

Game Analysis: Road Bowling

References:

My primary source for this game was a friend of mine (also a UMBC student), Kristen Dagenais. I also used the Wikipedia article on the game http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Irish_road_bowling as a reference for some of the terminology.

Road Bowling (or Ból an Bhóthair, as it is called in Irish) is a sport that is played in Ireland on a road that is not currently in use (or has been blocked off for safety concerns). The game of Road Bowling dates back at least several centuries, quite possibly to even earlier times than that, and it is still played today. Often times, Road Bowling is played between several drunken people, adding to the complexity of the game, but making it infinitely more enjoyable to observe (as long as you can dodge the ball, that is). Matches are often times played between two people, but this need not be the case necessarily. It is also very common to have a round of betting that goes on before play starts. If betting is done, it is not the players themselves that are betting, but rather observers. The observers who bet on a player will generally follow that player around, and act sort of like a caddy in golf, giving the player some idea of how to approach their next shot. In actuality, Road Bowling is quite similar to golf, but a lot more fun to watch. The target audience of the game is generally adult males, but there is no strict age or group that plays the game. Many times children will play this game with one another. It is generally not advisable to have children playing seasoned players, as the game of Road Bowling is largely one of physical strength and skill. A

young child would be at a very obvious disadvantage if they were playing against a seasoned veteran.

As mentioned above, Road Bowling is generally played on a deserted road, the longer the better. Players are given the starting point and the finish point for a round before the round starts. When one player is taking their turn, the other player must steer completely clear of them. In this manner, only one player is on the field at a time. Any bettors on the player may be on the field giving advice, but should always stand behind the player. Since Road Bowling is largely a game of strength, it is quite possible for a player who makes a bad throw to have a deflated feeling of self-esteem. This is largely enhanced by the fact that many times players are drunk, and it may be less possible for them to control their emotions. This is especially true for more serious players. In games played for betting, the bettors on the game (who actively do participate in the game, giving advice throughout) will often feel elated or very angered depending on how the player they bet on is doing in the game. Drunkenness also enhances these feelings, of course. Emotions do run quite high during a match, for both the players and the observers.

Road Bowling does not require very many materials to play. The main object needed to play is a ball made of metal that weighs 800 grams. The ball must be slightly smaller than a baseball. Also required is a method to mark the road where the ball lands, such as chalk. The playing field is also a very important part of the game, and generally a small road (not necessarily a straight road) is used. The field can be very long, sometimes more than 1 kilometer. These are generally the only equipment required for play, but of course as reiterated several times above, alcohol is frequently

used as well. The ball used in the game is called either a bowl or a bullet. A match is called a score, and one throw is called a shot. The mark on the road from which a throw takes place is called a butt, passing the line before a throw (which causes the player to have to re-throw and will bring ridicule upon the player) is called breaking butt (pun intended, I think so). Lofting the bowl is throwing the bowl through the air, rather than toward the ground.

The Rules of Road Bowling are fairly straightforward, and are listed below:

1. Prior to the start of the game, a starting line and finishing line is marked on the road in chalk. The starting line acts as the starting point (the butt on the first turn) for all players, and the finish line is of course the goal.
2. Players take turns throwing the bowl down the road (one bowl can be shared by all players, as the bowl is removed from the road after the player throws the bowl).
3. The field ahead of the player throwing the bowl is cleared, traditionally by the player yelling to clear the road (of course, in Irish).
4. The player throws the bowl in an underhand fashion from somewhere behind the butt. Shots are taken with a running start, which puts more momentum behind the bowl.
 - a. If the player breaks butt, they are penalized one throw (their throw does not count).
 - b. The bowl should stay on the road, and it may be that a penalty is assessed against a player who shoots their bowl off of the road (this is not always the case, however).
 - c. A shot can only be lofted when there are sharp turns in the road, otherwise, the bowl should remain in contact with the road for most of its traveling time. If a bowl

is lofted and does not touch the road afterwards, the player is penalized one shot and must re-shoot from the same position on their next turn.

5. Wherever the bowl lands, a mark is made on the road (or wherever on the road the bowl last touches the road) which serves as that player's butt for the next turn.
6. The bowl is then removed from the road, allowing the next player to take their shot.
7. Play of one round is completed when a player passes the finish line on a shot.
 - a. If there are still players waiting to take their shot, they are allowed to take one last shot.
 - b. If multiple players pass the finish line on one turn, then the tie is broken by whichever shot went the farthest past the finish line.

There are no particularly cheap ways to win a match of Road Bowling, except when there are a series of curves in the road. This is when the rule that a lofted bowl must touch the road prevents a player from simply lofting over the whole set of curves in the road. Also, disallowing lofting the bowl for most of the game is another way to prevent cheap wins (shooting the bowl underhand will generally make it travel less distance than lofting it, as friction will slow the bowl's progression).

The only hole in the rules that I see is the fact that lofting the bowl is allowed at all. A very skilled Road Bowling player will have much finer grained control over their shots than a novice, and will be able to judge when a loft is useful (or indeed allowed), and when it would be advisable to just take a simple normal shot. This weakness may allow a seasoned player a huge advantage over someone who is a novice, further increasing the margin of victory. This doesn't particularly make the game any cheaper, but does make things harder for someone just getting into Road Bowling. One major

thing that can make the game much easier or much harder to play is how drunk the player is when he or she is playing. There is a fine line between being drunk enough to fit in with the crowd and being so drunk that it is almost impossible to play. It is strategically advantageous to be less drunk than the other players so that it is easier to judge a shot. As for other tactics for success, getting as large of a running start as the bowl will have much more momentum behind it when it is shot, and will ultimately make it travel much farther down the road. Another bit of advice to make the game easier to play is to always survey out the lane before beginning play. Know where exactly to aim for the bowl to be on a shot, and know when it is advantageous to loft the bowl, rather than simply shooting it. Also, practicing with lofting the bowl in a variety of situations will ultimately make it much easier to make sure the bowl hits the road when lofting it in an actual match.

The game ultimately draws most of its meaning from the social interactions of the players. Although a bad outcome in a match may hurt one of the players' self-esteem temporarily, it will only serve to strengthen the players' friendship later on, especially when everyone involved gathers at the local pub afterward. The game itself really doesn't seem to be so much about winning or losing for the players (it is largely based on winning or losing for the bettors), but more about having as much fun as possible being drunk with buddies. The game strengthens the bonds of friendship amongst the group playing, and between the players and any bettors on them. Although many people may find it pointless or silly to be completely drunk throwing a small ball down a road, once a person experiences this game, they will ultimately see why it is played. Casually observing a game without knowing what exactly is going on will draw at least a few

laughs, especially if the players are completely drunk, but will probably cause the observer to want to try to play the game themselves, further increasing the meaning of the game. All in all, Road Bowling is an amusing sport to play when you have a group of friends that are drunk, an abandoned road, and a desire to show off how manly you are.