

I'd like to teach the world to swing

Golf

Most of us know by experience how difficult it is to hit a ball 'far and sure' on the fairway. Of course there are always people who have got talent, who feel intuitively, when holding a club for the first time, how to swing that club.

Unfortunately the majority of golfers do not have that talent. Consequently there are teachers to teach us and driving ranges, chipping & putting greens and bunkers where one can practice what the professional has told us. There are magazines and instruction books in which all kinds of professionals show how to improve one's game and there are club- and ball-making companies who promise 'a rose garden' on the course when buying their newest invention.

Today most people, who want to play golf, first have to take lessons from a professional and to frequent the driving range to put what was learnt into practice. But what did one do 500 years ago to learn how to swing? – www.universitygolf.com



We all know that playing regularly is of importance to reach an acceptable level without air shots and unintentional hooks, pulls and slices.

When King James IV bought his first golf clubs from a bow maker in Perth in 1502 and when he challenged the Earl of Bothwell for a ‘round’ of golf on the North Inch parkland fields near Perth, both needed to know how the game had to be played. Both must have known how to swing the club to achieve a good result. Who gave them some lessons? Did they practice? After being banned for almost half a century, were there still experienced players to instruct the new ignorants?

When the king was on his way through his kingdom, he had to show his ‘royal presence’, he had to look after governmental business, he had to put away some quite copious dinners, he had to play hand-tennis, to go on shooting parties and had to look after his mistresses, so not much time was left for a time-consuming round of golf, let alone for regular practice. When the king bought some clubs he must have known what kind of clubs he needed. The bow maker without any experience on club making must have been told by somebody what the requirements were.

Thomas Kincaid was a medical student at Edinburgh University in the 1680s. He was an ardent ‘golfe’ player. He analysed the golf swing very seriously and wrote down his ideas of how the golf swing should be for optimum results in his diary of 1687 and 1688. We only quote his ‘summary’ written down in a poem.

*“I digested the rules of playing golf into verse thus:
Gripe fast stand with your left leg first not fare
Incline your back and shoulders but beware
You raise them not when back the club you bring
make all the motion with your bodies swing
And shoulders, holding still the muscles bent
play slowly first till you the way have learnt
At such length hold the club as fits your strength
The lighter head requires the longer length.
That circle wherein moves your club and hands
At forty-five degrees from the [e] horizon stands.
What at on[e] stroke to effectuate you despair
Seek only 'gains the nist it to prepare.”*

(See <http://digital.nls.uk/golf-in-scotland/historical-sources.html> for extracts from Thomas Kincaid’s diary about the golf swing)



*The home course of Thomas Kincaid was Bruntsfield Links near Edinburgh. His analysis of the golf swing was not meant as an instruction but just his own idea of 'how to swing', which he wrote down in his private diary. As far as we know this analysis was never printed or used in one way or another by contemporaries and should not be seen as a kind of 'official' golf instructions. –
Drawing by Paul Sandby, 1746-1747 – © Trustees of the British Museum*

Not much is known either of the 'coaching' of colf, crosse and mail players in the early days of these games.

Crosse

The elderly crosse players of today were initiated in the secrets of the ancient game by their fathers, grandfathers or uncles. Nowadays most often the experienced players instruct newcomers how to play the game.



In the game of crosse new and young players were instructed by their (grand) fathers or by the more experienced players in the fields how to play the game. In crosse, the strategy of the game was very important. On this photograph one of the leading crosse players in Belgium is explaining how to proceed from the planchette to the next one to the newcomers Christoph Meister, the then president of the European Association of Golf Historians & Collectors (on the left), and the co-author of this book (with hat).

– Baudour, Belgium, 2009



Colf

Four figures wearing ice skates; one of the lookers-on has a club over his shoulder while the oldest man is watching how the young boy is striking at the ball with a colf club. A father, grandfather or uncle who is teaching the young boy how to play the game? –

Engraving by Bartholomeus van Lochem, 1620-1630 - © Trustees of the British Museum

In colf, there are no references to people instructing new players how to swing. We expect that learning how to play was done in the same way as in the crosse game. The fathers, grandfathers and uncles taught the young boys how to play the game.

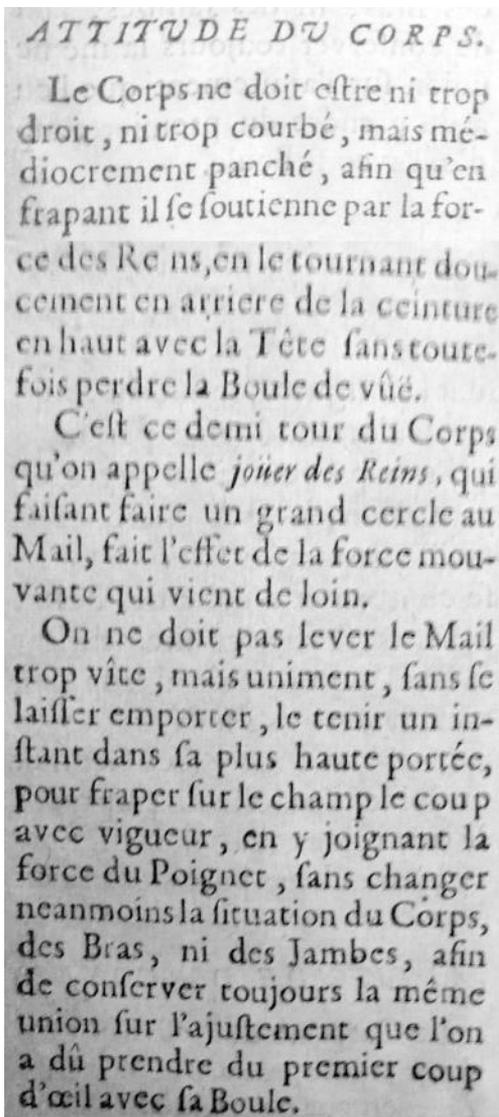
Until now we came across only one painting which shows a young man who is teaching a young woman. The picture does not show if the teacher was a kind of 'professional' or whether there was a more personal relationship.

*Painting from the 17th century showing a professional or a personal friend who is teaching a young lady how to handle the colf club. –
From 'Golf Through the Ages', Flannery & Leech*



Mail

Jeu de mail is the only sport of which we dispose of a detailed description of how the mail player should hold his club, how he should stand behind the ball and how to make the right swing. Already in 1717, Joseph Lauthier published the rules of the game and how to swing the mail club in his book ‘Nouvelles règles pour le jeu de mail. Tant sur la manière d’y bien jouer, que pour décider les divers événemens qui peuvent arriver à ce jeu’:



“THE POSITION OF THE BODY

The position of the body should not be too upright not too bent, so that the hips can support the strength of the swing when turning the mail (club) slowly upwards from the waist while keeping the eyes on the ball.

The half turn of the body, called ‘jouer des reins’ (playing from the hips) should allow the mail to make a large circle so that the strength is coming of a distance.

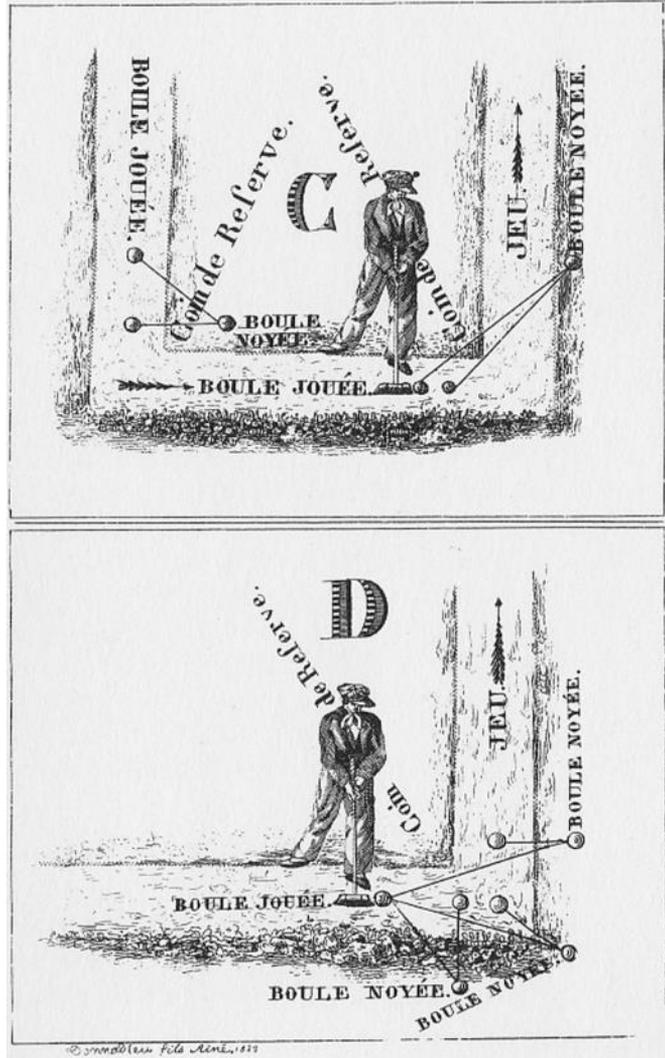
One should not make the back swing too fast but rather constant to be followed by a short stop at the top, followed by a forceful down swing, adding a movement of the wrist to add extra strength. This should be done without changing the position of the body, the arms or the legs in order to maintain the same position one took at the first strike and keeping an eye on the ball.”

The ‘swing instructions’ of Lauthier are part of 59 pages of rules and instructions; the booklet was written because several ‘estimable persons’ asked for it.

In the world of jeu de mail there were so-called 'palemardiers', professionals who, as the Robinson's and Morris's in Scottish golf, gave lessons to people who wanted to play the mail game. Most of them were concentrated in the Lanquedoc region in France but they were invited to teach the game all over France and even outside France.

The son of palemardier Coste at Montpellier went to Madrid to teach the princes the secrets of 'juego di mail' (J. Sudre, 'Le Noble Jeu de Mail de la Ville de Montpellier, Avec ses Réglements' 1772).

In 'Principles pour apprendre à bien jouer au Mail' (Principles of to learn to play mail) Sudre copied the part about the swing from Lauthier, just adding some clauses to make the descriptions clearer.



In the book 'Le Noble Jeu de Mail de la ville de Montpellier, Avec ses Réglements' (1772), J. Sudre not only described the rules of the game but he gave also some instructions about how to play the mail game, clarified by means of several drawings. The content of the book was agreed upon by the organisation of 'palemardiers', a kind of union of mail professionals.