

Rather boys than girls in colf, crosse, golf and mail

In the history of European stick and ball games, most written references from children playing come from the game of crosse. Talking about pictorial evidence, the game of colf is the leader.

We'll look closer at the different games of colf, crosse, golf and mail.

Crosse

In 1834, Madame Albertine Clément-Hémery ('Histoire des fêtes civiles et religieuses, des usages anciens et modernes du département du Nord' [History of civil and religious feasts, ancient and modern customs in the department Nord]) wrote: "In Berlaimont and other towns all the girls came together on St Catherine's day. Before the High Mass, they went to a large field where they played the game of crosse with such vigour that, apart from their clothing, one almost could have doubts about them being girls. The winner of this display of force would have the honour of being the queen of all balls of the year, and the contradance of every dance event would be hers. On the same day, the young ladies enjoyed the privilege of choosing their dance partner from the boys sitting around the dance floor waiting for an invitation. The girls paid for the music and the refreshments."

Alexandre-Joachim Desrousseaux made a similar observation ('Moeurs Populaires de la Flandre Française' [Popular customs in French Flanders], 1889): "For my part, I do not know a more amusing game; men, women and children, everybody drives his ball as he or she pleases."

He referred to Doctor Bourgogne ('Histoire de Macou', 1885, serial in the 'Courier de l'Escaut' [Scheldt Newspaper] in Condé, France), who told us that by the end of the 19th century, according to old traditions, boys and girls played the game of crosse together in the fields on Ash Wednesday.

In 1898, René Minon confirmed in 'La vie dans le Nord de la France au XVIII^e siècle' (Life in Northern France in the 18th century) that in some municipalities on St Catharine's Day and during Carnival, the girl who was the most skilful in the 'jeu de crosse en plaine' (field crosse played with iron crosses and wooden balls) became the queen of the dance that she would open.

In the Blaton area in the Borinage, only men and boys played the game of crosse. Girls were allowed to play crosse with the boys on special occasions. One such special day was Shrove Tuesday.
(Jean-Marie Desmet, 'El Crochôte à l'tonne' [Carnival target crosse])

Research by André Auquier shows that at the beginning of the 20th century, farmers went to local schools on Thursday afternoons to invite the schoolboys to come and play on their lands. The farmers liked the boys to play on their sowed lands to stamp down the soil since, at that time, farmers did not possess advanced farming machinery.

To stimulate a healthy rivalry between the boys, the farmers presented small prizes, usually clay pipes, which encouraged them to play the game of crosse when they grew up. On occasion, schoolteachers organised tournaments for their pupils.

(André Auquier, 'Mail Crosse Golf ou l'Histoire du crossage en plaine' [Mail Crosse Golf or the history of field crosse], 1983)

In the past, children were very much involved in the game of crosse. They were very eager collectors of 'chouettes' (balls). The small, often colourful elliptical balls attracted much attention. Crosseurs did not care about losing chouettes during their matches on winter Saturdays and Sundays: "They always carried a string bag with spare chouettes".

(Jean Pierard, 'Le Jeu de Crosse au Borinage', 1968)



As the crosseurs did not care about losing their wooden balls, children were avid collectors of these egg-shaped balls, often beautifully coloured.



Boys started playing crosse at a very early age. They mostly started with a small wooden crosse called 'chambot'. Often, these children's crosses were given to them by their proud fathers or grandfathers, who would teach them the secrets of the game. Later, they got the real thing: the iron crosse.

In 1939, Louis Schély wrote that around 1900 in the Belgian Péruweltz region, children could not afford 5 - 10 centimes to buy choulettes; therefore, they made them themselves with a pocket knife: "It was a long and meticulous task for a seven years old to carve such balls." (Louis Schély, 'Le "Jeu de Croches" en Wallonie').

Boys were not only collectors of choulettes. They also played the game with their friends. They were given small 'chambots' (the wooden version of the iron crosse clubs) at a very early age by their fathers and grandfathers, who taught them how to play. The boys played in the fields whenever there was time.

At a later age, they got the real iron club, which was a very solemn moment. Edgar Hismans (1930-1995), former mayor of Quaregnon, started to play crosse when he was a young boy. When he was 8 or 9, his grandfather came to his house holding something behind his back.

"Moved by the solemnity of the moment and with great pleasure, he gave me my first wooden chambot, beautifully painted blue. My grandmother gave me a string bag with choulettes". He immediately received his first lesson from his grandfather on the neighbouring fields.

The following Thursday afternoon, when there were no school lessons, a group of young boys occupied the fields. They all had their proper chambot.

Some lucky boys already used a real iron crosse; some had even inherited the real boxwood or pressed wood choulette from their parents. Mr Hismans said that he later broke his chambot and was presented with his first iron crosse: "I was so delighted that I took the crosse with me when I went to bed."

Robert Leclercq wrote in his publication 'En Avesnois.... Au fil des saisons 1919-1939' (Avesnois ... During the seasons), 1985, that in the Avesnois many children played crosse. Because the iron crosses were far too expensive, they played with wooden chambots.

They played their matches on Thursday afternoons. The rules of the game were more or less respected. It was essential for the boys to hit the choulettes as far as possible.

When the boys grew up, they were proud and happy to own a real crosse equipped with an iron head.

The ash wood shafts were often carved very roughly. The goals they had to reach were less far away than those of the adults. It did not obstruct their passion for hitting the ball as far as possible to impress their companions.

It is clear that until the second half of the 20th century, crosse en plaine was very popular with boys in the Borinage and the Avesnois.

Henri Dehon is one of the rare young crosseurs known by name. He was born in Pâturages as the son of a crosseur. He got his first wooden 'chambot' when he was 12. On his 14th birthday, he received his first 'real' iron crosse club. Henri loved practising, and he was already a well-known player by the time he was 16 years old.

Girls were more or less excluded from the game, and playing crosse was generally allowed only at Carnival and on particular Saint's days.

Today, most children have not heard of jeu de crosse, even when they live in the small crosse region. When they do know the game, because their grandfather, father or uncle is a crosseur, they consider crosse as a game for 'old' people. Youngsters cannot resist the temptation of other sports, such as football, basketball, or cycling, where you can become famous when you are good.



Henri Dehon, as a junior already a well respected crosseur, holding one of his first trophies – 'Mail Crosse Golf ou l'Histoire du crossage en plaine', 1983, André Auquier

Colf

Children, mainly boys, are often painted in a stately pose. The colf clubs are generally far too big and too heavy to be used by the depicted children on the playing fields, and the colf equipment certainly belonged to their fathers. It is hard to believe these young boys playing colf, certainly not in such expensive and unsuitable clothing.

It was not uncommon to dress boys, until the age of 6 or 7, like girls and portrayed in their long dresses. After that age, boys started to wear trousers. It explains why many authors see these painted children as girls instead of boys (Philippe Marchand, 'Pride and Joy. Children's portraits in the Netherlands, 1500-1700', 2009).

Boys were not only depicted in stately poses in rich attire with colf clubs (and leather balls) in their hands. In the 16th and 17th centuries, painters made many so-called 'genre' paintings to show everyday life.

The excavation in 1992 of a ship from the reclaimed Zuiderzee, now the IJsselmeer, near the village of Biddinghuizen, the so-called 'Biddinghuizer colfschip' (c1540), confirms that children indeed played colf in the early days of the game. Part of the cargo consisted of sixteen colf clubs, including four small ones: two right-handers and two left-handers, half as heavy as the 'grown up' clubs and meant for children.



In the 16th and 17th centuries, Netherlandish painters painted many young children (mainly boys) holding colf clubs in their hands. The rich attire and the far too big colf clubs (from their fathers) show that the depictions are a kind of 'stately portraits' of rich men's children rather than sporty children. – Stately portrait of Maurits de Héraugières at the age of 2 with a leaden colf club and a leather ball – Adriaen van der Linde (1595) – Private collection



The presentation of boys with colf clubs in 'genre' paintings shows that the game of colf was part of daily life for 'common' boys in the 17th century. An excited boy receives a beautiful colf club (Scottish cleek). – Het Sint-Nicolaasfeest, Jan Steen, 1665–1668 – Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam



Famous representatives of so-called genre paintings, depicting aspects of everyday life by portraying ordinary people engaged in common activities, were the Southern Netherlandish painter Pieter Bruegel and the Northern Netherlandish painters Pieter de Hoogh and Jan Steen. In some of their paintings, they depicted children carrying a colf club. These two paintings suggest that colf was part of children's daily life.

One of the rare paintings with a girl having a children's colf club in her hands. Most paintings show stately portraits of children, but De Hoogh pictured a girl and a boy, obviously looking forward to playing the game. – Pieter de Hoogh (c1660) – Polesden Lacey © National

In the beginning, the game of 'kolf', the successor of colf, played in confined areas and later indoors, did not attract or did not allow children to accompany their father in socialising on the kolf court.

The first mention of a schoolboy playing the game at the age of 15 on his uncle's court dates from 1894. From 1903 onwards, juniors participated in the national championships. In 1907, there were two hundred seventeen participants, and under them, nineteen juniors. In 1925, one of the junior kolf associations organised a match; the last mention of a junior participating in the national championship dates from 1972. In 2007, one of the kolf associations started with kolf lessons for school children. ('Kolfbanen in de 17e – 21e eeuw', Dirk Spijker, 2020)

Mail

No documents have been found so far about children playing the game of 'maliën', as 'jeu de mail' was known in the Netherlands. The only picture of a boy in the mail game represents a caddy.

Charles d'Aigrefeuille wrote in 1737, in his 'Histoire de la ville de Montpellier', that jeu de mail was so popular that 'les enfants de Montpellier naissent un mail à la main' (the children from Montpellier are born with a mail in their hands). He saw children playing the game as soon as they could walk.

Contrary to this saying, we have not found any documentation about children playing this popular sport.

Golf

A Kirk Session of 1612 rebuked a woman in the town's churchyard for instructing her son in the mysteries of golf on Sunday.

In 1690, Sir Robert Sibbald was crossing Leith Links when a boy, who did not hear him approaching, apparently hit him on his backswing. Sir Robert required medical attention, but the name of the young golfer is unknown. (www.scottishgolfhistory.net/leith_links_first_golf_competition.htm).



*The two Macdonald boys, James on the right and Alexander on the left. James holds a gun, and Alexander a golf club. It is the oldest picture I found of a boy with a golf club. The question is whether Alexander is a real player or only depicted in a 'stately portrait'. –
Attributed to William Mosman, c1749 –
National Galleries of Scotland*

The Musselburgh Golf Club fostered junior golf as can be seen from regular minutes such as those in 1808, gifting to 'the boys' at Mr Taylor's two dozen golf balls and to those at Mr Grierson's school one dozen (Robert Clark, 'Golf: A Royal & Ancient Game', 1875).

At the time that there was a severe decline of interest in the game, the Glasgow Herald wrote in 1854: "We have lost one of the oldest of our Scotch games, viz. the golf, which used to be regularly played upon the Green of Glasgow, not only for boys, but also by many of our first-class citizen". This statement made clear that golf, before 1854, was played by boys (George White, 'History of Golf - Part Three: The 1800s thru 1900s', 2002).

Today, the game of golf is open to everybody, men and women, young and old.