be playing for their country. And hesitant shooters were once pointers and pointers were once beginners.

If you're a pointer who has come to the point where you want to become a shooter you're on the right path. You've been through Denial (I'll never be a shooter), Anger (why am I being shot off the terrain?) and you've moved to Acceptance (I'd better start learning how to do it.)

Conclusion and inspiring quotes

Petanque is a game of attack. Rolling towards the head in decorous & genteel manner is often not useful and wasting boules you might need later. Sometimes you have to change the game.

Remember what Hermann Goering said "Shoot first and ask questions later". Whatever you think of Hermann the phrase fits petanque quite well.

And shooters? When they hit they're heroes; when they miss they're zeroes. But you've got to be prepared to shoot. It has to be a weapon in your armoury.

Also sing softly to yourself...

"These boules are made for shooting and that's what they should do. Otherwise these boules are gonna shoot all over you" (Nancy Sinatra & Lee Hazlewood 1966)