

# *What is Petanque?*

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I'd never heard of it. At first I thought it was just another French word I'd mispronounce. But it's fun and a wonderful way to meet a group of delightful people.

Petanque is a French game that some people compare to the better known, Italian game of bocce. But it's not like bocce. Comparing bocce to Petanque is like comparing simple arithmetic to algebra. Petanque has variables that go well beyond the straightforward skill needed for bocce. Petanque is complex and intriguing.

I was introduced to Petanque May of 2021, at the Valley of the Moon Petanque Club Newcomers' event. I saw a notice in the local paper by my neighbor, Peter Mathis. I had heard that Peter is a serious Petanque player. I didn't realize he's been playing for over 30 years and has been the national champion and represented the US in international competitions.

I signed up. What did I have to lose? I hoped it would be fun.

What is this game? Everyone has 3 metal balls (boules in French) that each weigh about a pound and a half. You toss the first boule out with the intention of getting close to a small rubber target boule called a cochonette. That, I thought, was the easy part. I was wrong.

The cochonette (target) is thrown 6 to 10 meters from the circle where a player throws his or her boule from. Petanque is not played on a smooth surface like bowling or bocce. It's played on Mother Earth, with all her ridges, rolls and occasional, or plentiful, gravel. There are several techniques for tossing your boule that vary based upon the ground's contours, obstacles and the player's skill.

There are six boules per team. Teams of two get 3 boules per player and teams of three have 2 boules per player.

When you toss that first boule it might land close to the target, far from the target, in front of it, to either side of it, or behind it. A good boule lands within a foot or two from the target. A really good boule lands next to the target and presents a problem for the opposing team.

Before we solve that problem, it's worth mentioning that you can be competent at Petanque after a few matches. It's an easy game to get a feel for. To get past a novice level takes time playing the game. The beauty and attraction of Petanque is, as a player improves, there's enough complexity, competition, comradery, and variation to keep coming back for more. Simply, the challenge is always execution. The solution is enjoying the process as you improve.

Back to our problem. So, you threw a really good boule. It's right next to the target. What does your opponent do?

There are two roles on a team: pointer and shooter. The pointer tries to toss the boule close to the target. If it's very close, so the other team finds it difficult to get closer, their shooter plays. The shooter's job is to hit the opponent's boule and send it flying away from the target. Optimally, the shooter will hit the opponents boule in such a way that his boule stops where the opponents boule landed. That's challenging. A shooter is happy to hit the opponent's boule.

After all the boules have been played, the winning team's boule is closest to the target. The winning team gets a point for every boule that is closer to the target than the opponent's closest boule. The game is over when one team reaches 13 points.

Strategy is all about the positioning of the boules and the target. Strategy requires experience. For a new player it's hard enough just telling one player's boules from another. For an experienced player it's all about boule placement.

Pointing to get close to the target appears to be a simple skill. Hitting a baseball appears to be a simple skill, as does throwing a football or shooting a basketball. Things get more challenging when you have to hit a curveball, throw a long pass or hit a basket over an opponent.

Getting beyond a novice level, pointing with consistency on different terrains, determining the right distance when making the toss, took appreciation of the game's complexity. Having focus, concentrating on where I want the boule to land, how to hold my hand and body, and how to learn from the tosses of other players took time, effort and coaching.

Joe LaTorre gave something even more generous than advice. He loaned me Petanque boules to play with until I bought my own. Here is some of the generous coaching I received.

I joined my neighbor, Peter Mathis, in a game. He gave me advice as to where to aim and what the terrain would do when I threw the boule. After the match he showed me how to hold my hand on the boule so I threw it straight more consistently.

Peter Wellington, another experienced player, took me aside after matches. He told me when I gripped the boule it came out inconsistently, but when I let the boule flow from my hand I threw the boule straight. Bill Miller showed me how to end my throw with my fingers pointing at the target. Ed Clay explained the benefits of swinging my arm back before the throw.

I do my best to remember and incorporate all that advice into my tosses. I remember kindly all the people who have taken the time to share their expertise.

A plombe is a toss where you throw the boule much higher. I watched people toss plombes on very rocky courts and immediately saw its advantage. Kevin Evoy showed me his unique style of throwing plombes. My game took a significant step up from that advice.

Playing with the Valley of the Moon Petanque Club has benefits. There are tournaments almost every month. They provide the opportunity to play against a range of players. Several members of the club are chefs and the tournaments often have delicious lunches. My first tournament meal included duck confit and the best white beans I've ever had, cooked and served by Marco Ilaria. It's Sonoma, so wine is always provided with the meal.

As a new grandfather I never thought I'd start playing a sport that gave me the opportunity to play with a mix of world class players and enjoy first class meals. On any given day there's usually a dozen or more people playing.

One day I couldn't toss a boule close to anything I aimed at. When I showed frustration one of the other players graciously said: "It happens to all of us. Look at it this way – some days Steph Curry has off games." That was just what I needed to hear!

Now Petanque – the game I never heard of – is one of the joys in my life. Take me out to the boule game!