

# How to Setup and Play Pétanque

*Learning the basics of the classic French ball game*

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Looking for an outdoor game you can play anywhere? Look no further than pétanque. Pétanque is a game similar to Bocce, in which the goal is to toss hollow metal balls (the *boules*) and get them as close as you can to a small wooden target ball (the *jack*). It's easy to pick up and can quickly grow competitive as you and your friends knock each other's boules out of play. We'll show you how to set up, play, and win this timeless French pastime.

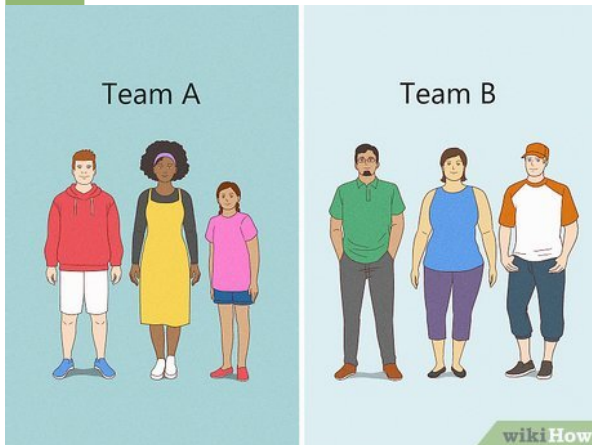
## Things You Should Know

- Divide up to 6 players into 2 teams, and distribute the boules evenly among the players. Draw the throwing ring on the ground, then flip a coin to see who goes first.
- Throw the jack from the circle. Then the first team throws a boule toward the jack, then the second team, each aiming to land their boules closest to the jack.
- The team that doesn't have a boule closest to the jack throws again until they do, or are out of boules. The team with a boule closest to the jack wins the round.

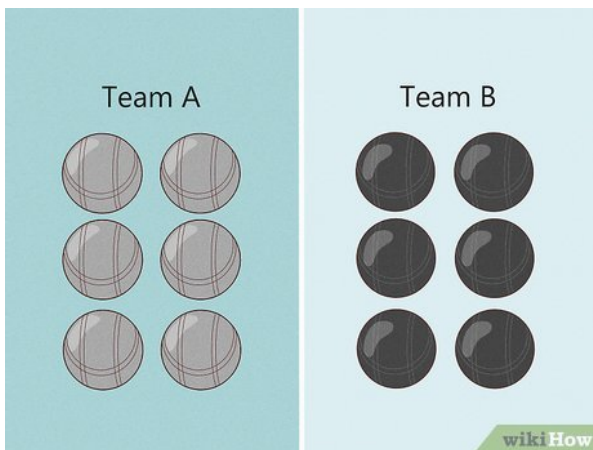
Part  
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Part 1 of 3:

### Setting up Pétanque

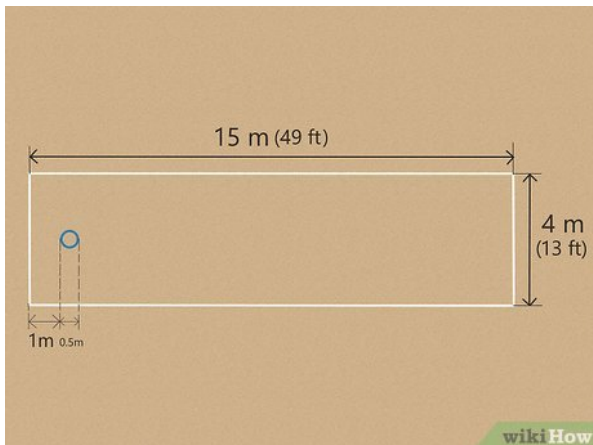


**1** **Gather up to 6 players and split yourselves into 2 teams.** Pétanque is played with 2 teams, with up to 3 players on each team. Round up an even number of players, then divide into teams.<sup>[1]</sup> If you have an odd number of players, have someone switch out for another player each round, or have them sit out until the next game.



**2 Pass out the 12 boules to the members of each team.** For 6 players, or “triples,” hand each player 2 **Pétanque boules**, or the large metal balls that you’ll throw to play the game. For 4 players, or “doubles,” hand each player 3 boules. To play 1-on-1, or “singles,” give both players 3 boules (playing with only 6 boules total).<sup>[2]</sup> Set aside the target ball, known as the “cochonnet” or “jack,” which is about 3 cm (1.25 in) in diameter.

- Official pétanque boules are metal, about 3 inches (7.5 cm) in diameter, and weigh about 700-800 g (1.5 pounds).<sup>[3]</sup>
- Alternatively, play with **Bocce balls**. You might not get the official pétanque experience, but the game will be perfectly playable.



**3 Draw a circle on the ground wherever you’re playing the game.** Find a large area clear of any obstacles like trees or shrubs. To play on a regulation pétanque pitch, mark off an alley 15 by 4 metres (49 by 13 ft) large using string or rope. Then make the circle about 0.5 metres (20 in) in diameter about 1 metre (3.3 ft) away from one end of the pitch. Use a bit of string, draw it in the dirt, or even use a hula hoop to mark the circle.<sup>[4]</sup>

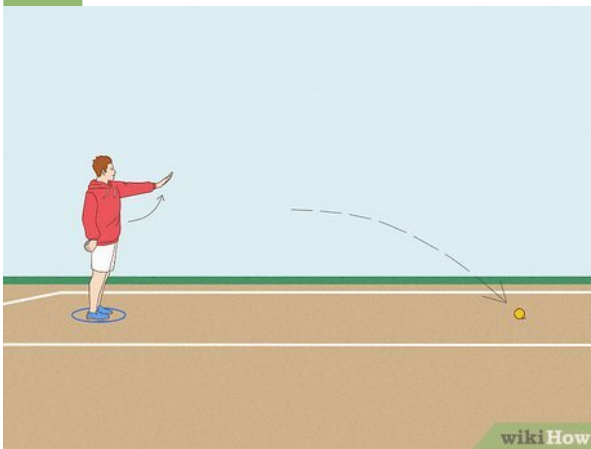
- Whenever any player is throwing, they must stand in the circle, and both of their feet must be planted on the ground.
- Play without marking the pitch boundaries for a more casual game.
- Play pétanque on any surface, from sand to grass to gravel. For a more beginner-friendly game, opt to play on a short-trimmed lawn, where the boules can roll comfortably.



- 4 Flip a coin to see which team goes first.** Toss a coin and have the other team call either heads or tails while it's in the air. If the coin lands according to their call, they go first. Otherwise, your team is up first.<sup>[5]</sup>

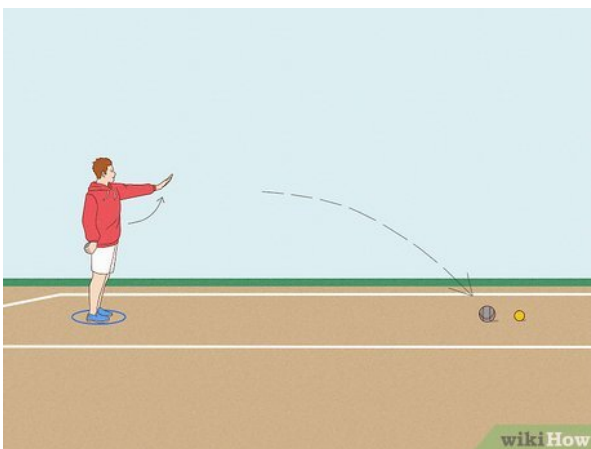
Part  
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## Part 2 of 3: Playing Pétanque



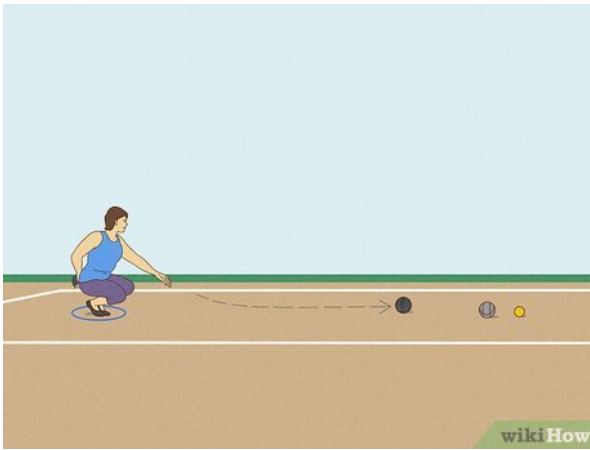
- 1 Stand in the circle and toss the jack forward.** If you're up first, step into the circle and throw the small jack forward with an underhand toss. Aim for it to land between 6-10 m (20-33 ft) away from the circle, and at least 1 m (3 ft) away from any object (like a tree) that might interfere with a player's swing.<sup>[6]</sup>

- Measure the distance of the throw with a [measuring tape](#). If the throw is more or fewer than 6-10 m away, the other team tries to throw within that range. Continue alternating until one team successfully throws the jack.



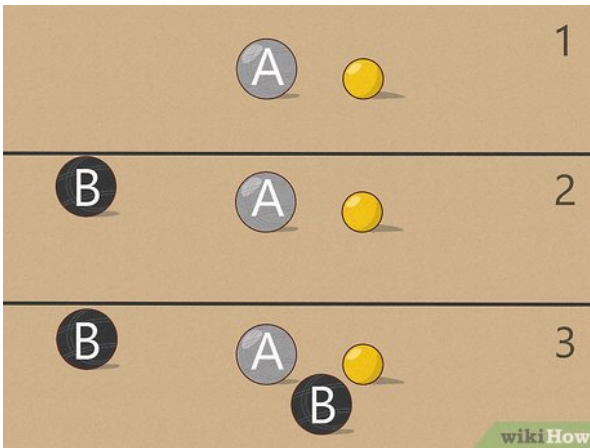
- 2 Throw the first boule toward the jack.** The same team that threw the jack then throws the first boule. Use an underhand throw, and aim to have the boule land as close as possible to the jack.<sup>[7]</sup>

- If you're playing with the official boundary, discard any boule that lands outside the boundary. This boule is out of play for this round, and doesn't count toward the score.



**3 Have the second team throw a boule toward the jack.** As a member of the second team, aim to have your boule land closer to the jack than the first team's. Try to roll your boule close to the jack ("pointing"), or try to hit the opponent's boule away from the jack ("shooting"). The team that has a boule closest to the jack is "holding the point."<sup>[8]</sup>

- Throw the boule low and parallel to the ground when trying to shoot your opponent's boules away.
- Toss your boule high in the air to increase your accuracy. This way, your boule won't roll very far, and instead bounce in place.



**4 Have the team that doesn't hold the point throw until they do.** If your boules aren't closest to the jack, then the next player on your team throws their boule and tries to gain the point. Alternate players until you either have the point, or you run out of boules to throw. Once you gain the point, the next player on the other team throws to try to regain the point.<sup>[9]</sup>

- For example, if Team B tosses a boule and it doesn't land closer to the jack than Team A's boule, then Team B tosses another boule. This continues until they get a boule closer to the jack than Team A's boule, or run out of boules.

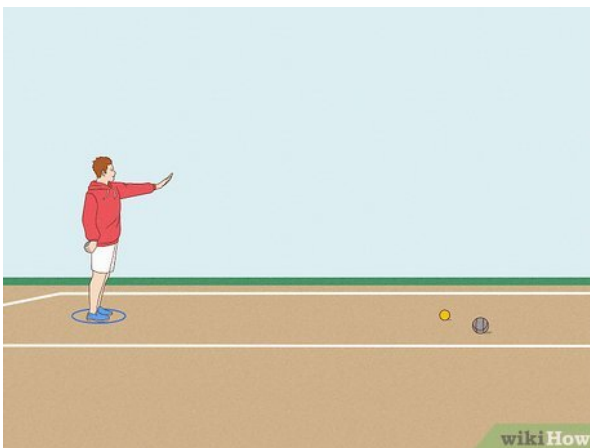


**1 Continue throwing until both teams have thrown all of their boules.** This ends the round. If a team uses all of their boules before the other, the other team throws all of their remaining boules. The round is over once all of the boules are tossed onto the pitch.<sup>[10]</sup>



**2 Tally the score based on the boules' proximity to the jack.** The team whose boule is closest to the jack wins the round. The winning team gets 1 point for each of their boules that is closer to the jack than the losing team's closest boule. The losing team doesn't score any points.<sup>[11]</sup>


- Use a measuring tape to more accurately judge which team's boules are closer.
- For example, if Team A has 3 boules closer to the jack than Team B's closest boule, Team A scores 3 points.



**3 Move the throwing circle and toss the jack again to start a new round.** The team that won the last round draws a new circle on the ground, around the place where the jack was in the last round. Then, the winning team also throws out the jack from the circle, using the same technique as before. The winning team from the previous round goes first, and play resumes.

- Toss the jack the opposite direction from where it was tossed the first time, so that the game alternates in a back-and-forth direction.

Team A  
 $3+2+4=9$

Team B  
 $2+4+2+2+3=13$  

wikiHow

**4** Continue playing rounds until one team reaches 13 points. Keep throwing boules, knocking away your opponent's boules, and tallying points until a team reaches 13 points. At this point, the game ends. Time to reset the throwing circle and play again!<sup>[12]</sup>

 **Community Q&A**

**Question**

If the jack lands less than 6 meters (20 feet) or more than 10 meters (33 feet) and is challenged, what should be done next?



**StephenFerg**  
Community Answer

The teams should measure the distance between the throwing circle and the jack. (That's why a tape measure is a standard piece of petanque equipment.) If the distance is less than 6 or more than 10 meters, the thrown jack is considered invalid. Traditionally, the team that threw the invalid jack would throw the jack again. Starting in 2016, however, the international rules changed and now (in official competitions) a team has only one chance to throw a valid jack. If it fails in its one attempt, the jack is turned over to the opposing team which then places it by hand on the terrain.

Helpful **35** Not Helpful **9**

**Question**

What is the maximum number possible on a team?



**StephenFerg**  
Community Answer

The officially-recognized way to play includes each team having the same number of players; that number may be one, two, or three people. In informal games where the number of players is limited, people may play with different numbers on the teams; for example, a team of 3 players (playing with 2 boules each) against a team of 2 players (playing with 3 boules each).

Helpful **24** Not Helpful **3**

**Question**

How should the balls be thrown, under or overarm?



**StephenFerg**  
Community Answer

It is legal to throw any way you like. However, the most effective way to throw is underarm. As you throw, keep the palm of your hand and the boule toward the ground, with the back of your hand up.

Helpful **33** Not Helpful **7**

### Question

#### How big is the circle players stand inside?



**StephenFerg**  
Community Answer

The circle is measured by its inside diameter. A plastic circle must be 50 centimeters in diameter. When players draw a circle on the ground, they generally try to draw it as close to that as they can.

Helpful 14 Not Helpful 3

### Question

#### Can I lift my heel while throwing the jack?



**StephenFerg**  
Community Answer

Yes. The rules for throwing the jack are the same as the rules for throwing a boule. You may lean forward on a toe, lifting a heel, when you throw. You may NOT, however, lift your foot completely off of the ground. And you may not have your heel above the circle - your entire foot must be entirely inside the circle.

Helpful 21 Not Helpful 3

### Question

#### Can I move the circle once I've thrown the jack, or must it remain in the position first placed?



**StephenFerg**  
Community Answer

Once the jack has been successfully thrown, the circle may not be moved. Note, however, that you may move the circle to the maximum legal distance (10 meters) before throwing the jack if you need more room in order to be able to throw it.

Helpful 14 Not Helpful 1

### Question

#### If during play, the jack is hit and bounces back towards the throwing circle, is there a minimum distance for play to continue?



**StephenFerg**  
Community Answer

Yes. If the jack bounces back and comes to rest within 3 meters of the circle, the jack is considered dead.

Helpful 15 Not Helpful 3

### Question

#### How are balls marked?



**StephenFerg**  
Community Answer

The metal balls (boules) are almost always engraved with grooves. The grooves come in a variety of numbers (single, double triple groove), spacings (wide, narrow), and arrangements, so each player can identify his/her own set. Players also often put different colors of paint or permanent marker in the grooves, to help distinguish the sets. Sets of high-end "competition" boules are required to have unique ID numbers engraved on them. For smooth boules (no grooves), you can identify sets by their color (gold, silver, brushed silver, grey, black, etc.) and by how shiny or rusty they are.

Helpful 13 Not Helpful 3

### Question

#### How many boules are used per team?



Community Answer

According to the international rules, for doubles and triples, each team plays with six boules. In singles, each player traditionally plays with three.

Helpful 13 Not Helpful 2

### Question

#### What happens if the cochnet is longer or shorter than the required length?



StephenFerg  
Community Answer

You must throw the jack to a distance of between 6 and 10 meters. The pre-2016 rules gave a team 3 attempts to throw a valid jack, before the team had to turn the jack over to the opposing team, which then also had 3 attempts. Under the new rules, the team has one attempt to throw a valid jack. If they throw it too short or too long, then the jack is given to the opposing team, which places it on the ground by hand (at a valid distance, of course).

Helpful 10 Not Helpful 4



### Tips

- Throw the boule underhand with your palm facing downward to give the boule some backspin, causing it to travel a shorter distance as it rolls.
- In addition to knocking the opposing team's boules away, try to knock your own boules closer.

### References

1. ↑ [https://www.capementelle.com.au/assets/client/File/petanque\\_rules.pdf](https://www.capementelle.com.au/assets/client/File/petanque_rules.pdf)
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## About This Article



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This article was co-authored by wikiHow staff writer, **Luke Smith, MFA**. Luke Smith is a wikiHow Staff Writer. He's worked for literary agents, publishing houses, and with many authors, and his writing has been featured in a number of literary magazines. Now, Luke writes for the content team at wikiHow and hopes to help readers expand both their skillsets and the bounds of their curiosity. Luke earned his MFA from the University of Montana. This article has been viewed 301,569 times.

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