



Irish Road Bowling



A Guide to Getting Started

Irish road bowling has been played in the Irish countryside since the 1600s. Its origins are unclear-perhaps it was brought to the Emerald Isle from England by weavers in the new textile industry, or perhaps from Holland by the troops of William of Orange, or maybe it began when Irish patriots robbed small English cannonballs and rolled them home by the light of a full moon. Irish troops traditionally have played road bowling wherever they were stationed around the world. Road bowling has a passionate following primarily in County Armagh in the North, where it is called bullets or long bullets, and in the South, mostly in County Cork, where it is called road bowling. The two regions independently developed distinct and very different hurling styles

General Rules

1. A 28 oz. regulation road bowl is about the size of a baseball. It is called a shot, bowl or bullet, depending on what part of Ireland the match takes place.
2. Usually played in the country of Ireland as one or two person team, also three or four person team.
3. The bullet can go off of the road surface. Mark straight back to the road for next shot from where the bullet stops, not from where it leaves the road surface. It can run in gravel berm or come back on road. Record the cumulative shot count under each mark.
4. Players must throw in set rotation, substitutes are allowed but only in rotation.
5. Before every shot at least one team member, the spotter, must be down the road to clear the road for safety and to choose that perfect path to guide the shot.
6. Shots should not go past players of the team in front. Wait until road is clear.
7. Team with fewest shots to the end of the course wins.
- 8a. If teams are tied approaching the finish line, the final throw which goes the farthest past the finish line wins, OR
- 8b. If there is a tie, the winner will be determined by a "bowl off". Each team will select one bowler and the longest throw wins the event.
9. Scoring is Honor System, please count all shots.

Safety

Safety must always be the highest priority in organizing and conducting an Irish road bowling match. Danger is inherent when playing a game that sometimes shares public roads with vehicles, bicyclists, spectators and other pedestrians.

Always get permission from appropriate government authorities before using a road. Keep in mind, road bowls, or bullets, originally were small cannonballs designed for mortal combat.

It is the responsibility of the thrower to ensure that everyone in the road ahead is facing him/her and paying attention. Do not be shy about shouting out "Rolling!" before throwing. It is the responsibility of the thrower's teammates, the road showers, to "Clear the Way!" (*Faugh a Ballach!*) of all spectators for a safe distance (at least 50 yards) in front of the thrower before every shot.

Never stop the bullet with your foot. Use a jacket, a piece of cloth or rug, or a garbage can lid. Sore toes and ankles, or worse, will surely result if you stick your toe out.

The Road

A road to road bowling is like a golf course to golf-each road is unique and requires a different combination of strategy and skill. Choosing a good road is important-it should be very scenic with variety of terrain: straight-aways, curves to the left and the right, and a hill or a rise for uphill and downhill shots.

The road chosen should be one to two miles long-1 1/2 miles is a good distance for Irish bowling. For first-time beginners, a 1/4 to 1/2 mile distance would be a good length. For larger tournaments with spectators, look for wider areas for parking near the start and finish lines.

The road should be closed to vehicular traffic, at least during the two hours required for the match. If not possible, a relatively quiet country road should be chosen and the local police/sheriff's department or other governmental authority must be contacted for permission. As a courtesy, property owners along the road should be notified that Irish road bowling will be passing by at a certain time.

For a tournament a circular road course works well, returning bowlers and spectators near to the start line for the next match.

Today paved roads are used for road bowling courses, although in olden days dirt roads commonly were used. If unpaved, the road should be hard-packed.

Problems to avoid when choosing a road

Houses or garages too close to road surface.

A road with heavy vehicular or pedestrian traffic.

Too many vehicles parked alongside road surface. If only a very few parked vehicles, they can be avoided, or a road bowling official or bales of straw can be positioned to protect the vehicles, (especially hubcaps).

Particularly in curves, the bowl will roll straight ahead off the road surface. Make sure an off-the-road "run out" area is open and clear beyond all curves.

Teams

Irish road bowling is played as singles competition, or with teams of two, three or four persons. Only one bowl is used per team, with players throwing in rotation. Substitutes are allowed but only in rotation. In Ireland matches (called *scores*) are more commonly singles competition, or two persons per team.

The Start

A chalk line is drawn across the road. The thrower stands behind this line, and his/her teammates (called *road showers*) go at least 20 to 30 yards down the road to mark the desired path of the bowl. They stand like human croquet wickets, feet apart, straddling the "perfect path" to be taken to achieve maximum distance. One of the road showers lays a scud of grass (the *sop*) in the road where the bowl should first strike the pavement. An experienced bowler can consistently "split the sop."

The Grip

The bowl should be held in a C formed by the thumb and the index and/or middle fingers. The bowl should be thrown from the fingers, not from the palm of the hand.

The Throw

The bowler should back up 10 to 15 yards and take a running start to gain momentum to the throwing line (the *butt*). For many people, however, taking two or three steps is sufficient.

As the thrower runs to the throwing mark, in the Northern or County Armagh style, he extends the arm and bowl behind him as he runs. At the throwing mark the arm is snapped forward by arching the back and shoulders, releasing the bowl underhand before stepping over the mark.

In the Southern or County Cork style, as the thrower runs to the mark, the arm and bowl are lifted up and back, then whirled downward into an underhand throw, releasing the bowl before stepping over the mark.

The bowl should fly through the air a few yards before striking the sop, rather than being thrown immediately into the road surface. The bowl, striking on or near the sop, will then grab the road with heavy topspin, rolling on exactly between the legs of the teammates, the road showers, following its pre-planned path to glory.

Topspin is imparted as the bowl comes off the tip of the index and/or middle fingers. Remember; throw from the fingers not from the palm of the hand.

Although the bowl should be released before the thrower steps over the line (i.e., before "breaking butt"), this rule is not strictly enforced in casual matches.

The Shot

From wherever the bowl stops, not from where it leaves the road surface, the bowl is taken directly to the nearest point on the road. A chalk mark is made at that point, and the next throw is taken from behind that mark by the next teammate in rotation. And so on to the finish line. It is customary to write the cumulative shot count on the road under each mark.

The Irish Loft

Over sharp curves or where two roads intersect (a *corner*), the bowl may be thrown through the air (*lofted*) over the corner rather than rolled around it. The loft must strike the road surface or pass over the road. If the loft fails to reach the road, it is a *dead bowl* and counts as one shot. The next throw, however, must be taken from the same mark. The next thrower may choose either to again attempt the loft or to bowl around the corner.

It is the responsibility of the thrower and his/her teammates to be absolutely certain the landing area of the Irish loft is clear of all spectators before lofting.

The Finish

The final shot to the finish line should be thrown as far as possible past the line. If two or more players or teams have an equal number of shots crossing the finish line, the winner is decided by which shot goes the farthest distance past the finish line. A long "run-out" straightaway beyond the finish line should be available.

Irish Bowling Tips in General

stroke A smooth Irish bowling "stroke" imparting accuracy and topspin often gains more distance than a more powerful but less accurate throw.

bowling a curve A shot can be played around the outer edge of a curve, but often it is more effective to shoot deep into the curve and let the bowl's momentum bring it back out. It is important to get through most curves in only two shots. The first shot, into the curve, must "get sight," i.e., allow the next thrower a clear shot out of the curve.

Kitter-paw A left-handed bowler

lost bowls Often beginners' throws outpace the relatively inexperienced road showers who must chase and spot the bowl for the thrower. Watch carefully where the last weed moved, or the exact spot where the bowl plunged into the stream. Then leap in gleefully and plunge those arms into the weeds or mud! If all else fails, bring along a metal detector. Real Irishmen never lose their bowls!