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MAN WITH A MALLET

Jerry Stark gave up a perfectly good job to pursue an unlikely dream. The dream has become a reality. By Steven Beschloss. Photographs by Ramin Rahimian.



Pro croquet player Jerry Stark teaches the finer points of the game to more than 3,000 guests each year at Meadowood.



W

When Jerry Stark was 28, he had been working on the General Motors assembly line in Kansas City, Kansas, for four years. The job was *not* resembling anything like a long-term plan, and Stark was unhappy. "I had no desire to work on the assembly line for the rest of my life," he says. "It was just a job. I wanted something different."

But Stark, who sports a six-inch-long red goatee, is not the kind of guy who would

pick just any new gig — or the kind who would find his path to happiness in a typical place. He found it in a Kansas City backyard, at a croquet tournament with 200 people and 50 kegs of beer. "I had a blast," says the six-foot-one former high school football player, laughing. "With a bunch of buddies, we started playing every weekend. That sort of hooked me."

And then one day, a friend showed up with a croquet magazine complete with eye-opening stories about fancy custom-made mallets and well-tended grass courts in Phoenix. "I just thought, 'Wow, there's real croquet out there,'" he says. So he took a two-week trip to Phoenix, and after plenty of play at the Arizona Croquet Club, he returned home with a plan. "It took me a year to sell my house, quit my job, and move to Phoenix. My family and friends — they all thought I was crazy. But I wanted to go and play real croquet. The bug just got me," he says.

Not exactly a smart career move for a headstrong young man, you say? ("I was 28," Stark says. "Nobody could really tell me what to do.") Well, in fact, it was — Stark became a professional croquet player.

Now 54 and clad in all white, he shrugs his shoulders and smiles. "Yeah, I like to be different," says Stark from the grounds of Meadowood, an elegant Napa Valley resort where he's been the resident pro for the past two decades. He may not have been the first autoworker to take his job and shove it, but he's surely the only one who has found a new life in croquet. And as congenial a fellow as Stark may be (one friend calls him a gentle giant), he's taken the game by storm. He's currently the seventh top-ranked player in the United States and is ranked 56th in the world. He has won five national titles and has even earned a spot in the United States Croquet Association's Hall of Fame.

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CROQUET



If You Go ...

STAY: Meadowood (www.meadowood.com) is an elegant Napa Valley resort with 85 gable-roofed cottages and suites tucked into the bucolic woods of St. Helena, California. The luxury hotel, set on a 250-acre estate, offers guests two tournament-level croquet courts and lessons from pro Jerry Stark, fine dining, two swimming pools, seven tennis courts, a nine-hole golf course, four miles of hiking trails, and a fully-equipped spa and fitness center. (Prices for weekdays and weekends for August through November range from \$575 to \$700 for a studio to \$1,900 to \$2,150 for a hillside-terrace one-bedroom suite. The nearest airports are in San Francisco, Oakland, and Sacramento.)

EAT: The Restaurant at Meadowood (www.meadowood.com), destination dining for Meadowood Resort guests as well as for Bay Area residents, is an intimate and artful affair headed by Michelin-starred chef Christopher Kostow. The impressive haute cuisine — how about poached ocean trout cured with pine and served with baby artichokes and olive-oil ice cream? — draws on fresh ingredients from nearby gardens, and its courses are paired with fine local and international wines.

SHOP: While visitors can pick from a vast list of nearby wineries, they should include Napa's Oxbow Public Market (www.oxbowpublicmarket.com) on their itineraries. The artisanal Oxbow offers fresh produce and restaurants as well as shops selling wine, cheese, spices, baked goods, seafood, and more.

The game we've all played with bent wire wickets and chipped balls in lumpy backyards? Well, not exactly. There's that version, which Stark calls the kids' game. Then there's the adult version, which is played on

a regulation court (105 feet by 84 feet with a perfectly manicured grass surface), uses sturdy metal wickets and pricey custom mallets, and has precise rules for both U.S. and international play. The game basics include scoring 26 points by hitting two one-pound balls clockwise through a series of six wickets and back again before pegging out. This is the game that has changed Stark's life and has sent him around the globe to compete against some of the best players from England, Australia, New Zealand, and South Africa.

Stark has worked hard to get to this point. He admits somewhat sheepishly that he played croquet nonstop during his first six months in Arizona and didn't even think about finding a job. His girlfriend, who eventually joined him from Kansas City and became his wife, had her doubts. "But I knew he had a passion for it and it was something he had to do," says Donna Stark, who also recalls that Jerry and his hometown buddies would sometimes even play croquet in the snow. "It's like I got a flu that just never went away," adds Jerry Stark. "I guess it's the competitiveness of it."

To get a handle on Stark's curious obsession, consider that in more than 20 years of tournament play, he's won an estimated grand total of \$16,000 in prize money. Croquet is not exactly a road to riches; this is a game you play for the love of it. For the first several years in Phoenix, Stark tried working different jobs to pay his bills, including one as a sales rep for a paint company and another selling signs. How did those work out? "I'm not a salesman," Stark says, laughing.

But even when he lacked a job that fueled his passion, Stark didn't lose his focus. In 1984, after about a year in Phoenix, he was invited to participate in a top tournament in the wine country of Santa Rosa, California, with leading players from England, Australia, and New Zealand. He didn't do that well, he says, but he got a taste of the high level of international competition. Over the next few years, Stark began to sharpen his game and was eventually selected for the U.S. team by the United States Croquet Association (USCA) to play internationally. Gradually, by making trips to England and around the United States, Stark grew his reputation. "He's such a good strategist and tactician," says Rory Kelley, one of Stark's

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CROQUET

former employers and a ranked player who credits Stark with teaching him world-class croquet. "He has an overall understanding of the game — and a true-blue love of it."

Then, in 1989, Stark got the call of a lifetime. Meadowood owner Bill Harlan, who had built two pristine regulation courts framed by a stone fence and by towering redwoods and firs, was looking for an assistant croquet pro for his resort. Stark did not hesitate, even though it still seemed crazy to his wife. "My wife thought I was nuts when I told her I was moving from Phoenix for this," he recalls. Says Donna in self-defense: "It amazed me that he could make a living at it." Still, how many times does a croquet player get an offer like this? Resident pros at North Carolina's Pinehurst Resort and at the National Croquet Center in West Palm Beach, Florida, are two of his counterparts in America. "I loved it [from the beginning]," Stark says of the job. "I didn't feel like I ever wanted to go do anything else."

Twenty years later, Stark is still Meadowood's pro, teaching the finer points of croquet to more than 3,000 guests a year and as many as 32 players at a time. It's a civilized scene along this forested California hillside dotted with wooden cottages: The tones are hushed, the clothes all white, and you can hear the *click-click* of the balls as they roll and collide on the finely cut lawn.

In a pastoral yet cultivated setting like this, it's easy to imagine the game's nineteenth-century European origins: Croquet first became popular in England and then spread to other English-speaking nations. The United States didn't really join croquet's grand history until 1977, when the United States Croquet Association was formed. It was then that U.S. players graduated from the simple backyard game to the six-wicket tournament-style game. Today, the USCA includes some 300 member clubs and 3,000 member players.

On this cool Napa Valley day under a crystal-blue sky, Stark hands out equipment and tells a group of 30 guests that the mallets weigh three pounds and the balls — black, blue, red, and yellow — are each one pound. He shows them how to grip and swing the mallet. He sends them onto the court for a few minutes to practice hitting; then, he calls them back with this question: "So, does everybody have a grip?" Stark likes to joke with and entertain his groups,

even as he looks to add a few converts to the game. "It's fun to do something you have a passion for," he tells me later.

As busy as Stark is at Meadowood, he hasn't lost his zeal for serious competitive play — or his instinct for the jugular. Nicknamed the Barbarian — he swears he got the name from a Swiss competitor's comments on his appetite for meat and potatoes — Stark is particularly proud of a long-shot gamble he took in 1989, which resulted in his hitting the peg dead center from 60 feet away to help his American team capture a match during that world championship (final score: 26–25). In 2005, he won croquet's U.S. Open by jumping his ball over the wicket and hitting the peg, which was about 30 feet away. "I guess you could say I'm aggressive," he says. "I just felt like I could do it. Sometimes, you just feel you're in the right zone."

The day after we meet at Meadowood, Stark is leaving for a tournament in Florida, one of half a dozen or so events he participates in each year. The beauty of the game is making the balls do what you want them to do. "A lot of players wait around for another player to make an error. I usually attack at the first opportunity. I don't worry about missing. I just think about the positive side — what I'm going to do to finish off [my opponent]."

Stark explains that the ethics of the game are part of what appeals to him most. Even though there are third-party referees who watch, judge shots, and settle disputes, the players are the main referees. But don't think croquet's civilized side softens Stark's edge. "For me, it's a moral game, but I'm going to do this to you," Stark says, grinding his thumb down. "I don't want you to score any points. When I shake hands at the beginning, I say, 'Have a good game,' because I want to beat you when you play your best. That's why it's fun to play the top foreign guys."

Despite his success, Stark is still clear about his goals. He'd like to become one of the top 10 players in the world. He'd like to be on the U.S. team that finally wins the MacRobertson Shield, essentially croquet's World Series team event. (The U.S. has never placed better than third in five tries since 1993.) And he yearns to beat the world's three leading players at the finals of a major event: Robert Fulford and Chris Clarke of

England and Reg Bamford of South Africa. Is time running out for the 50-something Stark? He smiles and notes that one of the world's ranking players is 75.

But Stark is not the kind of man who dwells on what he hasn't achieved. I ask him if he considers himself lucky. "Oh boy!" he says. "Thinking of how things could have turned out? I have friends who worked on

the assembly line. They haven't gotten to do anything. This has allowed me to do a lot."

Yes, in a world full of people who only dream about doing what they love, Jerry Stark — croquet player, resident pro, Hall of Famer, world traveler — is a lucky man. **AW**

STEVEN BESCHLOSS frequently writes about the arts, travel, and international affairs. His work has appeared in the *New York Times*, the *New Republic*, the *Village Voice*, *TV Guide*, and the *Wall Street Journal*.

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