

# Marbles: Where Made; Terms of the Games; Different Games; How to Acquire Skill

by Alfred Rochefort

Each season has its own particular work for the farmer, and he does his work without direction from or consultation with his neighbors or any one else. Each season has its own particular games for the young folks, and they take to them without any suggestion from outsiders, just as young ducks take to water, without any instructions from the mother bird. The seasons in the south temperate zone are just the opposite to those in the north. Some years ago I spent the months of July and August in New Zealand, and great was my surprise to find the boys down at Dunedin snowballing on the Fourth of July, while the sleigh-bells made music through the streets. In the following October, which is the spring month in Victoria, Australia, I found the youngsters of Melbourne playing marbles, just as the boys in New York had been doing when I left it the previous May.

## MARBLES

We have reason to believe that the first marbles were fashioned from pebbles on the ocean's shore, or ground into roundness by the action of river currents. We do not know when or where marbles originated, but of the antiquity of the game we are very sure. Egyptian boys played marbles before the days of Moses, and marbles are among the treasures found buried in the ruins of Pompeii, which you will remember was destroyed by an eruption of lava from Vesuvius in the first century of the Christian era. To-day marbles are played in every civilized land under the sun, and with slight differences, the method of shooting and the games are practically the same.

Germans are the greatest toy and game-makers in the world, and so we should not be surprised to learn that that great country not only produces the most marbles, but also the very best. From Germany we get the finest "agates," the beauty and value of which every lover of the game knows. The more common marbles are made in Saxony, of a fine kind of white limestone, which is practically a variety of the building material known as "marble," and from which the name is derived. Broken into small pieces, and the irregular bits placed between two grooved grinders, the lower one being stone and the upper wood, power is applied, and after much rotating the spheres are turned out, hundreds at a time, and these are afterwards sorted and polished.

Glass marbles, some of which are imitation agates, are cast in moulds that close so perfectly that the place where they join cannot be seen in the finished product. China marbles are made from pottery-clay, and after being joined are baked, and sometimes they are painted. The small gray, brown or black marbles, usually called "commies," are little balls of clay, baked and glazed. These, being the cheapest, are the most numerous, and are usually the objects of attack, and so change owners the oftenest.

## NAMES OF MARBLES AND PLAY TERMS

While the names of marbles and the terms of the game may vary slightly in different parts of the United States, they are in the main so much alike that the following will be understood by all boys throughout the land:

The *Taw* or *Shooter* is the marble used for shooting.

The *Taw Line*, or *Scratch*, is a line drawn for a starting point in the game.

*Ducks* are marbles to be shot at.

*Dubs*, an abbreviation of "doubles," means that you get all the marbles knocked out with one shot.

*Fen Dubs*, an abbreviation of "defend doubles," is shouted by an opponent before the play, and means that you must put back all but one marble.

*Lofting* means shooting through the air, so that your taw does not touch the earth till it hits the object aimed at or a point near it.

*Knuckling Down* means resting the knuckles on the ground while shooting.

*Histing* or *Hoisting* is holding some distance above the ground. It is not permitted in Bull Ring or in Meg-on-a-string.

*Roundsters* means taking a new position to avoid an obstruction. It is not allowed in Bull Ring.

*Sidings* means moving your taw from one side to the other in a straight line when about to shoot. It is barred in Bull Ring.

*Burying* is when the taw, if in a good spot, is forced into the ground with the heel of the shoe. This is seldom allowed; "Fen buryings" being the accepted law of experts. *Laying* means placing the marbles in the ring.

*Clearances* means the removal of all obstructions between the players and the ducks. *Sneaking* means shooting for a position.

*Babying* is shooting so as not to send the taw too far. Good players often do this so as to secure a position from which they can "skin the ring."

*Dabsters* are little squares of cloth or skin laid under the knuckles when playing to keep them from being cut by constant contact with the hard ground.

*Marble Bag* saves pockets and explains itself.

According to quality, marbles are known as "agates," "crystals," "chinas," "alleys," "potteries," and "commies," or the cheapest and least prized.

The three great essentials of the game are the boys, the marbles, and suitable ground.

The marble is shot from the hollow of the crooked index finger, and projected by the thumb. Good shooting is often done in this way, but the most expert shots place the marble on the point of the index finger, and project it with a firmer grip of the thumb. This method is more difficult to acquire, but it pays as does everything that requires practice and effort. A good player, as in billiards, can make his taw carom for position, or he can make it remain stationary, while the marble struck shoots away in a

straight line.

## **SOME GOOD GAMES**

A boy can practice the above, and I would advise him to do so, but it takes at least two boys to make a game—just as it takes two to make a quarrel, and you must never be one of the latter. Just here let me say that the boy who loses his temper, or who has not the manhood to accept defeat in the right spirit, does not make a desirable friend or playmate, for if he cannot conquer himself he is unfit to contest in the sports of youth or in the business of maturer years.

### **FAT**

Fat is one of our oldest and simplest marble games. It is played in this way: Make a ring eighteen inches or two feet in diameter; ten feet back draw or scratch a taw line to shoot from. If four boys are playing, each places a marble, as indicated, or if there are more players the marbles are placed at equal distances about the ring. The order of the play having been decided on, by shooting or rolling towards the taw line, the nearness to which decides the question, number one shoots for the ring, and if he knocks out a marble, he shoots again from where his taw rests, and so keeps on until he has missed. Number two knuckles down at the taw line and shoots, as did number one. If the first taw is within range, he can shoot at that, and if he hits it, then number one must hand number two all the ducks he has knocked from the ring. If number two can hit number one's taw again, then number one is killed, and must retire from that game.

When number two misses, the next in order shoots, either at the ring or at the line taw, and so the game proceeds till all the marbles are knocked out, or all but the last player are killed. In the second game, the first man killed is the last to shoot, and so they take turns in the order of their defeat. This game is the more fascinating for its uncertainty, for often the last player knocks out the taw of one who so far has been getting all the ducks, and he gets credit for his score.

### **FOLLOWINGS**

Followings can hardly be called a game. It is played by two boys—usually when they have more important business on hand; the first boy shoots in the direction both are traveling; the second follows, and whenever one chances to be hit it counts one for the shooter.

### **KNUCKS**

In this game, one boy, called "Knucks," takes a small marble between his knuckles, then places the clenched hand on the ground. The other player knuckles down at the taw line, four or five feet away, and shoots—he must not roll—at the marble held by the other. Every time the "Knucks" marble is hit, it counts one for the shooter; each time he misses in the three shots, it counts an additional shot for "Knucks" when it comes his turn.

### **THE LONG RING**

About eight or nine feet from the taw line make an elongated ring, composed of two sections of a circle, crossing each other. Draw a circle down the center of the long ring, and on this place the marbles. If there are only two players, then each lays a duck at the intersection of the curves. Each additional player adds a duck to the line.

Where there are only two players, the first is sure to "sneak," that is, to roll his taw so that it will rest near one of the marbles in the ring. If number two hits number one, and so kills him, he wins the game, but if there are more than two in the game, number one is put out. Number two has another shot, from the place where his taw rests, at the ducks in the ring, and he keeps on till he misses. So the game is kept up till all the ducks are knocked from the ring. If it is agreed in advance, each player may lay more than one duck in the ring. In this game the killed are not dead, if there are more than two players. They can play when the turn comes, but it must always be from the taw line.

## **THE BULL RING**

This is one of the oldest and best games. The ring should be from four to ten feet in diameter. The ducks are placed in the form of a cross, in the middle of the ring, the number each is to "whack up" being agreed upon in advance. The order of play is usually decided on by knuckling down and rolling for the opposite side of the ring. The first player "lofts" at the ducks. He must drive the marble outside the ring for a win. If his own taw goes outside, the successful player can come back to the ring edge for his next shot. If it is a miss and the taw goes outside the ring, it must be replaced inside at the point of exit. When a taw is struck the owner is "dead" for that game, and the successful player keeps on shooting till he misses.

When two or more ducks are knocked out of the ring, the player is entitled to raise his score by that number, provided he shouts "Dubs" before the others cry "Fen dubs." If a player is caught "hunching," that is, pushing his fist beyond the line while shooting, and makes a hit, he must replace the marble and shoot over again. "Histings" and the use of "bowlers" are barred in the bull ring.

"Sneaking," that is, shooting the taw so that it will rest near the middle of the ring, is allowed. If this taw is not hit, it may be able to skin the ring when its turn comes. A dead man, when his turn comes, and there are enough ducks remaining to warrant the risk, may re-enter the game by placing in the ring twice as many marbles as were at first required, and an additional duck near the edge of the ring; on this duck he caroms so as to send it out, then if his taw is in a good place, he may come out ahead.

## **DUCK-IN-A-HOLE**

Make three shallow holes, and about ten feet away draw the taw line. The holes are three feet apart. The object of each player is to shoot his taw so that it will enter and stay in the first hole. If he succeeds, he is allowed to place his thumb on the far edge of the first hole, and using his hand as a pair of dinders, by a twist of the wrist he marks with his longest finger a curved line on the ground. This is called "taking a span." From the span line he shoots at the second hole, and if successful continues on to the third. If this is won, he takes a span backward for the middle hole. If he reaches the first hole, he repeats it over, but this time he is entitled to two spans. The third time, if there is no miss, he can take three spans, and if he succeeds, he becomes a "King Duck," and takes four spans.

If the first player misses, and the second player rolls into the first hole, he takes a span and shoots—if it is near—at the first taw, and if he hits, he can place his taw in the second hole, and so on till he misses. When number one's turn comes, he must shoot from the spot where his taw rests.

In this game the first king has a great advantage because of his four spans. Each time a player hits another, he scores one point, and the hit loses one. By the time all have become King Ducks the game is over, or it may be decided in advance that when one has made five or ten points, the game shall

end.

## **MEG-IN-A-HOLE**

Meg-in-a-Hole differs from the foregoing game, in the fact that there is no taw line. The player shoots from one end at the middle hole. If he succeeds, he is entitled to a span, and he keeps on as before till he becomes a king. Before this, he can take but one span in any direction, but as a king, he can take one foot measure—his own foot—and a span from the first hole; two feet and a span from the second hole, and three feet and a span from the third hole. This gives him a great advantage, and if there is no rival king he is "Monarch of all he surveys." If there is a second king, the first one assigns him the first hole to guard, because from this he can take only one foot and a span. When all become kings, or the points agreed on are won, the game is over.

## **SQUARE RING**

A "Square Ring" sounds odd, but such things go in playing marbles. The square may be of any size, but four feet is the best. The taw line must be from twenty to thirty feet away. Before a player can win the game he must first kill all the others. Perhaps that is why it is sometimes called "Injun."

The first player is at a great disadvantage, for if he knocks out a duck he must replace it, and if his taw stops inside the ring he has killed himself, and is out of the game. The best way is not to knuckle down but to toss for a good position near the ring. The second player, for obvious reasons, must keep away as far as possible from the first, so he shoots through the ring with force, hoping to get a duck on the way, for he does not have to replace it. He can take the duck back to taw and holding it in his left hand shoot at it so as to send his own taw close to number one, which he can then kill.

If number two misses, number three pitches his marble off to one side, and so the game goes on, each player guarding his own taw and trying to kill his rivals. Knocking out ducks gives the privilege just described, after which the duck is replaced.

Source:

Rochefort, Alfred. "Marbles." *Healthful Sports for Boys*. Electronic.