

Petanque In New York

By George Pendle

In the shade of the park's plane trees, the members of La Boule New Yorkaise teach the rules of the game: get your metal ball (boule) as close to the little wooden ball (cochonnet) as possible. Pierre Benjamin, 67, shows me the correct grip and guides me through the court's troughs and peaks.

Benjamin was formerly the maitre d' at Lutece, once the city's grandest restaurant, and remembers when the club used to consist entirely of French waiters and cooks. The club's 120-strong membership is now primarily home-grown.

Ernesto Santos, 40, president of the club, tells me that the courts are often ringed with curious office workers. It's little surprise: few other sports require such a mixture of strategy, precision and aggression, while at the same time allowing its players to smoke and wisecrack. "It's a social club," Pierre explains. As he plays, the others tease: "Allez Papa!"

In a game of triples each team has a pointeur, who aims to get close to the cochonnet; a tireur, who blasts away opponents' balls; and a milieu who does both. Playing as a pointeur I manage to nuzzle my ball up to the cochonnet only to see it smashed away again and again.

The unerring accuracy of the club's best players is mesmerising. Hugh Gallagher, 36, an author, explains: "When someone commits the perfect tirez it's like a clean tackle in football, or a home run. There's a thrill to it which is the equal of any sport."

The sound of metal striking metal in midtown Manhattan usually signifies a fender bender. But in the oasis of **Bryant Park** the cause is much more benign - petanque.