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# THE YEAR 1457: GOLF OR HOCKEY?

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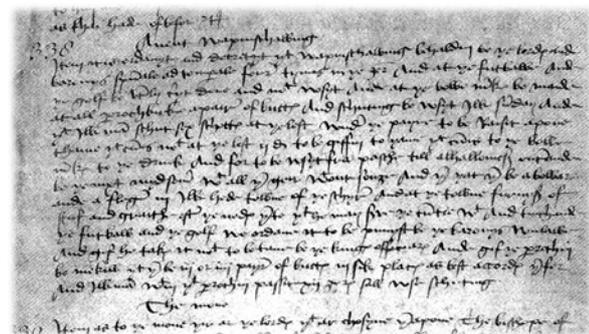
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## THE YEAR 1457

The most important date mentioned in the many books about the history of Scottish golf is 1457. In that year, King James II of Scotland banned by a Royal Edict the game of football and golf. In an earlier Edict, in 1427, his predecessor, James I, banned football, but did not mention the game of golf. Scots concluded therefore that golf was 'born' between these two dates.

The last few years however, some (not Scottish) historians have expressed their doubts about the correctness of this conclusion. They question the meaning of the word 'golf', used in the Act of Parliament. In their opinion the word 'golf' meant a game in which two teams fight over one ball and try to put that ball into a beforehand decided target. A kind of hockey.

## The 'Golf' Acts of Parliament



*Detail of the Act of Parliament, Edinburgh, 6 March 1457: Item it is ordanyt and decretyt ... (th)at ye futbawe and ye golf be uterly cryt done and not usyt and (th)at ye bowe markes be maid at all parochkirkes apair of buttes and schuting be usyt ilk sunday ...*

Item, it is ordained and decreed ... that football and golf be utterly condemned and stopped and that a pair of targets be made at all parish kirks and shooting be practised each Sunday ... – Olive M. Geddes, *A swing through time – Golf in Scotland 1457 – 1743*, 1992

In the late Middle Ages, the relationship between the kingdoms of England and Scotland was not very friendly, not to say hostile.

In the Hundred Years' War between England and France (1337–1453), the Scots took sides with the French and many Scottish soldiers fought together with the French army. Until the appearance of Jeanne d'Arc and the introduction of firearms (gunpowder), the big battles (Crécy-en-Ponthieu 1346, Poitiers 1356, Agincourt 1415) were won

by the English. The superiority of their 'long bow' archers was responsible for these victories.

To prevent the English armies to invade Scotland, it was of paramount importance that the Scots would improve considerably their archery skills.



*The various Franco-English battles in the Hundred Years' War prompted the Scottish kings to ban unprofitable games like golf to the advantage of practising archery – Bibliothèque nationale de France*

It was therefore that King James I in an Act of Parliament banned the game of football and ordered the Scots to practise archery on Sunday's. No other games were banned. Football must have been by far the most popular game in Scotland.

How strong this ban was enforced upon the people, we do not know, but after 33 years it seemed to be necessary to point out to the Scots the importance of practising archery. In a new Act of Parliament in 1457, King James II banned football and golf in favour of archery practising. In this act, for the first time the game of golf was mentioned. Historians concluded that the game of golf must have been born between these two dates. It is surprising

... that none of these historians ever has wondered how a game like golf just can be invented and become very popular in just 30 years time;

... that they never wondered why in these Acts of Parliament the game of shinty was not mentioned, although this game was very popular, especially in the Highlands;

... that they never thought of golf being perhaps an umbrella name for different stick and ball games, as 'jeu de crosse' was on the continent;



Some historians consider golf as named in 1457 as being a kind of hockey game. Was it perhaps shinty, the centuries old Irish and Scottish 'to and fro' team game? – *The Penny Magazine*, 1835

... that they never wondered if a game like golf could have evolved out of other more ancient games. This to the contrary of the continent where the early medieval stick and ball games evolved in the course of the centuries into games like colf, crosse, mail and many other more 'modern' stick and ball games.

It was Professor Heinrich Gillmeister, teaching English at the University of Bonn in Germany and a renowned sports historian, specialised in the games of tennis and golf, who put question marks behind the published conclusions of previous historians about the relationship between the Acts of Parliaments of 1427 and 1457 and the birth of the game of golf. As a philologist, he researched the meaning of the word golf as used in the act of 1457.

He found an answer in a book from a Scottish nobleman, Sir Gilbert Hay, from 1460. This book, 'Buik of King Alexander the Conqueror', is according to Gillmeister a translation of a French Alexander novel. He did not mention who was the French author.

In the English version Gilbert Hay used the word 'golf staff' for the French word 'crosse' what in Gillmeister's opinion means hockey club. Without a shadow of a doubt, Gillmeister explains that the English term 'golf' in that time meant hockey and not golf as we know it, a game in which a ball was played 'to and fro' (*The International Journal of the History of Sport*, Vol. 19, N° I, 2002).

The original book in the French language is called 'Li romans d'Alexandre' (Romans of Alexandre) written in the 12<sup>th</sup> century by the Norman poet Alexander of Bernay. It could be a translation (or adaptation) of a book about Alexander, by Julius Valerius (approximately 3<sup>rd</sup> century).

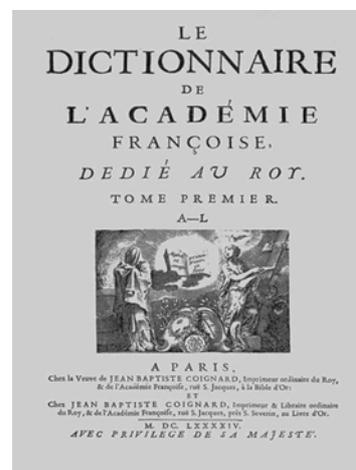
In the book 'CHOULE - The Non Royal but most Ancient Game of Crosse', one can read that in the Middle Ages a ball, to be struck with a stick, was called 'choulla' in the low Latin language, used by the educated French people (*Glossarium Mediæ et Infimæ Latinitatis*, Charles du Fresne, Sieur du Cange, 1678). From this word developed the northern French word 'choule' and the southern French word 'soule'.

The Count of Hainaut bought in 1332, among others, balls to 'chôler'.



Count William I from Hainaut is the earliest choule/jeu de crosse player known by name. He bought jeu de crosse equipment in 1332. – *Bibliothèque municipale, Arras, France*

Because it is unlikely that the Count would use these balls for playing the violent, undisciplined game of hockey, we could conclude that the count probably played a more sophisticated, disciplined golf-like game, in which the ball could easily have been hit 'to an fro', as players in the ancient County of Hainaut in France and Belgium do already since time immemorial in their game 'jeu de crosse'.



In the first dictionary of the 'Académie Française', 1694, the words 'crosser', 'crosse' and 'crosseur' were already included

In the first Dictionnaire de l'Académie Française (1694), all stick and ball games are called 'jeu de crosse' and not only the hockey-like games.

The choule/déchoule game played in Northern France and Southern Belgium is called already for hundreds of years 'jeu de crosse' and not 'chole', and this game is certainly not hockey, although players hit the ball 'to and fro'.

In our opinion, the conclusion that golf in 1457 is not golf but hockey, based on one line in a book which is a 'translation' or better an 'adaptation' of an earlier French book, is rather flimsy, as flimsy as the conclusion that golf was 'born' between the two Acts of Parliament from 1427 and 1457.

But assume for a moment that in 1457 golf is hockey, what about the game of golf mentioned in a third Act of Parliament from 1471 in which King James III banned football and golf again in favour of archery practice. Is that golf still hockey or meant James III the game of golf as we know it today? In 1491, King James IV banned football, golf and other 'unprofitable' games. What game of golf was banned now, golf or hockey?

It is rather interesting to see that the same King James IV bought in Edinburgh in 1503 (Accounts of the Lord High Treasurer for Scotland, February 1503), 12 years after the ban of golf (or hockey?), 'real' golf clubs and balls to play 'match play' with the 2<sup>nd</sup> Earl of Bothwell. He did buy already golf equipment in Perth in 1502 and later on in Saint Andrews in 1506. From these purchases, we could conclude that at least with royalty and nobility, golf had become rather popular in the area around the Forth of Fife.



*In 1503, King James IV bought equipment to play golf. He seemed to be a keen golfer and not a hockey player.*  
– National Library of Scotland

Supposing that golf in 1457 was hockey, then golf in 1491 has to be real golf, otherwise that game could not have spread so far in just a decade.

When there are any doubts about 1457, there is certainty about 1491. In that case we talk about a difference of approximately 30 years.

You would not lose any sleep over it, would you?

### **Bibliography**

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