



The English Short Mat Bowling Association

An introduction to the game of Short Mat bowls

This article is intended to introduce some of the fundamentals of the game of Short Mat Bowls for those who are new to the game.

Short Mat Bowls is one of several variants of the general game of bowls, all of which are relatively simple in concept. Most new players find they can get to grips with the basic principles quickly. Bowls in general, is one of the few sports that can be actively participated in by any age and gender from the very young to those of more advanced years. It can be played by people of all fitness levels and, with a few adaptations caters for disabilities including wheelchair users and the visually impaired. There are number of aids and attachments which may help those with a disability. Specifically, the Short Mat variant is particularly sociable and across the country is played in over 1000 clubs. Most are small and meet to play in village halls although some of the larger clubs use leisure centres for their activities. In most counties, there is an active program of inter-club league games and keen bowlers can play at inter-county level and enter the annual national championships.

The Bowls – Sometimes referred to as “woods”, bowls are usually purchased in sets of four, all the same size, make and colour. A full set of bowls is probably a bowler’s largest item of initial expenditure and should be chosen wisely, preferably with advice from coaching staff or other experienced players. Most clubs have some spare bowls to borrow which can help new bowlers to determine the size that suits their hand size. Many people believe wrongly that the bowls are weighted on one side to cause them to turn (bias), but in fact this is due to a slight misshaping introduced during the manufacturing process. Bowls are not perfect spheres.

The Jack - is spherical in shape, coloured yellow or white and weighs 14-32oz. The heavier jack is now most commonly used although some believe that using a lightweight jack encourages more skilful play.

The Rink Mat - The mat is 40’-45’ long with a width of 6’ – an ideal size for use in small venues where it can easily be unloaded from its storage trolley and rolled out ready for play. The attached diagram only shows the markings on one half of a mat with the opposite end being a mirror image.

Playing Formats - The game can be played in teams of four (rinks), three (triples), two (pairs) and one (singles) and most clubs take part in team events in several of these disciplines. The basic object of the game is to get more of your or your teams bowls nearer to the jack (the object ball) than the opposition.

A SINGLES game – is played between two contending players, each playing 2, 3 or 4 bowls singly and in turn.

A PAIRS game – is played by two contending teams of two players known as Lead and Skip. The 2 Leads each play their two bowls singly and in turn followed by the 2 Skips who then each play their bowls singly and in turn.

A TRIPLES game – is played by two contending teams of three players known as Lead Second and Skip. The 2 Leads each play their two bowls singly and in turn followed by the 2 Seconds who then each play their bowls singly and in turn and finally the 2 Skips who then each play their bowls singly and in turn

A FOURS game - is played by two contending teams of 4 players known as Lead Second, Third and Skip. The 2 Leads each play their two bowls singly and in turn followed by the 2 Seconds who then each play their bowls singly and in turn and then the 2 Thirds who then each play their bowls singly and in turn and finally the 2 Skips who then each play their bowls singly and in turn.

In each of the above disciplines, the delivery of all bowls by all players in one direction is known as an “end” and a match will usually be specified as lasting a specific number of ends. Alternatively, matches may be played to a specified time limit.

Dress - For practice nights (social bowling) most clubs allow normal casual wear although proprietary bowls shoes (or other flat soled shoes/slippers) must be worn to protect the mat. More formal dress of grey or black trousers/skirt plus white tops or club colours is normally expected for league matches and competitions.

Basic principles of play – (Refer to attached diagram)

At the start of each end, the jack can be placed anywhere on the Jack Line F.

All bowlers deliver their bowls from a rubber Delivery Mat placed at the delivery end in position C and during the delivery of each bowl one foot must be on (or over) this mat. The leading foot must be kept within the two lines marked B.

A 15” wide wooden block is placed in the centre of the mat at position G and any bowl that touches this becomes dead and is removed from play. The intention of this barrier is to make “firing” difficult and encourage the use of the “draw”.

If a bowl is carried beyond the Dead Line E the bowl becomes dead and is removed from play.

Once a bowl has been delivered and comes to rest anywhere within the Live Area it remains in play and together with other bowls in this area are collectively referred to as the “head”.

If a bowl comes to rest on or beyond the Ditch Line D without first touching the jack, the bowl becomes dead and is removed from play. However, if during delivery the bowl touches the jack (irrespective of how many bowls it touches on the way), it will be marked with chalk and becomes a “toucher”. Any toucher that enters the ditch (area D) remains in play (live) and may be counted as part of the result.

If a bowl comes to rest anywhere in the area between the two Dead Lines it is dead and must be removed from play.

Playing the game – Always arrive in plenty of time and introduce yourself to the opposing team, traditionally with a handshake and a wish to “have a good game”.

A coin is tossed, and the winning side has the choice of bowling the first bowl or the second. In subsequent ends, the winner of the previous end will bowl first.

At the start of each end, the first Lead player positions the delivery mat with the back of the mat placed against the fender and the sides within area C. The jack is placed by the Skip anywhere on the Jack Line F. All the bowls will then be delivered in turn until the last bowl has been delivered.

After all the bowls have been delivered the end is complete and the score is determined and agreed. Sometimes it will be necessary to use measuring implements to determine which wood(s) are nearest the jack.

In Singles games a third person is engaged as a “marker” who is positioned at the “head” end and assists the 2 players by marking any touchers, undertakes any measuring (if no umpire is present) makes sure the mat and fender are correctly aligned, removes dead bowls and adjudicates on line decisions (if no umpire is present). They can also answer questions from the players regarding the state of the “head”. If an Umpire has been engaged, he/she may be called on by the marker or players to advise and adjudicate. In all such cases their decision is final.

Delivering the bowls - There is no such thing as an ideal way to deliver a bowl to the head and simple observation of any experience bowler in action will show a varied number of styles. The most important thing is to develop a delivery style that suits you and which becomes consistent. Coaching staff can explain basic concepts such as how to hold the bowl and stand on the delivery mat but beyond this the overall style is up to you. However, your stance and grip on the bowl should always be comfortable.

Some people stand on the mat with both feet parallel slightly apart facing the line along which they intend to send the bowl and then take a step forward to deliver their bowl. Others may prefer to take a fixed stance by placing one foot on the delivery mat with the other foot extended in front facing the direction of delivery.

Note that if one foot is not fully on (or over) the delivery mat when the bowl is released it will be judged as a “foot fault” and the bowl removed from the mat.

Finally – Short Mat bowls is not a difficult game to play but it is a difficult game to achieve success in. Concentration and focus are essential qualities for any bowler aspiring to improve. Take time before each shot to follow a brief routine. Remove any chalk marks from your bowls. Check your position on the mat and the direction you are facing. Check your grip and bias. Make sure you have an objective in mind as to what you want your bowl to achieve and where you want it to end up. This will often be determined by your Skip who is directing play. After delivering your bowl watch its course until it stops and note any corrections in strength or line you will need to make for your next delivery.

It will not be too long before you will be able to bowl reasonably well and will find the way to the jack easier and easier, but if you allow your mind to wander and be distracted by outside factors, you will struggle to improve.

Everyone plays good shots (those that achieve their objective) and bad shots (those that do not) so **CONSISTENCY** is the key to success. The best bowlers are simply those who play many more good shots than bad ones!

Have fun and **ENJOY** your game and win or lose, **SMILE**.

Reference can be made to our website at www.esmba.co.uk where the following items that can be found.

- A brief history of the origins of Short Mat Bowls in England - see “**The History of the ESMBA**” page.
 - Our **INFORMATION PACK** which covers aspects of a more general nature including etiquette, dress code and various other ESMBA regulations.
 - The **LAWS OF THE GAME** which defines all the playing rules in more detail. This is the umpire’s “bible” and it is recommended that every player should own and carry a copy and become familiar with its contents.
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