

Clubs for crosse en plaine (field crosse)

Some information about the earliest beginnings of the game of crosse can be found in several letters of remission written during the 14th and 15th centuries and from handwritten and hand-painted illuminations in the religious prayer books from the 15th and 16th centuries. Some manuscripts created in Northern France show players who, with some imagination, can be seen as playing the crosse game or at least one of the variants of this stick and ball game.

As in most stick and ball games, use was made of a simple club curved at one end with which a ball could be hit. One of the oldest representations of a crosseur with such an original curved wooden stick can be seen on an illumination in a manuscript from c.1500. The picture shows a woman who is handling a curved stick. She is going to strike a ball that is placed on a sand tee.

The oldest presentation of a woman playing the game of crosse. She uses the original curved crosse to hit a fairly large ball. It looks as if the ball is placed on a sand tee. Illumination from 'The Hours of Abbot Guillaume Bracque', Valenciennes, c.1500. – Sam Fogg, London





Hockey players using the curved stick on an open space in or near a town. Basically, the sticks have not changed very much during the centuries. – From ‘The glorious world of golf’, Peter Dobereiner

At the same time ancient hockey players used exactly the same bent sticks as the crosseurs used in their individual target game. In the course of the centuries the hockey sticks hardly changed. No paintings, drawings or illuminations are seen in which hockey players use composite or iron-headed sticks. In hockey, the man who holds the stick is more important than the stick itself; in the crosse game it is much more a combined action from player and the club.

In the course of the years we see that in addition to the bent clubs, composite clubs were being used in jeu de crosse: a parallelepiped wooden club head in which a wooden shaft was inserted. In several illuminations from c.1500 it seems that bent clubs and composite clubs have different functions in the crosse game. In each team of two, three or four players both clubs are present. The composite clubs seem to be used for hitting the ball carefully towards the stake; it could be that the curved sticks were used for long distance playing. Several illuminations show that the game of crosse was played outside the city walls where sufficient space was available for long hitting. The clothing of the players in several illuminations suggests that they belong at least to the middle class but there are also illuminations showing players with composite clubs dressed much more as farmers, playing in a farmland environment.

In his study about the history of table billiards, Robert Albouker (‘Autour du billard’, 1992) explains that these peculiar shaped sticks were used in a stick and ball game called ‘billard au sol’ (ground billiard), and that the long distance strokes were made with ‘bent sticks’ while the parallelepiped-headed sticks were specially used for the more accurate approach strokes towards the target. These sticks were called ‘billiards’.



After the curved crosse, club makers developed a composite club made of a parallelepiped club head connected to the wooden shaft. Several illuminations show that the curved clubs were used in the field, while the composite clubs were used for playing towards the stake. – Book of hours from Jean Fouquet, c.1450 – Biblioteca Nacional (ms. Vit 25.3, folio 2), Madrid

Some authors consider the composite clubs as early jeu de mail clubs. Jeu de mail is initially an Italian game that entered France in c.1550. Until now we have not come across documents proving that jeu de mail was played on French soil before 1550. Therefore it seems doubtful that the ‘composite’ players in the illuminations were mail players.

The oldest written references to a game of crosse date from the 14th century. In letters of remission, several times stick and ball games are referred to in which targets had to be hit with a club or in which a neighbouring village had to be reached in the fewest number of strokes (Roger Vaultier ‘Le folklore pendant la guerre de Cent Ans d’après Les Lettres de Rémission du Trésor des Chartes’, 1965).



The illumination in a French manuscript from c.1475 shows several teams playing outside the city walls the game of crosse. It seems that the composite clubs are used for the short finishing strokes. We suppose that the curved clubs are used in the fields for long distance. – Prayer book of Poitiers, ms. L.A. 135, folio 2 verso, 1460-1465 – Museu da Fundacao Calouste Gulbenkian, Lisboa

How did the old curved stick in the crosse game develop after the introduction of the composite club? Was the development of crosse clubs ‘embedded in the urge’ of hitting far and sure as was the case with colf and golf?

The head

The late Richard Stiévenart, a local Belgian crosse historian, reported in ‘Les origines du jeu de crosse’ that crosse clubs with an iron head were used in jeu de crosse by the end of the 15th century. Unfortunately he did not mention his source of information.

In the course of the centuries, several references were made to crosse clubs with an iron club head:

- ◆ In the battle of Quévy (near Mons) in 1570, a soldier used ‘une crosse ferrée’ (an iron club) to hit (and kill) an enemy soldier (‘Les origines du jeu de crosse’, Richard Stiévenart).
- ◆ In the chronicle from Pierre-Ignace Chavatte (‘Chronique des choses mémorables’, 1700), it is said that in 1700 in the city of Lille “... it is forbidden for everybody to play with clubs both of metal and wood and other comparable clubs.”

- ◆ In 1753, it was forbidden to play the game of crosse in the streets of the city of Ath, with wooden or iron crosses.
- ◆ In 1775, the bailiff of Havré expressed concern about irregularities during and after the crosse tournament'. To avoid breakage of the windows in the chapel, crosseurs were not allowed anymore to use iron clubs but only wooden mallets ('Le jeu de crosse au Borinage', Jean Pierard, 1968).
- ◆ In the tale 'Le Grand-Choleur', Charles Deulin is the first author to describe the double face of the crosse head in the match between Roger and Belzébuth ('Contes du Roi Cambrinus', 1873). How long before 1873 were double-faced crosses used? Did the soldier in Quévy or the youngsters in Lille use crosses with 'pic' (concave) and 'plat' (straight) faces?
- ◆ After Deulin, it was Emile Zola who described in his novel 'Germinal' (1885) the crosse as 'a mallet with its bent iron (club head), long handle (the shaft) and the tight strung network (the grip)'.

The original 'dual purpose' ('pic' [concave] and 'plat' [straight]) crosses were forged in one piece. For the insertion of the 'rooted' shaft an opening was made into the rear of the head. It is the earliest known iron head for a crosse club.



The earliest known crosse heads have two strike faces: the plat face and the pic or 'bec' face.

The flat face with an inclination of less than 15° is meant for teeing off, for distance or when the choulette (ball) has a good lie. Depending on the distance and the condition of the field between the choulette and the planchette, the plat face can also be used for 'doquer' (putting in golf) and approaching.

The inclination of the plat is not standard. We have seen crosse heads with plat faces varying between 5° and 15°. Often crosses were made to measure and the size of the crosse heads varied, depending on the requirements of the crosseur.



The inclination of the plat striking face of the club head varies between 5% and 15%. Such a crosse is meant for distance whenever the ball lies in a good striking position. The club is used for 'teeing off' as well.



When a choulette ends up in the heavy rough, the ball can still be played with the extremely concave striking face of the club head. Because the ellipsoid choulette can always be put upright, the concave face can get under the ball more easily.



The extremely concave pic face is used for retrieving the choulette from bad lies such as hedges, ruts, muddy pools, natural bunkers and water. This face is also used for shorter distances to surpass hazards and, depending on the distance and the condition of the field between the choulette and the planchette, for approaching and 'putting'.

We have the impression that in the course of the years the size of the pic face has grown considerably. At a 'marché aux puces' (flea market) at Saint Ghislain near Mons in Belgium, we found an old rusty 'crosse à brochon' from before the Great War. The pic face of the crosse head was less than half the size of the plat face. More recent crosse heads have pic faces of at least the same size as the plat face.

Elderly crosseurs explained that in the 19th century carts were used to collect the milk from the cows in the fields. The carts could carry four milk jars. The carts had high and very thin wheels, sometimes fitted with iron hoops, which made deep, narrow tracks in the muddy fields.

Left: When the pic or 'bec' (concave side) was added to the iron head, it was meant to retrieve the choulette from small ruts. Experience taught that such a concave face could improve hitting the choulette out of any difficult lie. In the course of the years, the size of the pic increased considerably.

When a choulette finished in such a rut, it was difficult or rather impossible to retrieve the choulette from the track. With the small concave face of the crosse head it became easier to hit the choulette out of the track. The concave striking face could be compared with the old golf rut iron or today's pitching wedge.

When these milk carts fell in disuse, it was not necessary anymore to play with such a small pic face. Crosseurs had experienced already for a long time that the pic face was a very advantageous tool on the crosse field and that increasing the size of this face would improve considerably the quality of their game. Today almost 70% of all strokes are made with the concave face.

The original crosse club heads were forged in one piece and consisted of two faces and an opening at the rear end for the insertion of the 'root' shaft. When the shafts with a root curb were not available anymore and woodworkers and club makers were forced to change curved shaft production into straight shaft production, the blacksmiths had to alter the design of the crosse head as well. The opening in the rear end of the old club head in which the root stump of the shaft had to be inserted had to be replaced by a socket in which the straight end of the shaft could be inserted.



Because of the introduction of a straight shaft end, the opening in the rear end of the crosse head had to be replaced by a socket in which the new straight shaft end could be inserted. All modern crosse club heads are composed of three parts: the plat striking face, the pic striking face and the socket, all welded together.

The 'pontoise' has only one clubface, the plat. The miniature pic face is considered by most players as just decoration. The crosse was mainly used in the 'au but' game, a kind of putting contest. To protect the shaft from breakage, this shaft has been reinforced with copper wire.



Nowadays the crosse head consists of three parts welded together: the plat face, the pic face and the socket.

All crosse heads, old and new, have smooth faces. The small dimples on the wooden and nylon balls help the crosseurs to hit the ball far and sure.

The material used for the production of crosse heads is mainly iron but today also copper and even stainless steel are used.

The weight of the clubs is on average 650 grams (compared to approximately 425 grams for most modern golf irons).

Deviating from the standard two face crosse head is the ‘pontoise’, a crosse head with only one flat face and on top of that face a miniature concave face. Some crosseurs say that this pontoise was the first crosse head with a concave face to use in very difficult situations and that in the course of the years this concave face increased in size.

According to the late Albert Hanze, former president of ‘La Franco-Belge’, crosse society of Gognies-Chaussée, France, and the late Raymond Véron, president of ‘Les Amis Réunis’ at Gommegnies, France, the pontoise was designed by the end of the 19th century by a local ‘crossetier’ (crosse club maker) in the town of Pont sur Sambre – hence ‘pontoise’. This club was specially designed for the ‘démarrage’ (tee shot) and for the ‘crosse au but’ game, a type of putting contest, being a very popular variant of the crosse ‘en plaine’ game. The extremely small pic face must be seen only as decoration.

Compared to the size of the heads of golf clubs, the heads of crosses are small, and often the choulette is larger than the face of the crosse. Crosseurs must have a very constant swing.

The introduction of celluloid and nylon choulettes in jeu de crosse in Belgium had considerable consequences for the crosse clubs. The crosse head could easily resist the impact of the wooden choulettes but the hardness of the nylon ball is such that the face of the heads can easily be damaged.

The Belgian crossetiers had to adapt the construction of the crosse head.

The French crosseurs, who did not and still do not play with balls other than wood, continued to use the original club head.

Since blacksmiths have stopped producing crosse club heads, crosseurs are forced to be inventive in developing and producing these heads for themselves and for their fellow crosseurs. There are a few crosse-playing employees in steelworks who are allowed by the management to make crosse heads after working hours.

Crosseurs are not different from most golfers. They have the same urge to hit the ball further and further. The Belgian players know that with a nylon choulette, the longest distance can be achieved and that the big golf club manufacturers have developed metal woods for more distance. However, metal woods are not resistant to the impact of the extremely hard nylon choulettes. The one millimetre thin face of these clubs will be damaged severely by the nylon balls. Some creative Belgian crosseurs have removed the face of a metal wood driver and replaced it by welding a seven millimetres thick part of a motorcar leaf spring on the remains of the metal head. Or they use the metal nose of an industrial shoe by welding a piece of leaf spring against the open side and fixing it to a metal shaft. Bear in mind that crosse shops do not exist and that one has to be creative sometimes. Again, others use unmodified metal golf drivers but use them only to hit the wooden choulettes.

(For more information about the development of choulettes in the game of crosse, see 'CHOULE - The Non-Royal but most Ancient Game of Choule', chapter 'The choulette [ball] and 'Games for Kings & Commoners', 2011, chapter 'Swapping woodies for featheries')



The nylon choulette is used only on the Belgian side of the crosse region. Because the nylon balls are very hard and less pliant, the impact on the hands can be painful and therefore often use is made of thick bicycle tyre grips to absorb much of the impact.

The height of the French choulette is 4.5 centimetres and the width is 3.5 centimetres. The useful height of the plat face is 3.5 centimetres and the useful width is 3.5 centimetres. The pic face is 3.5 centimetres wide and 5.5 centimetres high.



The shaft

Certainly in the 19th century and the first half of the 20th century, jeu de crosse was a very popular game. In every town and village one could find crossetiers to fulfil the needs of the thousands of crosseurs. Many thousands of crosses must have been produced every year. The shortage of ash wood forced several crossetiers to lay out plantations of ash wood trees for the shafts of the crosses. Within six years these trees could be transformed into crosse shafts.

Crossetiers were mainly woodworkers, very skilful in carving the shafts with the root stumps and inserting them into the iron heads that were forged by many blacksmiths. If these crossetiers and blacksmiths were specialists, who produced only shafts and heads, we do not know. In any case it must have been an important part of their business.

A lot of skills were required to produce these ‘rooted’ shafts. It was difficult and time consuming, and from a young ash tree just a few shafts could be made.

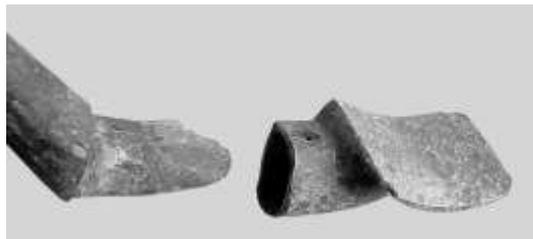
At the beginning, the shaft of a crosse was made of a piece of ash wood (*fraxinus excelsior*) and of sweet-brier, acacia and hazel when there was a shortage of ash wood. The use of ash wood had various advantages:

- ◆ the wood was fairly sturdy; it would not break too easily
- ◆ the wood was fairly supple, a property very much appreciated by crosseurs for striking at the choulette
- ◆ the shape of the roots was such that they could be manipulated to fit into the iron club head at an acceptable angle.



An ash wood shaft in the making. The shaft is cut in an octagonal form. The root part is not yet cut into the shape to fit into the opening in the rear end of the club head. –

Musée d’Histoire et de Folklore, Ath, Belgium – Photo Geert Nijs



The original joining system of shaft and club head. The club head has at the rear a forged shaft opening. The root stump of the ash wood shaft is tooled on to fit the opening.

For making crosse shafts, a crossetier would select an ash wood tree with a trunk diameter of 20 – 25 centimetres. This tree was unearthed and cut (not sawn) at a height of approximately 1.50 metres. The trunk was split lengthwise in several parts depending on the thickness of the trunk and the number of useful root parts. The best period for cutting the selected young tree was between October and March when no leaves were on the tree. In that period, the last quarter of the moon was the best cutting time because of the descending fluid in the tree.

The root stump was then carved to fit into the iron club head. The angle between the root stump and the shaft was on average 120° but could within certain limits be adapted to the requirements of the specific crosseur.

The small delicate root end of the crocheton shaft had to be entered carefully into the opening of the iron head. The wood had to fit exactly in the opening and was fixed with glue and a peg. To reinforce the fragile connection, the lower part of the shaft was often wrapped up with cord and later with copper wire.

To conserve the flexibility of the shaft, a hole was made in the top of the shaft, 15 to 20 centimetres deep. This hole was filled once per year with linseed oil. Another method was to leave the crosse for two or three months submerged in slurry. To harden the neck the shafts were heated in a fire but not burnt.

The crosse à brochon is becoming very rare. Crosseurs who still own such a club do not play with it because a broken ‘root stump’ shaft cannot be replaced. There are no crossetiers anymore who have the skills to make such shafts. These crosses have become collectors’ items.

A crosse composed of an ash wood shaft with a root stump fitted straight into the iron club head was called a chrocheton, a crossillon or a crosse à brochon.



The contemporary crosse has a socket welded onto the club head. The straight ash wood shaft is inserted into the socket and fixed with glue and a screw.



When during the Second World War the interest in the game diminished many of these skilled crossetiers stopped producing these shafts. The few remaining club makers changed over to the production of straight shafts (without a root stump) which was much easier, faster and cheaper to make. Because of the straight shafts, the composition of the iron head had to be changed. Blacksmiths had to design a crosse head with a socket welded to the head to allow the end of the shaft to be inserted into that socket. Fixing the two parts together remained the same: glue, but now with a screw instead of a peg.

All wooden shafts used today are straight shafts without a root part, made mainly of ash wood but as ever hazelnut, sweetbrier and acacia are used. There are some crosseurs who 'concoct' crosse shafts themselves, even from plastic tubes for maximum flexibility.

The advantage of the straight shaft and the welded socket is that an exact angle between the face and the shaft can be made while the angle of the root part of the crocheton was defined mainly by the roots of the tree.

Today we sometimes see crosses with metal and even titanium (golf) shafts. In Belgium the use of 'high-tech' golf material is very controversial. Traditionalists want to preserve as much as possible the originality of the game and its tools; modernists believe in evolution.

Most French crosseurs have decided through the 'Ligue régionale de Crosse-Golf' to stick as much as possible to tradition and they continue to play with wooden shafts.

The grip

The illuminations in the handwritten books of hours and breviaries do not show that the crosses were equipped with a grip. The first mention of a grip was in the novel 'Germinal' (1885) from Emile Zola: "... garni d'une ficelle fortement serrée." (equipped with tight strung network).

All kinds of cord like flax were used and wrapped around the shaft, sometimes even covering the whole of the shaft. To improve the grip of the hands the cord was then rubbed with pitch. An alternative was to rub the cord grips with garlic, not to make the shaft 'smelly' but rather sticky.

After the introduction of the extremely hard nylon choulettes, crosseurs started to use strips of bicycle tyres wrapped around the end of the shaft. Such grips absorbed the impact much better especially of the nylon choulettes.

Some different crosse grips, used through the ages. (1) Leather, a rather expensive material for making crosse grips. (2) Compared to leather, cord was a cheap material for the grip on the shaft. To improve the grip, the cord was rubbed with pitch or garlic. (3) Strips of bicycle tubes were used as well because the thick bicycle tube grip absorbed much of the painful impact of the nylon ball on the hands.



A beautiful collection of many dozens of old crosses à brochon with an infinite variation of grips. Seeing those redundant clubs standing in a garage, makes one sad. It's a sort of graveyard of the ancient game of crosse.



The equipment used to play the game of crosse looks somewhat laughable and amateurish to a non-crosseur but one should keep in mind that crosseurs can neither go to ‘crosse shops’ nor to ‘pro shops’ because they do not exist. There are no crosse manufacturers and therefore crosseurs show an infinite creativity to find and to use all kinds of material to play or to improve their game of crosse.

The game of crosse has mainly been a game for the working class. In the past, many players could not afford to have a crosse of their own. Crosse societies owned just a few clubs for 20 to 30 players; crosseurs shared crosses during play. Today, crosseurs can afford to have more than one crosse, although a new made wooden crosse could cost € 200.

Crosseurs are growing older. They stop playing when they cannot climb the fences, creep under the hedges or when they eventually have gone to play on the eternal crosse fields. Their crosses and chouettes will end up in the attic or the shed in the back garden or even worse on the rubbish dump. Most of their sons and grandsons do not play the game of crosse anymore. Collectors regularly comb boot sales, fairs, flea markets, etc., hoping to find an old crosse à brochon or some dogwood balls.