

VARIETIES OF BILLIARDS

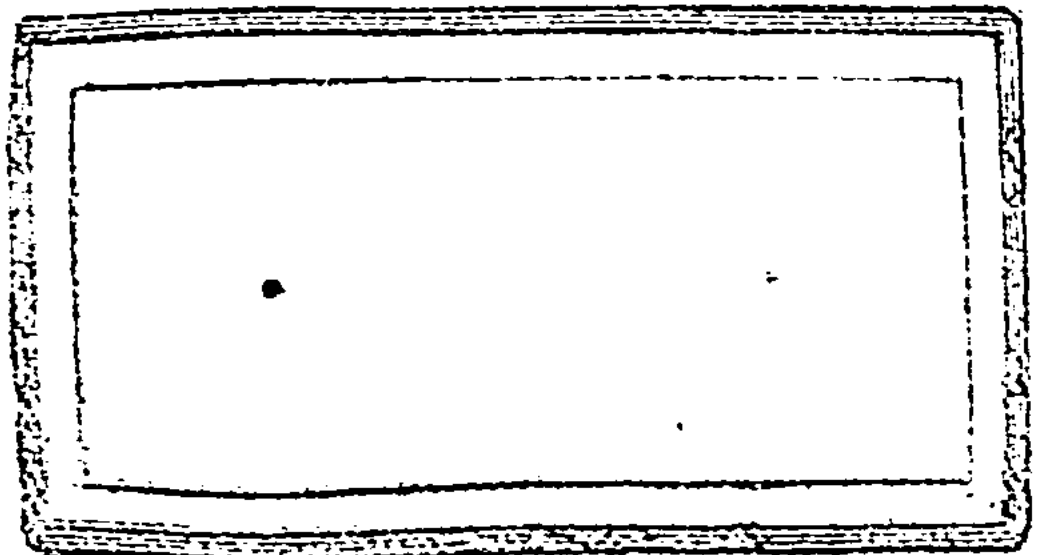
THE GAME TO BE PLAYED AT CHICAGO.

HOW IT DIFFERS FROM OTHER BALK-LINE GAMES—ATTEMPTS TO IMPROVE ON OLD METHODS AND REPRESS NURSING.

Even in professional circles the game that is to be played in the tournament beginning in Chicago to-morrow is but imperfectly understood. This results from its having been called the game of the continuous balk-line, which confounds it with two earlier games whose lines are continuous, not broken, as those of this are in fact. There have been four line games of billiards projected, and diagrams can better illustrate their points of difference or of resemblance than it is possible for type to do. The plan shown in the first diagram is that originally proposed for the three-ball game in 1873, although its drafter had brought it forward in print long before that as an obstacle to a long succession of caroms, such as Melvin Foster's 422 in playing off a tie resulting from the tournament in this City in the Spring of 1869, which "runs," in spite of the prohibition of the push-shot, had been facilitated by the reduction in the size of billiard-tables, as well as by closing up the pockets that formerly existed midway of the length of the table, which in the olden days had six pockets in all, even for carom playing, whereas when Foster made his then phenomenal "run" there were only corner pockets—four in all. Carom playing has for so many years been confined in this country to tables without pockets that most players who have developed during the present decade have a notion that six-pocket tables are a modern invention, designed for 15-ball pool. There are, however, some few localities in the States where pocket tables are still used for carom play, as there are also places in which 15-ball pool is played on tables having only four pockets; and in Mexico it is common to meet with both six-pocket tables and tables of the largest size ever known to this country, viz., 8 feet wide by 12 feet long, measured from the outside of the rail, thus differing from the English table, which measures 6 by 12 in its playing surface, or inside of the rail. It would be a difficult task to trace the changes billiards has undergone in this country during the past half-century, for nowhere else has it changed one-tenth so much, and a brief recapitulation of the vicissitudes that have marked the progress of the game would make an entertaining and instructive article; but at present it is of more moment to render comprehensible the different balk-line games, all of which are of American origin, other leading billiard-playing nations, with the exception of France in substituting the carom table for the six-pocket, having made no material or permanent change in their systems during the past half-century.

The idea of lines on the surface of a billiard-table was not the first introduced for the purpose of rendering nursing more difficult. It having been represented that there was a popular clamor for the repression of nursing, the experts' game, as it was called, was brought forward 13 years ago. Precisely as experts themselves who had any sense knew must be the case, it demonstrated at its first public trial that there was no such popular clamor as had been represented; and in prohibiting nursing, as it did, it prohibited itself, for it was never heard of afterward, no one being more pleased with its fate than its deviser was in secret, for his theory was that the life of billiards consisted not wholly in nursing, but in being made up of all the varieties of play and strokes possible, and was, therefore, dependent in large part upon nursing, subject to a reasonable limitation of long "runs," in order to guard against the possibility of the spectacle being some night presented in a match of one player having the table continuously to himself, while the other should sit with arms folded, as has substantially happened once in this City, once in New-London, Conn., and twice in Chicago. The experts' game was one of four balls, and the players of it in the public match that took place at the Hippotheatron, this City, were Melvin Foster and Joseph Dion. No lines at all were used in connection with it, and yet it was so severe upon nursing that the highest runs of the night amounted to but 23 for the loser and 23 for the winner, who was Dion. The same party who framed this game, which, like the champion's game of 1879, was given a special code of rules of its own, conceived the idea of the continuous balk-line for the four-ball game, mainly to make the 5½ by 11 table or the 5 by 10 as practically difficult to play upon as the 6 by 12 had been. In one sentence, its purpose was in the match games of professionals to make a 5 by 10 table take the place of a 6 by 12. Its first application to the three-ball game was to substitute cushion caroms in place of "the rail." In 1873 there was what is technically known as rail-playing, but it was a plodding, hesitating, clumsy process, much resembling the bungling strokes of the moderately skilled amateur of to-day, who, if allowed to place the balls on "the rail" with his hand, and challenged to make a run of 15, would probably squeeze out that number of caroms one in fashion or another, but would have completely lost the true rail position before he had reached his twelfth shot. His finishing caroms would be somewhat akin to "the rail" as played by experts as far back as 1873—a nursing process without system, style, or finish to it. One of the earliest to exhibit the possibilities of "the rail" in the three-ball game was John Deery, in San Francisco, in 1869-70, but it was Slosson who first began to give it its vast power. Slosson's nursing along the cushion in 1874-5 was performed in a crude, hesitant fashion, reminding the spectator of the way in which Louis Fox played the push-shot "rail" with four balls up to 1855, at the end of which year, having had the championship wrested from him by Deery at Rochester, he threw himself into the Genesee River, where his body remained until the Spring thaws uncovered it. Poor Louis used to play "the rail" of those days with his tongue out, and when the balls got near the middle of the side cushion, up would go his right foot and leg whenever the point of his cue went forward. Yet, while it was not pleasant to look at Fox nursing, there was no more powerful handler of balls *en bloc* than he until John McDewitt came along. It was painful, too, to watch Slosson nurse in 1875. Long as his runs would sometimes prove, it seemed as if he would never be fit for anything else on a billiard-table. Save occasionally when he is essaying to retain and recover complete possession of balls that are slipping away from him and would be completely lost to anybody else, who would have to trust to the chance of bringing them together anew and elsewhere after a series of "drives" around the table, Slosson now nurses with comparative ease and grace, and this he owes indirectly to Sexton, who improved upon rail-playing in 1875-6 and gave style to it. From him Slosson copied, to make it more powerful still in 1878 and succeeding years, he being at this period hot-chased by Schaefer, who, like Slosson, had gradually changed from a close and careful nurse, after his first visit to this City, in 1876, and become an open, bold, and free-handed one, of which latter style Sexton may be set down as the pioneer. Leaving out of consideration the question of strength in nursing, as involving the problem whether Schaefer or Slosson could hold the balls the longer and therefore make the longer run, the former is to-day the best exponent of the Sexton style of playing "the rail," Sexton himself having begun to lose the power to nurse well with the lack of constant practice that followed the opening of his room in the Bowery. He last played "the rail" admirably when he was practicing for his two match games with Schaefer set for the summer of 1875, but which never came off, and since then he has done no nursing even measurably adequate to his reputation as the man who was first to impart an air of artistic impressiveness to rail playing through driving the balls slowly but steadily ahead of him as if he felt that he could never lose them, his every carom being so audible in his click-click, with the occasional click-ell-ell-click of the double "kiss" on the one ball, denoting that the ball the cue-ball had hit first of all had also hit last of all, so as to retain the much needed position.

Referring again to the days of 1873, it may be of interest to explain how it was proposed to substitute "the rail" of that time by cushion caroms. This diagram illustrates the original scheme of the balk-line as designed to be utilized in the three-ball game:

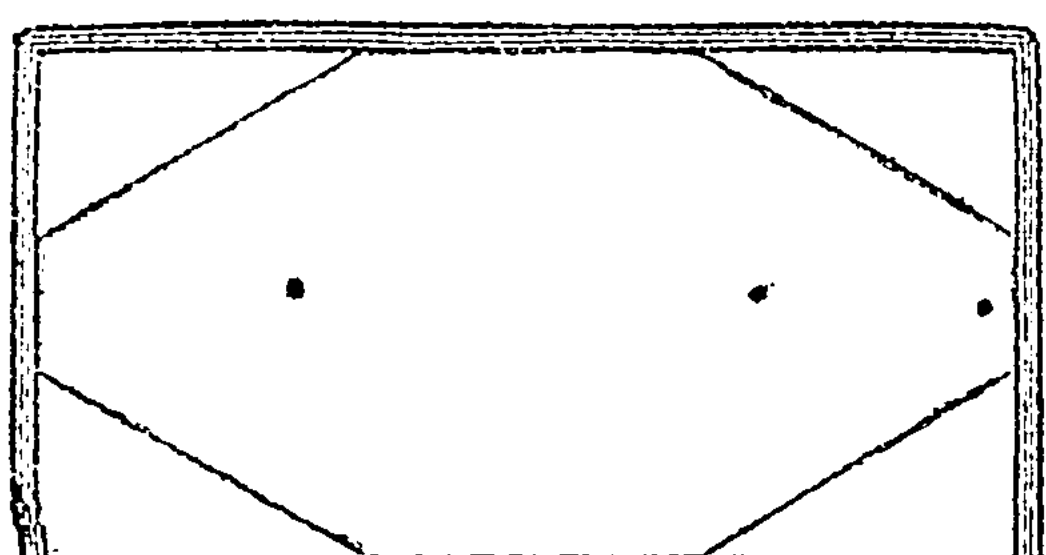


The continuous line was put 12 inches from the cushion, not so much because that distance was then necessary to accomplish the main purpose of the balk as because much of the nursing near the cushions had been done with the aid of the massive stroke, and it was deemed advisable, inasmuch as that stroke was proving a quite costly one to room-keepers through cloths indented and cloths

tern, to discourage its use; and the stroke would quickly fall into disuse if by it no position nearer than 12 inches to the cushion could be commanded. To insure this, and at the same time guard against a succession of nursing caroms by the direct contact of the cue-ball with the object-balls, it was made the rule that whenever the object-balls were both anywhere within the 12-inch space no carom would be valid unless the cue-ball hit a cushion before hitting a ball, or hit a ball and then hit the cushion before hitting the other ball, or directly hit both balls, and then, hitting a cushion, hit either or both object-balls again, the last ordinarily a more difficult feat than caromizing by either of the other methods. Practically, this restriction made the game at least three-fourths cushion caroms, as the other one-fourth would be made up of "draws," "follows," "spreads," "kisses," and the little nursing that can be done on balls in the open table. It is a game cushion-carom enough to suit the most persistent advocate of cushion caroms, with the additional merit of not wholly prohibiting strokes that are quite as difficult and quite as pleasing as any in cushion caroms, thus affording a greater variety than is to be seen in the latter game. The continuous balk-line was never adopted, for the reason that our leading professional players were then all of about the same strength at the ordinary three-ball game of billiards, and no one of them could see any advantage to himself in changing the mode of playing. Self-interest has exerted a more powerful influence than any general desire for the welfare of billiards in subjecting it to the various vicissitudes that have marked its history in this country.

The next repressive game to be made known was one in which the restrictions were not so sweeping as in that of 1873. It was proposed in 1873 for the Centennial tournament in Philadelphia during the following year. As its basis was the same form of continuous balk-line shown in the preceding diagram, it is not necessary to depict it further than to say that it reduced the prohibitory surface about one-half, the line being put 6 inches from the cushion all around; that it dispensed with the cushion-carom feature of its predecessor, and left the player free to make three successive caroms, direct or otherwise, on two object-balls anywhere within the line. This was meant to put a stop to rail playing, which in its crude form had now so developed that the highest run up to 1873 had been doubled, Maurice Daly having in the Spring of 1874 scored 212 in-and-out, off "the rail" and on it, which Sexton outscored by making first 251 and then 287 in the Centennial tournament, thus winning the first prize, \$1,000 of which, it may be stated, was offered by the late Frank Queen, editor of the *Apper*, by way of giving the non-nursing game a trial in public. It was not so tried, nevertheless, and has never been. It was the old game that was played in the Centennial tournament, and hence the runs of 251 and 287. These Slosson surpassed less than a month later by running 311 in a tie game resulting from the tournament in Irving Hall, this City; and the run of 311 was early in the following year eclipsed by Sexton's running 417 in a match of three nights in New-Orleans against Slosson. Early in the succeeding year, in a quasi-public tournament in St. Louis, Schaefer topped this 417 by running 423, which remained high until the Cooper Institute tournament in this City early in 1879, when Slosson made two or three higher runs, the highest being 464, which Schaefer soon obscured by running 630 in a match against Slosson in Chicago. This brought the life of the old game virtually to an end among leading professionals, although Schaefer and Slosson have since played a match at it of several nights' duration, but without improving upon their previous records, and Vignaux and Slosson have also played a match of several nights and 4,000 points at it, both surpassing all prior records at the three-ball game, Vignaux by making 1,339 in one inning and Slosson by making 1,103 in another. This contest took place in Paris early in 1880, and there has since been no public one at the old game between men of high mettle.

The first repressive plan to be actually adopted was that known as the champion's game, and the only explanation of its adoption where other methods had failed is that Slosson and Schaefer had made the pace so hot at the ordinary game that the other players realized that it would be a hopeless task to attempt to keep up with them. The same mode of playing that had been regarded as true billiards so long as a run of 417 was high ceased to be true billiards when 420, 464, and 630 had been made by Schaefer and Slosson; and now all the leading players were in favor of a change of game but these two, who vainly protested against it as an injustice to themselves, which it undoubtedly was, in view of the fact that the other players had shut their eyes to the same need for change during earlier periods in the progress of the game, when some of them, instead of Schaefer and Slosson, were "at the top of the heap." The nature of the new game of 1879 will be apparent after a glance at this diagram:

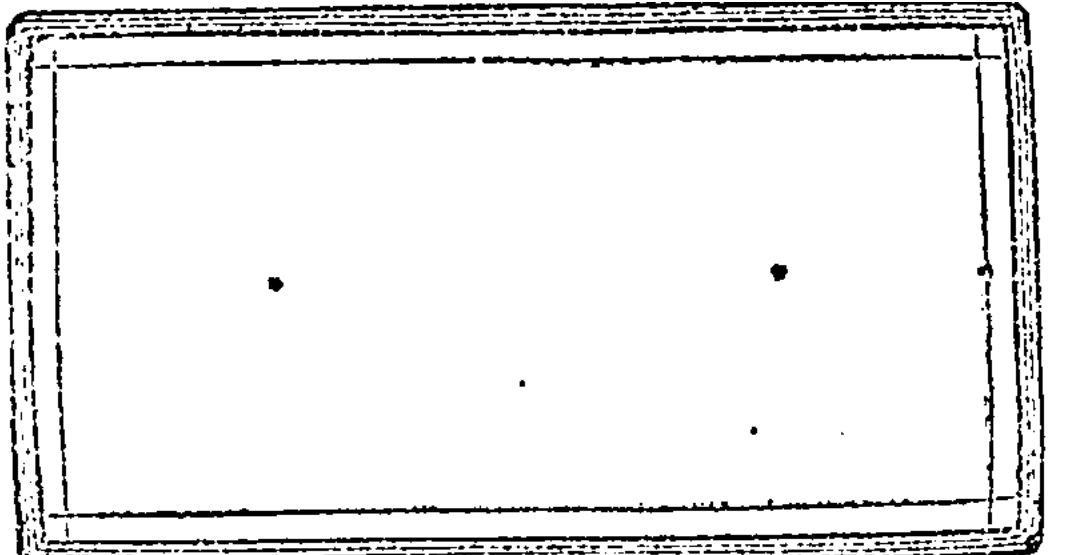


The same non-professional devised it that had conceived the experts' game and the games of the continuous balk-line. It was designed to be a compromise between the straight or unlimited rail game and the other extreme of no rail at all. The theory upon which it is based is that, apart from the fact that balls naturally gravitate toward the corners and rest there in consequence of sudden changes of axis in rebounding from cushion to cushion not far apart when the balls themselves are losing their speed as a consequence of long-continued friction by contact with the cloth of the bed, the striker aims always to bring them there, as being the readiest point at which they can be gathered. The oblique line excludes so much of the corner surface as to render it difficult to bring the balls into good rail-nursing shape after they have been assembled in one corner, and makes it difficult to retain "the rail" in good shape after the opposite corner has been reached in the forward course of the balls. In other words, the idea is to make nursing most difficult where naturally it should be the easiest. The plan also recognized originally that lines on a billiard table, when closely analyzed, are but guides to teach the player how to nurse by suggesting that he follow them closely, and that therefore it is impossible to prevent nursing unless by making it to the direct interest of the player to avoid it. Accordingly, it was a part of the plan that cushion caroms should be encouraged by allowing twice as many points for a carom made by cushions as for one made by the direct or nursing stroke, while what are popularly regarded as brilliant shots, involving four or five or more cushions by a cue-ball swiftly bounding around the table without any reference by the striker to where the balls will ultimately stop, were given twice the value in points that would be scored from a direct carom. This would have increased the duties of the marker, but not more so than the old American game did with its different values for shots, or than the English game increases it, and nothing like so much as the Russian game. It was also a deference to the wishes of the comparatively few who believe that art in billiards begins and ends with cushion caroms. It was a feature of it, moreover, that it rendered it possible for two men totally unlike in style or stroke to play a match together, and for each to have a fair chance to win by the method of play that should be the more to his liking or the better suited to his arm-delivery. It will scarcely be credited that this cushion-carom feature was opposed by Sexton of all players, and it was dropped at once, never having been submitted to the other experts, who naturally would have objected to it because obviously it was eminently suited to the style of Sexton, who based his opposition on the assumption that on general principles Vignaux ought to be a better cushion-carom player than he, although the French player has never, for a reason that involves the important question of style once more, exhibited any special excellence at cushion caroms. With a premium on certain cushion shots, Sexton, in the tournament that followed, would have "won with hands down," as the saying is, whereas without it he merely pulled through, having made neither high run nor high single average, and having made a tie with Slosson for first prize. The fate of this attempt to command cushion caroming has a striking significance in connection not only with the peculiar history of cushion caroms since 1880, but also with the rejection of the original balk-line game, so much of which depended upon cushion caroms. It was another feature of the champion's game project to hold tournaments for the championship yearly, and extend the oblique line a few inches every year, in accordance with the progress our players might show in baffling it. Thus it was designed to establish a veritable school of billiards, with one length of line for the very expert player and a shorter one for the players of second or third grade. An amalgamation of manufacturing interests in 1879 nullified this project. That amalgamation embraced the only firms who were and are in a position to command the players needed to give tournaments, and it may have been observed that there has been no tournament since that of the champion's game of 1879, and even that would not have been held but for promises made before the amalgamation occurred. As it was, it was held in the face of strong opposition, as being, under the circumstances, a waste of money. It has been generally fancied that the oblique lines were chosen in order that players should not be able to cross them, and that thus nursing should be stopped. It was that they might be crossed that they were chosen; they would be unnecessary and would stultify themselves if they could not be crossed at times in good order, and they would not be a compromise between unlimited rail and no rail at all. They were by preference over all other possible methods given that shape and location, as tending to limit nursing while presenting the least possible line surface to lead to disputes between match-players, and they were made short to begin with in order to carry out the novel idea of lengthening gradually, so that as players gradually acquired the skill to "turn them," as the technicality is, they could be made all the greater obstacle. They were also meant as a handicap measure by which one player, restricted to a line 30 inches by 40, could give odds by allowing his opponent to play on a line 15 by 30. The original line was 14 by 23. In the tournament in this City next May it will probably be made 18 by 38. As has been said, Sexton was winner of the first prize in 1879, and Slosson and Schaefer were, by the change of game, made to assume secondary positions. After a time Schaefer became champion by defeating Sexton, whom he beat again, and then Slosson became champion by defeating Schaefer, whom he vanquished a second time. Not until then was there any project for another new game. Slosson could find no other opponent here than Schaefer, and had to go abroad to find one in Vignaux, who defeated him at the game the first time and was vanquished the second. There has been no public contest at the game since then, and the championship term expired in 1882, when the emblem remaining in Slosson's hands.

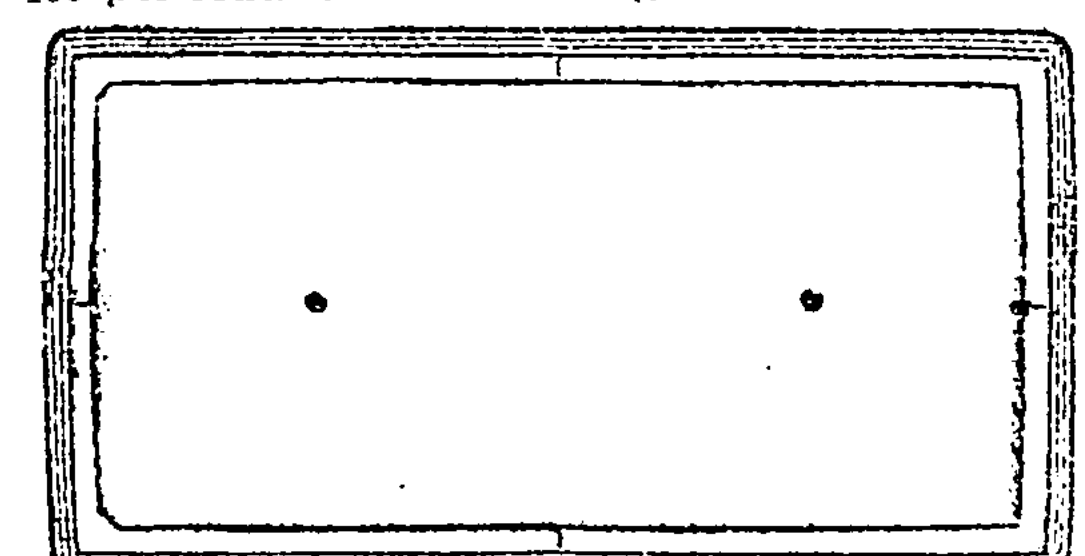
The next attempt to establish a new game for professionals consisted in bringing to the front the time-

honored game of cushion caroms, as to which very little can be said against its use by amateurs who ply the cue for amusement only and with no idea of advancement, while much can be urged against its use by professionals in other than private contests. Virtually rejected with the rejection of the original balk-line of 1873, rejected again when it was proposed to make use of its most attractive points in connection with the new game of 1879, the game of strict cushion caroms had never prior to 1880 been deemed suitable for the purpose of public contests, although it had been played in thousands of private matches. It was never seen in a public match until early in 1877, when Schaefer defeated the late John Mack, in Bumstead Hall, Boston, then making a run of 35, which, as showing how little improvement a game is susceptible of in which at least one-half the time the most skillful player cannot tell within many inches where all the balls will stop, he has never surpassed in any of his 13 public contests at it since then, despite the years of practice he has had meanwhile. The attempt to establish cushion caroms as the game of the future seems to have ended with the tournament of 1881, for there has never been a match for the emblem then forming a part of the first prize, which emblem Dion won and subsequently resigned to Sexton, declining to defend it. For the same reason that the leading player who opposed the strict game of cushion caroms in 1879 has since 1880 been altogether in favor of it, there will probably be an attempt to revive it whenever other methods of play some of our experts become hopelessly overshadowed by their younger and more industrious rivals; for, so far as the contrary has as yet ever been shown, it is a game that an expert can play as effectively after three days' practice when he has not touched a cue for two years, as if he had played it daily during all that time. There is so little technique in it that it is not easy to forget any part of it, and the stroke it calls for most of all is that which is natural to most men, and most natural to him who is out of practice.

This brings the record of changed methods of play since 1873 up to the present time. The game to be played in Chicago has the continuous balk-line as a basis, but in having affixed to it the short and intersecting lines that appear in the corners its original declared purpose of enforcing open-table play seems to be defeated:



The lines are placed 8 inches from the cushion. There are eight spaces inside of which no more than two consecutive strokes are allowed, a ball having to be driven out, as in the champion's game, on the second shot. There is a ninth space, the larger one, in which any number of successive caroms can be made, but into this the striker will never go except when it is necessary for him to hug the lines. The larger space he will use for the purpose of sending the first object-ball around the table, while in the course of a very short time a Vignaux, a Slosson, or a Schaefer will do about all of his caroming along the edge of one or all of the smaller spaces. Both object-balls being on or near an intersection of lines, by simply turning either ball over into any one of the four spaces at his second shot the striker acquires now life, by which is meant the right to make as many shots as he can by gentle touches, for the balls are now astride of some one of the four lines forming the intersections. Occasionally a gentle touch will not answer, as the first ball hit must be driven at least 3 or 4 inches. In that case he can drive it at least 14-7 forward and 7 back—by the aid of the cushion at the corners. It is not extremely difficult for a skillful player sure of his touch to nurse 20 or 30 successive caroms without driving a ball at all. This is the feature of the game that has conferred upon it the name of the "pony." The player straddles any one of four lines within 8 inches of the corner, one ball on one side and the other on any one of three other sides, and thus he rides forward on the road to 100, or even 300 in an extreme case. To obtain the chance to do this he has only, as in the old game, to bring the balls together in any shape in a corner. The "pony" game can be played less effectively than the old game, not because the lines are a direct bar, but because our best nurses, being short in stature, are apt to overreach themselves in having to play more frequently from the opposite side of the table than is demanded in the old game. The process of rail-nursing is the same—a double "kiss" or two, and then three or four direct caroms by the single "kiss," and without sending the first object-ball to the cushion and back. More caroms can be made without covering so much space going forward as in the old game, but the gain in forward space saved is lost in the time taken by the inside object-ball in traveling the greater distance to and from the cushion nearest it, and by the player who is too short to reach from the end of the table having to walk frequently to and from the opposite side of the table to that on which the balls are railed. Thus, a Slosson or a Schaefer, who at the old game would "rail" off 100 caroms in four and a half minutes on an average, would take nine minutes to make 100 by rail-work at the "pony" game. It is possible to get this "rail" whenever the balls are brought together in the corner, the intersecting lines facilitating the getting of it. Most of the "railing" will be done at present on the longer line at either end of the table. Its possibilities on the long line at the side of the table have yet to be developed. It has been already shown that a man not in practice can start from the foot of the table and reach to within 18 inches of the head before breaking up the balls. This was done six weeks ago on a line 9¼ inches from the cushion, the run amounting to 121, the outside ball in its forward course never getting nearer than 10½ inches to the side-cushion parallel to which it was slowly moving, and never swerving more than a half-inch from its onward course, which might be represented by the wave-line used underneath the classification head-lines of advertisements in *THE TIMES*. This was a mere experiment, and the player, confident of his ability to repeat it whenever he has the balls started in shape, has never since tried to go so far, his efforts in the little practice he indulges in at this game being confined to developing one end of the table, and in the latter way he has made his "averages," ranging from 40 to 57. As he plays the game, and as any one with a nice touch must play it, his runs are almost altogether made at that end of the table at which he makes the last of his first three or four shots—his starters, so to speak. The nursing runs are not apt to be of so great a length at this game as at the champion's, owing to the short nurse's lack of reach; but there will be more nursing runs, in consequence of the corners being always and practically fully at the command of the player, thanks to the intersecting lines. Although they have had less than two months' practice, yet the players are making better averages than, with eight months' practice, they were making just prior to the opening of the tournament of 1879 at the champion's game; and yet the 12 lines were placed as they are in the diagram with the view of making nursing so much more difficult than it had been at the elder game that Schaefer and Slosson, it was believed, would have no very decided advantage over Sexton and Daly. Had the short lines been employed in the diagonal and central shape illustrated at one end of the table in the fourth diagram, or, contrarily, as shown at the other end, (the object of the short lines being to enable the player to get new "life" by making a ball cross it,) the game would have been at least 100 per cent. less of a nursing one than it is now.



Players would then have to rely upon "the rail," which would be at least twice as difficult to get as it is now by the aid of the intersections coming all together. No reason can be given for placing these intersections together, unless it be to facilitate nursing, which it obviously does; and there can be no pretense that aught is gained by exchanging rapid, lively nursing that is over with in 10 minutes, as in the champion's game, for nursing of precisely the same principle, but rendered twice as slow by the distance the inner ball and the player have to travel, to say nothing of the delay caused by the raising of disputes as a consequence of having so much debatable line surface. With this game played in a tournament, the marker can call out whether a ball is in or out, and the referee will be called upon for a decision only at long intervals; but played in a match where there are umpires, the marker's word will be taken for nothing that is not so obvious as to render his calling out wholly unnecessary, and both the non-striker and his umpire will make disputes quite frequent. Played in Chicago, where nothing but the old game has ever been seen, save one cushion-carom match between Eugene Carter and Lon Morris last year, this game of intersecting lines can scarcely fail to please. It will please all the more the more that nursing is shown, for in that city no fault has ever been found with "the rail" in any form, and to its billiard devotees there are no more glorious epochs in the history of "the gentleman's game" than McDewitt's run of 1,458 in a four-ball match of 1,500 points, and Schaefer's run of 630 in a three-ball match of 1,000 points. Yet the fact is incontrovertible that the new game was designed neither for Chicago alone nor to be a nursing game in any large sense. Its only effects will be to lessen open-table play, and we look to the New-York tournament at the champion's game to demonstrate this. The huzzing at the end of the table, taught by the lines laid down in this balk-line game, will not be forgotten after the lines have been removed, and the nursing that has become so facile at either end of the table in spite of lines will be all the easier where there are no lines at all.