

Mail, a long and a short game

Concerning the origin of jeu de mail, it is known that the game called 'pallamaglio' (written in many different ways) was played in Italy before it entered France in the 16th century. It is said that it was Catherine de Medici who took the game of pallamaglio with her to Paris and she had several mail alleys laid out in the palace gardens. Both Catherine and her husband Henry II were enthusiastic mail players who probably invited visitors to come and play this game. The aristocrats near the royal court started to build mail courses in their own private gardens to entertain their visitors in turn. Such a mail course certainly added status to the noble families as it did to many towns, being able to entertain important visitors and to provide noble amusement to the bourgeois.

Subsequently the game found its way into the aristocratic and bourgeois circles all over Europe. The game became known as palemaille, pall mall, maliën, maillespiel, baille-maille and many other versions.

The royals and the nobles played the game on beautiful straight playing courts, bordered with hundreds of trees on their private estates. The length of these playing alleys varied from a few hundred metres to sometimes a thousand metres. The 'mailers' played from the starting point towards a stake or ring at the other side of the court. After reaching that turning point, they returned to the stake or ring placed at the starting point. The player who finished the court in the fewest number of strokes was the winner.



In France many aristocrats developed a private mail alley in the gardens of their 'châteaux' (castles) as did the German aristocracy, who was very French culture oriented and so built mail courts in their palace gardens. – Painting of mail players on the mail alley of Schloß Schleißheim in Bavaria – Photo by Michael C. Lang alias Carl Ludwig, Freiherr von Poellnitz

The equipment used, probably made to measure by the best 'palemardiers' (club and ball makers) for king and the aristocrats, must have been very sophisticated and expensive.

Just outside the town walls, near one of the gates of the town, mail courts were constructed by or for the ('upper?') middle class of the town such as lawyers, judges, professors of universities, leading clergymen, business man and top civil servants. These mail courts were not very different from the royal courts; they had the same length and were often equipped with several lanes of lime trees.



The royal or aristocratic mail courts were laid out in the private gardens of the palaces. The length of the courts depended on the size of the gardens but could easily reach 700 metres. The courts were often incorporated in the design of the gardens. This picture (2013) shows the former jeu de mail alley just outside the present gardens of Rochechouart Castle in the Limousin region but in the 17th century of course inside the castle gardens. Only 300 metres are left of this aristocratic mail court which is today used by the locals for playing petanque.

Most often one had to pay a fee to play on the mail court and one had to rent the clubs and balls as well. Losing balls or breaking clubs had to be paid for. The clubs and balls were made by professional club and ball makers, who had a workshop in the wine- or mail-house adjacent to the course where they often acted as the landlord. The mail alley with the wine house was used by the leading citizens of the town for entertainment, and talking politics and business with each other and their guests.

The lower middle class in the towns played mail in the streets along the ramparts, the open fields and on the paths through the garden allotments in town. These courts were not straight alleys but followed the course of the streets and the paths. The lengths of these courses varied depending on the roads and paths available. We discovered also short mail alleys probably used by women and children.



When the interest in the game diminished, the mail courts changed into beautiful promenades, avenues or parking lots, or were completely broken down. – Place des Arceaux, Mont-pellier, France, once part of a jeu de mail circuit, today a parking area near the heart of the town.



In Bourges, France, there was once a beautiful mail course just outside the city walls near the Porte de Saint Sulpice where the bourgeois in the shade of hundreds of trees played the game of mail. When people lost interest in the game and when the town grew outside the city walls, the mail alley fell into decay. Today only the name of the small dilapidated street reminds of the game that once was played here.

When towns became bigger and more crowded, town councils started to reduce the number of the streets where mail was allowed to be played, so the mailers left the town to play in the fosses under the ramparts, on the sandy paths between the agricultural fields or in the open fields.

As far as reliable information goes, the so-called ‘chicane’ game or ‘Languedoc’ game was not played cross-country but mainly followed the roads and tracks.

If they made the equipment themselves or if there were palemardiens and assistants who produced these clubs and balls for the chicane players is not known as it is unknown if this noble game was played anywhere else than in the Hérault or the Aix-en-Provence and the Montpellier region.

Such field games could cover several kilometres and were split in various parties with ‘touch stones’ as targets. The name of the game, as used in the Languedoc region, ‘le noble jeu de mail’, is rather confusing. Did the players consider themselves as noble or was the game itself seen as a noble game?

It is not clear if the working class played the mail game. It could well be that the commoners preferred to play jeu de paume (precursor of tennis) or jeu de boules.

The origin of this field game has not been discovered yet. Some are of the opinion that this game was an independent mail variant played for a long time. Others are of the opinion that this variant was born out of necessity because the street players were ousted from the towns and had to find refuge outside the town into the fields.

*When the interest in jeu de mail on the long courses diminished and the mailers were banished from town, only the game on the paths and roads outside town survived in the Longuedoc (southern France) until 1939. –
Bibliothèque Méjanès, Aix-en-Provence*





One of the very few paintings showing mailers playing in the countryside. It is not clear whether this chicane or Languedoc game was an original jeu de mail variant or that this game was born out of necessity because of the 'in-town' bans on the street mail game. – From Steve Newell's 'A history of Golf', 2003

In the German speaking part of Switzerland we have found several references to the game of mail, of which the earliest one was from 1550 ('Berner Rathsmanualen' [council reports]).

We found that mail or mailspiel, maillespiel, mylen schlan, maille schlagen or baille-maille was played in the regions of Bern, Zürich and Fribourg. The game was played not on a long narrow alley but, like the Languedoc game, in the streets and the open spaces of the towns and on the fields in the countryside.

The game was sometimes played from tavern to tavern ('Staatsarchiv des Kantons Bern', 1633), consequently often banned by religious and public authorities because of the danger of hurting the passers-by or for playing on Sundays ('Berner Rathsmanualen', 1644 and 1648). The mail clubs were often made by the players themselves or local woodworkers, while mail balls for the Languedoc or chicane game could be bought in Bern at reasonable prices. ('Bernische Avisblatt' [evening paper], 1735).

The game was often played between teams of different villages. The players of each team hit the ball in turn towards a predetermined target.

The team who reached the target in the fewest number of strokes was the winner. From there the next target was decided upon and so on.

According to the ‘Schweizerisches Idiotikon. Wörterbuch der schweizerdeutschen Sprache’ (Swiss-German dictionary) from Huber Frauenfeld, 1881, a challenge match was held over roads and paths from Romont to Fribourg, a distance of approximately 23 kilometres. The players hit their balls in turn. The end target was reached in 400 strokes. It was mentioned that in earlier challenge matches almost 600 strokes were needed. The result was considered as an exceptional performance of swing quality and endurance.

The mail game in Switzerland was both a short ‘churchyard’ game and an extremely long field game.

(All information about the German speaking part of Switzerland is derived from ‘Schweizerbuch der alten Bewegungsspiele’, J.B. Masüger, 1955.)

The traditional match from Romont to Fribourg (23 kilometres) reminds us of a comparable ‘marathon’ crosse match (20 kilometres) as described by Emile Zola in 1885 in his novel ‘Germinal’ (see ‘CHOULE – The Non-Royal but Most Ancient Game of Crosse’, chapter ‘Literature’). We also bring up the crosse match between villagers of Balzas in France in 1426, in which people were betting on the players who would reach the neighbouring village in the fewest number of strokes. – Engraving, Jenrich in David Herrliberger’s ‘Neue und vollstaendige Topographie der Eydgnoßschaft’, 1754-1758



The shape of the mail club did not change over the centuries. The configuration was not well-suited for playing cross country. Therefore we are of the opinion that the game was played on roads and sandy paths.



The self-laid out mail course in the Montpellier fields was the last resort for the few remaining players. It was here that in 1939, the last mail player returned home disillusioned because no friends turned up anymore for a friendly round of mail à la chicane. – www.disons.fr

Page 223: Scottish farmers living in the countryside near a hamlet, part of a village. They did not have much time for playing whatever games on far away towns. – A Scottish Lowland farm, detail from John Slezer's 'Prospect of Dunfermline', published in the 'Theatrum Scotiae', 1693 – Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, München, Germany