

AC WORLDS 2025 – WEST PALM BEACH, FLORIDA

DAVID HOUSTON – My Thoughts on the Event



Introduction

This is an individual event but the player's country can also bask in the glory of any successes achieved by the individual. Scotland had four players in the AC Worlds: Duncan Reeve and Sam Murray who were selected by their individual world ranking; Andrew Symons and David Houston who took up Scotland's two national places. James Hopgood was also there, playing for England.

As I was ranking 15th in Scotland and over 400th in the world at the time of selection, I felt very privileged to be there at the USA's National Croquet Centre with its twelve immaculate lawns. Duncan carried the saltire at the opening ceremony.

The NCC Club and Conditions for Play

I had arrived on Wednesday at the NCC Club which felt like Roehampton Clubhouse but rather smaller and mainly on one floor – amazing to see such a fine clubhouse for croquet alone. Rooms were luxuriously appointed and the event management kit was impressive with multiple laptops and four large screens in the public rooms. Lawn 6 was all set up for video and commentary and a light buffet lunch was being served. There was an excellent long veranda directly overlooking six of the lawns.

One of the first people I met was Andrew Symons who had also come early to get up to three days of practice. The balls were Invictus which I had not played with before. Although Quadways hoops were to be used in the event, they were not laid out on the practice lawns until the Friday, the day before the competition started and so the early practice sessions were less effective with easier hoops – similar to Jacques.

In the limited time available for practice on Friday when almost all the 72 players had arrived, it was clear to me that the new Invictus balls (with apparently much more milling and roughness of surface than Dawsons) coupled with the Quadways hoops set at 1/32inch were going to be the main challenge for all players. There was also significantly more pull with the Invictus balls. Lawns were fast and generally very flat.

I had previously competed in the AC Worlds in New Zealand in 2018 and had found the playing conditions similar to UK AC tournaments. At West Palm Beach, this was far more demanding and I found hoop running really challenging. This meant that unless you were really close to the hoop, it was very easy to blob it, hamper yourself or run it so hard that you could be 10 yards away! Stephen Mulliner said that he had not seen such a tough setup since the 2008 AC Worlds at Christchurch.

Once the Competition commenced on the Saturday, even the very top players were blobbing hoops and missing triples or needing multiple goes at them: standard going to delayed, then going to late 4back and straight double. No sextuples and only two straight triples were achieved in the whole competition which must be a record low. It was telling that plans to narrow the hoops to 1/64inch for the main knockout were not implemented by the tournament manager. I saw a few NSLs and MSLs being duffed up (in fact I hit into one which had a good proportion of the ball protruding from H4). I heard that some of the top players were keeping to diagonal spreads for more safety where misplaced balls are less critical.

My Personal Highlight – Being 3-1 Up against Reg Bamford



My last game in the Block Stage was against the famous Reg Bamford who had won the AC Worlds on 5 previous occasions. He won the toss and played a conventional EB start with blue. I played a slightly long duffer tice with yellow. He then hit his EB ball with black, sent blue S of H2 and used my yellow to make H1. Surprisingly he then laid up the black and yellow on the WB a little S of H2. Of course, he wanted 4 balls on the lawn in these tough conditions. At other times I am sure 3 balls would be plenty for Reg but he knew he needed to be near these difficult hoops.

Then came my shot of the tournament. I hit my red ball dead straight right up the WB (must have been about 25 yards) and bang - it hit my yellow which ricocheted into his black and bounced off the lawn and so both stayed close to their initial position on the boundary. I then sent my yellow towards H2, roqueted black and sent it to H3 while nicely lining up with blue for a dolly rush to H1 (see screen shot).



I made H1 and H2 nicely thinking that if I could keep this 4-ball break going, I might just go to peg out. Otherwise, I had little or no chance against Reg because he could hit a leave from anywhere. My set up for H3 was a bit at an angle and so I hit hard but it was too perfect as it sailed through for about 10 yards. My return narrowly missed the black reception ball. So I had to leave the lawn passing my well-placed yellow pioneer at H4. Damn! So near and yet so far – but I was still 3-1 up on the previous World Champion.

Reg chose to play blue which I had left S of H5 and hit my yellow from 7 yards but failed to get a good rush from red on the N boundary towards H1. Being Reg, he still managed to get H1 and H2 from long approaches and soon had a good 4-ball break going with blue to 4B. I noticed he was treating hoops with respect - setting up blue near to the hoop every time and with hoops 2, 4 and 2B hitting the pioneer well past and hitting blue hard through the hoop to go to the boundary – he was not taking any chances! He gave me a pretty good diagonal spread and I went for the usual shot from Corner 3 at his yardline ball. This time no hit! So around he went with black but failed to peel blue through 4B after H3 and only managed to jawse it there after H5.

He then gave me another chance as he stuck black in the jaws of H6. Unfortunately for me, my ball was about 8 feet due NE of H6 and the hoop upright was in the middle of his ball and so I hit the upright and bounced away before just missing his ball. So he carried calmly on, rush peeling blue before 1B and TP'd me successfully in delayed fashion including an impressive “death roll” with the penult peel but with no other significant challenges to his break.

So far from a perfect match for Reg but it was still 26-3 TP. I felt really disappointed that it was down to me to make that 4-ball break after 3 good hoops – I could have been playing anyone and I have often had long successful breaks on other lawns. Well at least I got more hoops against him than three other top players in Block C.



My Other Games

My great achievement was no game with zero scoring which meant I always gave myself some chance but failed by blobbing a hoop or missing a long ball. I was 10-0 up before lunch with my Block C match against Trev Bassett and then blobbed H2 when I came back out to the lawn (with his ball for the same hoop as pioneer!) - he then TP'd me. I do wish I had gone hungry that day!

I was well ahead in 2 matches in the Plate Block F and then I made some mistake and the opponent hit in at crucial point. Then the game against Patrick Sweeney was really unfortunate – I was 10-4 up when Patrick hit in at C4 and took the canon. He hit the turf significantly before hitting the canon. I claimed a fault but an American referee confidently ruled against me. I should have appealed as I was actually right but was not 100% sure. Given it was the AC Worlds I accepted his decision and lost the game. At that point I was losing hope of any wins at all.

So I was left at last with some real opportunity in the Manager's Invitational (the Z event) but even then I was being matched with much more highly graded players: Randy Cardo who is a local professional at the NCC Club – beat me solidly 26-7. Joakim Norback who is one of Sweden's best players – I only managed 7 hoops against him too.

I had already met Chris Percival-Smith of Canada in the initial block and gave him far more of a fight this time but still lost 26-16.

At last in the Z, I was matched against 2 weaker players. I had defeated Andrejs Savinovs of Latvia a few times in the past. I was leading well and then made a stupid wrong ball error when I had a significant stop during a double banking incident. I came back to a croquet with partner and hit the wrong ball near his hoop! Nearly got back on him but just managed 10 before time was called as he raced on to 17.

Then my final match against Hugh Pettingell of Switzerland. A win at last 17-8. Hurrah!

Conclusion and Results

Despite a lot of bad luck and unfortunate errors I enjoyed the event immensely and it was surprising and a bit of a comfort to see the scale of errors made by top players. For example, World No 1 Robert Fletcher took 3 goes at peeling penult in game 2 of his knockout match.



AC Worlds 2025 Champion

Reg Bamford, South Africa, with a record equalling six wins

Scottish Players' Achievements:

Duncan Reeve: **Won the Plate!**

Sam Murray: reached Round 2 of the Plate Knockout.

[James Hopgood: reached Round 1 of the Plate Knockout]



Photo also shows:

On Left (in white cap):

Event Director: Michael Albert

On Right:

USCA President: Beverley Cardo

Event Manager: Jeff Soo

Next AC Worlds:

Wellington, New Zealand – February 2027