

# History and Rules for Medieval Ground and Table Billiards

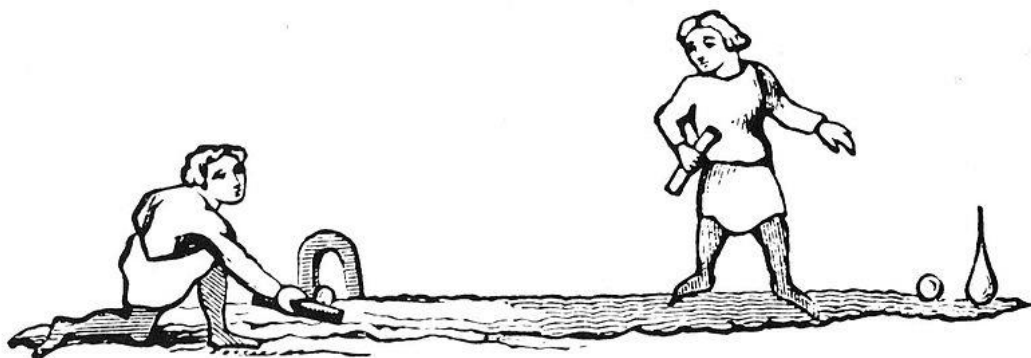
by THL Aurddeilen-ap-Robet

## A Brief History of the Game

The Modern game of Billiards (originally called "Port and King") is generally regarded to have evolved into an indoor game from outdoor stick-and-ball lawn games such as Jeu de mail, Paille-maille, Trucco, Croquet, Golf, and the stick-less game of Bocce.

The first literary mention of a form of the word "billiards" appears in Edmund Spenser's *Mother Hubbard's Tale* in 1591, where he speaks of "*all thriftless games that may be found ... with dice, with cards, with billiards*". The word "billiard" may have evolved from the French word *billart* or *billette*, meaning "stick", in reference to the *mace*, an implement similar to a golf club. The term billiard may have also originated from the French word *bille*, meaning "ball".

A form of billiards was played outdoors in the 1340s, and was reminiscent of croquet in that it used hoops and pins. King Louis XI of France had the first known indoor billiard table constructed in the 15<sup>th</sup> Century. Louis XIV further refined and popularized the game, and it swiftly spread amongst the French nobility. While the game had long been played on the ground, this version appears to have died out in the 17th century, in favor of croquet, golf, and various bowling games.



**Illustration A: Ground Billiards ca 1300**

## **Billiards Timeline 11<sup>th</sup> thru 17<sup>th</sup> Century**

Originally compiled by William Hendricks, 1974, and expanded by Michael R. Burch, 2010

**1099:** According to Michael Phelan in *The Game of Billiards*, the sport was introduced to Europe by Knights Templar returning from the First Crusade.

**1164:** At this time the word *bille* is being used to refer to medieval ball and stick games; *billet* means "stick" and *bille* means "ball." Or billiard may be a compound word, *bille* + *art*, meaning something like "ball art" or "ball artistry."

**1300:** Around this time medieval illustrations depict "ground billiards," a lawn game related to croquet and golf.

**1470: Records show that King Louis XI of France purchased a billiard table; it had a single hole at the center, like an indoor putting green.**

A "mace" was employed to push the balls. It was a crooked stick with a sizeable head, like a golf club, and a slender cue ("tail").

Dr. Samuel Johnson mentioned gambling at billiards by Fortunio, an Italian humanist (1470-1517).

Since Charles Cotton, who wrote the first English book about gaming, said that billiards originated in Italy, this seems possible.

**1500: The Manor of the Moor, which hosted Henry VIII and Edward VI, had a "billet bourde covered with greene cloth."**

The manor was owned by Cardinal Thomas Woosley (aka Woosley), so perhaps Woosley and Henry played billiards together.

The royal inventory was taken in 1547; however, it is not known when the table was installed, so the date above is a guess.

**1514:** "A large table for the game of billiards covered in green cloth" is listed among the possessions of a French duchess.

**1551:** During the reign of Henry III (1551-1589) of France, billiards comes to be called the "noble game."

**1560:** The invention of the modern form of billiards has been attributed to the French artist Henrique De Vigne during the reign of Charles IX.

**1564:** Shakespeare (1564-1616) makes numerous references to billiards in his plays. (Phelan)

**1565:** Billiards is introduced to North America by a Spanish family living in St. Augustine, Florida, according to Frank G. Menke.

**1578:** Billiard tables are licensed in Holland by the Lombards.

**1587: Mary, Queen of Scots, complains that her captors have deprived her of her billiard table at Fotheringay Castle, shortly before her beheading.**

Her letter to the Archbishop of Glasgow was written the evening before her death.

Having been married to the Dauphin of France, she may have been introduced to the game during her stay in Paris. Her lady-in-waiting reported that Mary's headless body was wrapped in the cloth from the table.

Around this time Robert Dudley, the Earl of Leicester and a favorite of Mary's nemesis, Queen Elizabeth I, also owns a billiard table.

**1588:** The first known reference to ivory billiard balls appears in an inventory of the possessions of the Duke of Norfolk.

Howard House contained a "billyard bord coered with a greene cloth [with] three billyard sticks and 11 balls of yvery."

**1591: The first literary reference to billiards (spelled "balyards") appears in the poet Edmund Spenser's *Mother Hubbard's Tale*. Spenser describes billiards as "a thriftless game."**

**1598: The modern spelling "billiard" appears in 1598, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*.**

This is probably a reference to the "truccare" and "trucco" entries in John Florio's Italian-English *Worlde of Wordes*, published in 1598.

These were games related to billiards and in their definitions Florio mentioned billiards with the modern spelling.

At this time the pockets are called "hazards" and one's cue ball going in the hazard was like one's golf ball going in the hazard: very bad!

**1599: A biography of St. John Berchmans (1599-1621) claims that "If anyone asked him to play at trucco or piastrelle, he joined at once."**

Trucco (also called "trucks") was a game similar to billiards, played on a table with ivory balls and shooting sticks.

**1605:** King James I of England orders a table to be made by "Henry Waller, our joyner," perhaps the first builder of English billiard tables.

**1609:** In Shakespeare's *Anthony and Cleopatra*, Cleopatra says to her handmaiden: "Let's to billiards. Come, Charmain."

**1610:** King Louis XIII (1610-1643) plays billiards.

**1611:** Cotsgrave mentions billiards, spelling it "billyards."

**1616:** The poet/playwright Ben Jonson mentions the smoothness of a billiard ball in his play *The Devil Is an Ass*.

**1617:** Young Louis XIII stands on a billiard table to be heard as the Cardinal de Richelieu is dismissed from the royal court.

**1632: John Locke (1632-1704) mentions billiards as something which needs no introduction: "For when the Ball obeys the stroke of a Billiard-stick..."**

David Hume (1711-1776) was another famous philosopher who mentioned billiards when discussing cause and effect.

**1638:** Louis XIV (1638-1715) aka "Louis the Great" and the "Sun King" plays billiards.

**1652:** Michel Chamillard, a court favorite of Louis XIV, is called "a hero at pool" but a "zero in the ministry" in a popular quatrain.

**1654:** Gayton in his notes on *Don Quixote* mentions billiards, which was being played in taverns.

**1665:** The first known book containing instructions for billiards, *La Maison de Jeux Academiques*, is published in Paris.

Samuel Pepys mentions billiards several times in his diaries.

**1674: The first known English book containing instructions for billiards, Charles Cotton's *The Compleat Gamester*, is published.**

"It is permissible to use the small end of the mace if the ball lies too close to the rail." (A step in the evolution of the pool cue.) At this time the pockets were called "hazards" and were to be avoided, unless you could pocket your opponent's ball. Cotton says that in England there were "few towns of note that hath not a publick Billiard Table. Gambling was a concern, as Cotton cautioned: "Let not a covetous desire of winning another's money engage you to the losing of your own." Players were also warned against gambling with "strangers" (i.e., potential hustlers).

**1676:** In a ballet of cards in a comedy by Thomas Corneille, one of slaves holding the queens' trains represents billiards.

**1677:** John Evelyn mentions that the King's apartment in Ipswich has a billiard table.

**1679: John Evelyn in his diary mentions the Portugal ambassador's billiard table having more "hazards" (pockets) than English tables.**

Evelyn also notes that the Portuguese mostly use the "sharp and small end of the billiard stick" (i.e., the cue rather than the mace).

**1680:** Francois Maximilien Misson, author of *Travels in England, Scotland and Ireland*, mentions billiards in his memoirs.

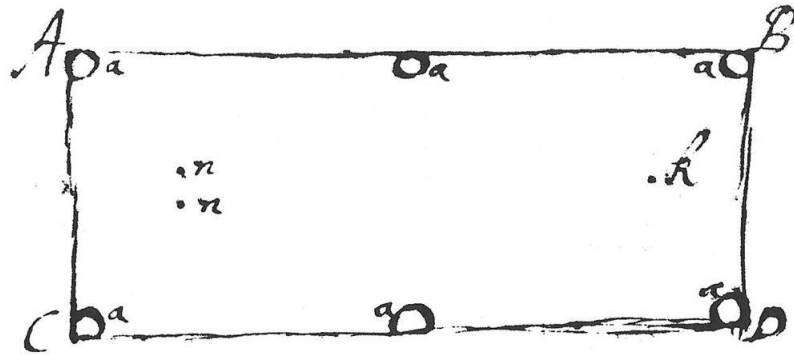
**1689:** In the memoirs of the Duke of St. Simon, a hustler is described who later becomes a Catholic bishop!

**1690:** Billiards may still be played "on specially prepared ground in the garden" according to Furetiere's dictionary.

Louis XIV installs an elaborate billiard room in his palace at Versailles and plays in the light of 26 chandeliers and 16 candelabras.

## The Billiards Table

Mary, Queen of Scots, claimed that her "table de billiard" had been taken away by what would eventually become her executioners, who covered her body with the table's cloth. In 1588, the Duke of Norfolk was documented as owing a *"Billyard board covered with a green cloth, three billyard sticks, and 11 balls of ivory"*. Billiards grew to the extent that by 1727, it was being played in almost every Paris café. In England, the game was developing into a very popular activity for members of the gentry.



**Illustration B: Billard Table as drawn by Francis Willughby in the late 17<sup>th</sup> Century**

The following description of a Billiards Table and its equipment is straight from the pages of the 17<sup>th</sup> Century Book of Games by Francis' Willughby's

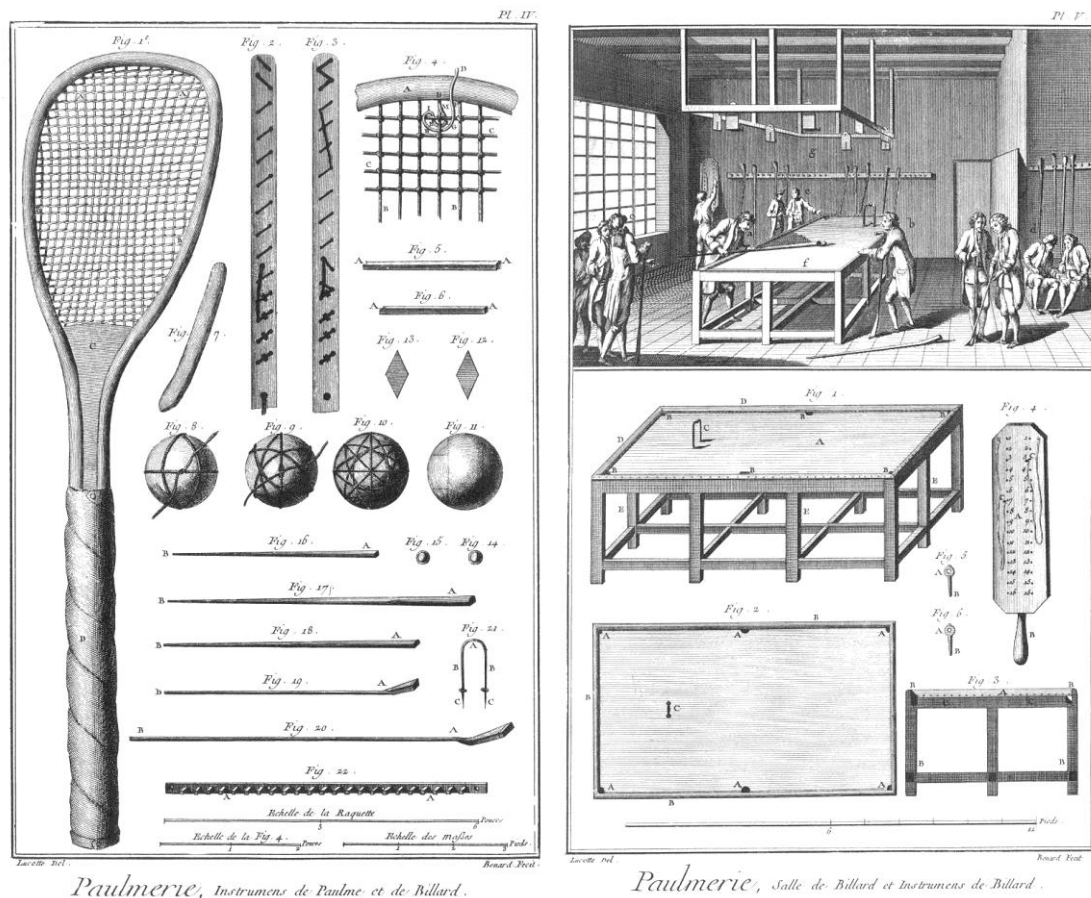
*"The Biliard table A B C D is a long square covered with greene cloth. a a a a a a a are the boxes, hazards or holes the balls fall in, one at each corner & one in the middle of each side. A ledge is raised round the table on the edges of the outside about 2 or 3 inches high, lined with greene cloth & stuft with tow, that the balls may the better reflect. The Biliard staves are made of brasell wood, in number two; about a yard long, bended and squared. One end is thick & tipt with ivory abot an inch square, the other end is thinner & narrower, that it may (if need be) come the easier between the ledge & the ball.*

*k is a naile whereon the King is placed, made of ivory, & is like a Chesseman. The Porte is like a gate shapt into an arch at n n (which are 2 nailes heads wheron they place this porch) made of ivory or heavy wood; the passage thorough is for the ivory balls which are 2 in number & are about an inch diameter a peece, marched with severall distinctions, that they may bee known asunder."*

One item that I must question in Willughby's description is the size of the balls; "an inch in diameter" is about the size of a marble. A ball that size seems considerably undersized in mass, and would be very difficult to strike. Most illustrations from the time period indicate a much larger ball.

## The Billiard Mace or Cue Stick

Initially, the mace was used to push or scoop the balls, rather than strike them. By 1670, the thin “Butt or Cue” end of the mace began to be used not only for shots against the cushion (which itself was originally only there as a preventative method to stop balls from rolling off), but players increasingly preferred it for other shots as well. The “Cue” as it is known today was finally developed by about 1800. The term “Cue” itself comes from *queue*, the French word for a tail. This refers to the early practice of using the tail of the mace to strike the ball when it lay against a *rail or cushion*.



**Illustration C: Craftsman Plates for Billiards Equipment, ca 1771**

The great demand for tables and other equipment was initially met in Europe by John Thurston and other furniture makers of the era. The early balls, ports, and kingpins were made from wood and clay, but the wealthy preferred to use ivory.



Illustration D: Ground Billiards, ca 1480

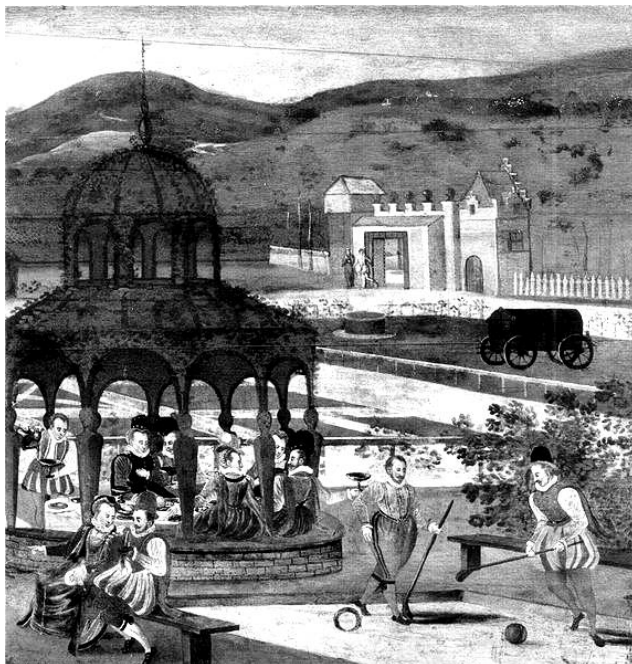


Illustration E: Trucco – Early 17<sup>th</sup> Century

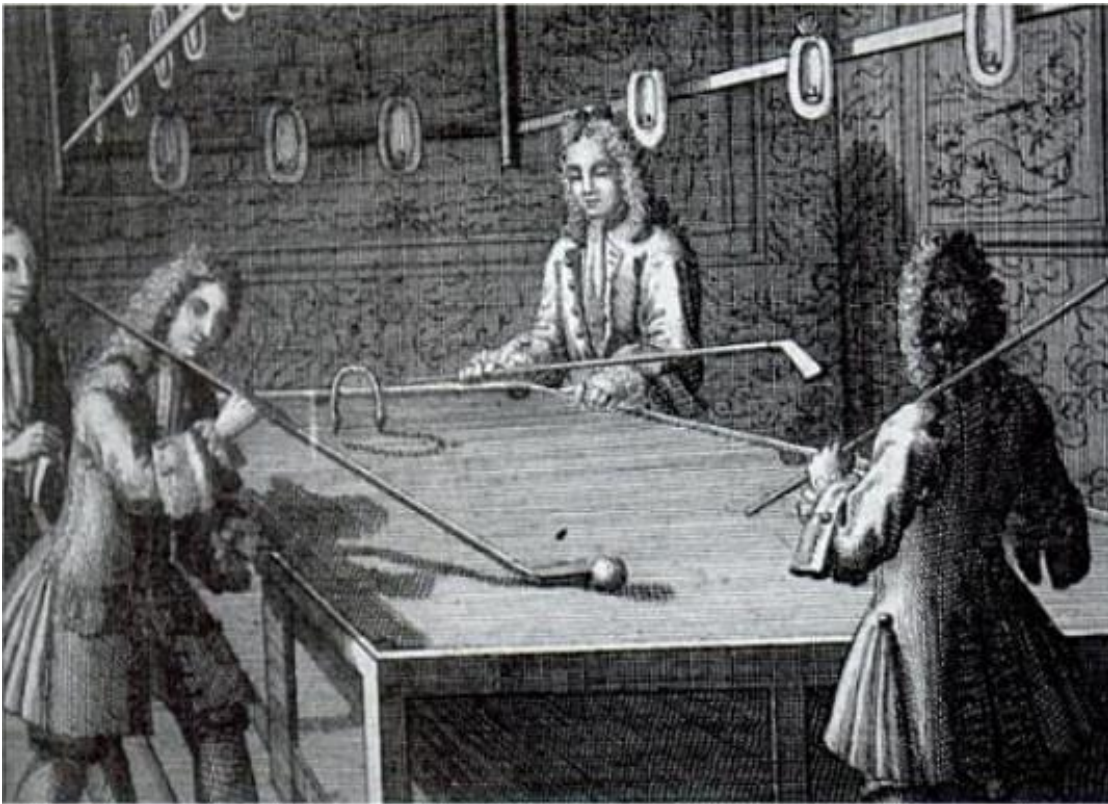


Illustration F: Table Billiards, ca 1674





**Illustration G: Ground Billiards, ca 1650**



**Illustration H: Table Billiards – 18<sup>th</sup> Century**



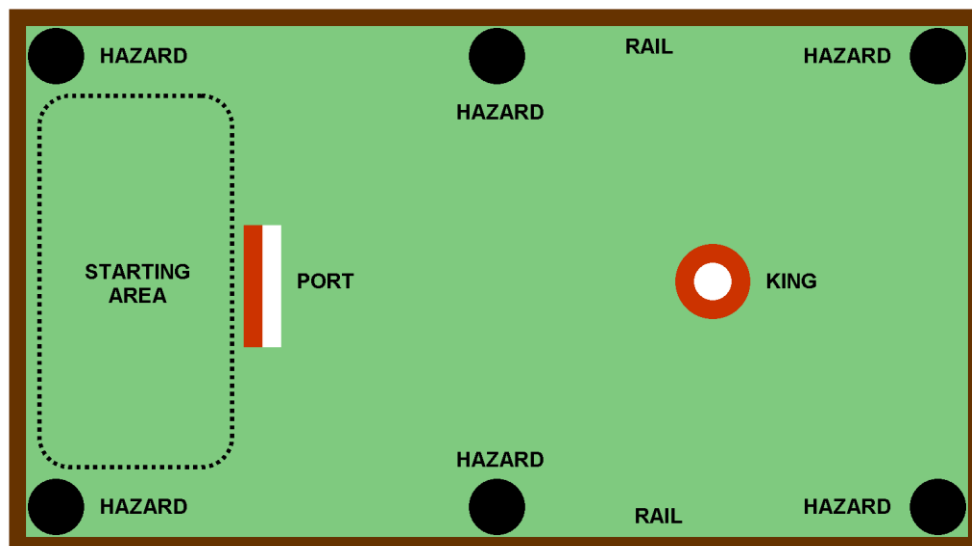
# Rules of Billiards a Reconstruction by THL Aurddeilen-ap-Robet

## 1. Playing Surface for Table Billiards

Medieval and Renaissance sources do not specify the size of the playing area for either Ground or Table Billiards. However, I think we can safely make the assumption that the playing area should be closely related to the average dimensions of a modern billiards table. Therefore for Table Billiards we will assume a level 4' x 8' green cloth covered table with a padded border known as the "Cushion". 3" to 4" diameter hazard holes are placed at each corner, and at the center of each 8' cushion. A fixed rotating hoop known as the Port (large enough for the balls to pass through) is located 2' from a 4' cushion, along the center line of the table. Please note that many tables during the later part of the Renaissance had fixed hoops instead of rotating ones. A free-standing tapered pin known as the King (which typically has a base of 2" to 3", and a height of 6" to 9") is located 2' from the 4' cushion opposite the Port, along the center line of the table. (See Illustration below)

## 2. Playing Surface for Ground Billiards

Using the same 2 to 1 ratio as Table Billiards, and examining the images from the time period, we will simply double the area for Ground Billiards, and assume a level 8' wide x 16' long field with a surrounding wood border known as the "Rail" (typically 3" to 6" in height). 6" to 8" diameter hazard holes are placed at each corner, and at the center of each 16' rail. If holes cannot be dug, then leaving an open gap between the rails that the balls can pass through can serve the same purpose. A fixed rotating hoop known as the Port (large enough for the balls to pass through) is located 4' from an 8' rail, along the center line of the playing field. A free-standing tapered pin known as the King (which typically has a base of 3" to 5" and a height of 15" to 16") is located 4' from the 8' rail opposite the Port, along the center line of the playing field. (See Illustration below)



### **3. Balls, Sticks, and Players**

By the Late 17<sup>th</sup> Century, Table Billiards was typically played between 2 players. However, when examining earlier images of Ground Billiards more than 2 players is not uncommon. In fact, play testing has concluded that 3 to 4 players make for a much more interesting game. Each player uses one ball and one Stick. Balls for Ground Billiards are typically 3" to 4" in diameter, while balls for Table Billiards are typically 2" to 3" in diameter. Sticks for both Ground and Table Billiards vary from 24" to 36" in length, and usually have a mace like head on one end.

### **4. Game Rounds**

The game of Billiards is played through 5 Rounds during the Day (7 Rounds if Odds are given). However, at night the game is played through only 3 Rounds (This is due to the expense of candlelight). In general, Rounds end when the King is knocked down, or all but one player has all been eliminated due to Hazard, or Fault. Please note that the King must be stood upright, and the Port rotated back its starting position before the next round can begin. Refer to Rule 11 concerning "Faults" for other ways to end Rounds.

### **5. Starting a Round**

To begin a Round, each player places their ball anywhere behind the Port. Then in an agreed upon order, each player strikes their ball with a single stroke in such a way as to bring their ball in close proximity to the King without actually knocking it down. Please note that knocking the King down during this initial stroke causes a player to be eliminated from the round. The player who places their ball closest to the King becomes the leader for this Round, followed by the next closest player. Thus for the remainder of the Round, each players now take turns striking their ball as established by their initial proximity to the King. Please note that players may not touch any rail or cushion with their ball on their first stroke, but may do so on any subsequent strokes.

## 6. Passing through the Port

After “Starting a Round”, the contest to “Pass through the Port” begins. The leader makes their attempt first, followed in order by the other players. Please note that is good play to turn the Port with your ball and hinder your adversary from passing through the Port.

## 7. Touching the King

Once a player passes their ball through the Port, they may then strike their ball on their next turn in an attempt to “Touch the King” without knocking it down, and win the Round. **If the same player can then pass through the port a second time before their adversary has passed once, then they may attempt to touch the King again, and win 2 Rounds.** Please note that caution should be taken in attempting this, because knocking the King down at any time causes the player to lose the Round.

## 8. Hazard an Adversary’s Ball

Any time after the first stroke, a player may attempt to “Hazard an Adversary’s Ball”, causing them to be eliminated from the Round. To do so, they must strike an Adversary’s ball with their ball in such a way as to knock it into one of the 6 Hazard holes. Please note that striking an Adversary’s ball is normally a Fault; therefore a player must loudly declare that he intends to strike another player’s ball prior to doing so. If the player **fails** to Hazard his Adversary’s ball, then it is up to the viewing bystanders to decide the true intentions of the Hazard attempt, and whether the Player has committed a Fault in striking his Adversary’s ball.

## 9. King an Adversary’s Ball

Any time after both players have passed their ball through the port, a player may attempt to “King an Adversary’s Ball”, and thus win the Round. To do so, they must strike an Adversary’s ball with their ball in such a way as to cause their Adversary’s ball to strike the King and cause it to fall down. After all, if you are going to bring a King down, it is just good politics to have someone else do it.

## 10. Fornication

**Fornication** results from passing a ball through the back of the Port. Any player who does this is considered a Fornicator, and must pass their ball twice through the front of the Port before they can proceed. Note that the back of the Port is colored black or red, while the front of the Port is colored white. Please note that it is good play to turn the Port with your ball and make your adversary a Fornicator. This can occur when an adversaries ball lies near the Port, and the Port is rotated in such a way as to cause their ball to pass backwards through the Port.

## 11. Faults

The following actions are considered “Faults” and result in various penalties:

- a. Striking a ball in such a way as to cause it to fly over a Rail or Cushion;  
Lose 1 Round.
- b. Playing out of turn; lose 1 Round
- c. Touching an adversary’s ball or stick with any part of your body or stick; lose 1 Round
- d. Accidentally knocking the King down with any part of your body or stick; lose 1 Round
- e. Accidentally removing or causing the Port to rotate with any part of your body or stick;  
Lose 1 Round. Port must be placed back to its original starting position.
- f. Raking a Ball, or striking it twice in succession; lose 1 Round.
- g. Striking an adversary’s ball without declaring an attempt to “Hazard” or “King”; lose 1 Round.  
Accidentally striking another player’s ball while attempting to pass through the Port is not a fault  
Please note that judgment of intent when striking another player’s ball lies with the Bystanders.
- h. Placing a hand, arm, or sleeve on the Table Cloth; lose 1 Round – Table Billiards only.
- i. Bystander making offensive or intrusive comments; lose 2 Pence  
(Thus the historical reference to “adding your two cents”)
- j. Player making offensive or intrusive comments; forfeit the game, and lose 2 Pence.
- k. Damaging the King Pin or any Ball; forfeit the game, and 1 Shilling.
- l. Damaging a stick; forfeit the game, and 5 Shillings.
- m. Damaging a Port; forfeit the game, and 10 Shillings.

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## Illustrations

- A. 1300 Woodcut, Reprinted in Strutt's *Sports and Pastimes of the English People* (1801)
- B. Hand drawing from Francis Willughby's *Book of Games*, 1635-1672
- C. Plates from the Diderot and D'Alembert's *Encyclopedie, ou Dictionnaire Raisonnee des Sciences*, 1778-1779
- D. 1480 woodcut, reprinted in Clare's *Billiards and Snooker Bygones* (1985)
- E. Sotheby's Catalogue #L07123, *Important British Paintings 1500-1850*, November 2007.
- F. Woodcut from Charles Cotton's 1674 book, *The Compleat Gamester*. Reprinted in the introductory history chapter (p.iv) of Joseph Bennett's 1894 book, *Billiards* (publisher T. de la Rue)
- G. 1650 Woodcut - Image in Public Domain
- H. 18<sup>th</sup> Century Plate - Image in Public Domain