

Playing Colf in the Arctic

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investigate some early references to colf being played in the Arctic

SOME of you may know that in the 16th and 17th centuries the Netherlanders and the English (later the British) were every so often quite hostile to each other. Both nations fought several sea battles to defend (or attack) the sea routes to their trade settlements in the Far East. Because the Channel between France and England became rather dangerous, the Netherlandish commercial fleet had to look for alternative routes to avoid clashes with the Royal Navy.

Nova Zembla 1597

Willem Barentsz, a cartographer and navigator, was commissioned in 1596 to find an alternative route, north of Norway and Russia to Asia.



A map of the arctic (1599) from Tromsø University Library, Norway. Willem Barentsz first sailed around the Spitsbergen archipelago after which he continued to the east along Nova Zembla. He got stuck in the ice when trying to round the Northern Island.

When the expedition reached the northern point of Nova Zembla the ship became stuck in the ice with the consequence that the crew had to winter. They built a wooden house in which most of them survived the eight months long arctic winter with temperatures between -4°F/-20°C and -40°F/-40°C. They kept themselves alive by shooting bears and arctic foxes and catching fish.

The ship's doctor, Gerrit de Veer, kept a journal of the voyage and the involuntary stay on Nova Zembla during the 1596/97 winter.



Although rather dangerous the crew killed polar bears for food, clothing and for making clubs and balls to play the game of Netherlandish colf. – Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam

Doing physical exercises both inside and outside increased very much the chance of surviving in such adverse living conditions. In the spring of 1597, the crew started to play the game of 'colf', which at that time was the most popular game at home. Colf clubs and balls were carved from bear bones.

The 'colf' texts in the journal from Gerrit de Veer, published in 1598, as translated into English in 1609:

The 3 of Aprill it was faire cleere weather, with a north-east wind and very calme; then we made a staffe to plaie at colfe, thereby to stretch our jointes, which we sought by all the meanes we could to doe.

The 29 of Aprill it was faire weather with a south-west wind. Then we plaid at colfe [and at ball], both to the ship and from thence againe homeward, to exercise our selues.

The 15 of May it was faire weather with a west wind, and it was agreed that all our men should go out to exercise their

bodies with running, goeing, *playing at colfe* and other exercises, thereby to *stirre their ioynts and make them nymble*.

Playing colf contributed to the safe return of the majority of the crew to Amsterdam on the 1st of November 1597.

Spitsbergen (Svalbard) 1634

Some forty years after the game of colf was played on Nova Zembla, Netherlanders played colf again in the Arctic, now around Spitsbergen.



Several West-European countries became active in whaling around Spitsbergen. The oil derived from the whales was used for lighting (oil lamps), soap production and as lubricant. Dutch whalers near Spitsbergen - Stichting Rijksmuseum het Zuiderzeemuseum

In 1604, the Netherlandish 'Noordse Compagnie' started whaling around the archipelago. They built the industrial site 'Smerenburg' with whale-oil refineries. They were soon followed by the English, Danish and French. The relationship between the different groups was not very friendly. When in 1633 the Danes damaged the installations of the Netherlanders, a small group of sailors under the command of Jacob Segersz van der Brugge stayed during the winter of 1633/34 to defend the installations against foreign assaults. Van der Brugge kept a journal in which he noted down what happened during the winter months when temperatures dropped to $-5^{\circ}\text{F}/-15^{\circ}\text{C}$.

This is what he wrote on the 5th of November 1633 (translated into English in 1904):

.... the wind N.E., with a clear sky ; this day we still enjoyed four or five hours' twilight ; we made wooden cleeks (N.B. In Netherlandish was written 'klicken), with which we golfed (in the original language was written 'kolfden') upon the bay before our tent, for exercise.

The colf playing sailors returned safe and sound to Amsterdam in the spring of 1634. Because of overfishing the whales the oil settlement was abandoned in 1660.



Spitsbergen. During the winter of 1633/34, a group of seven 'colf playing' sailors remained on Smerenburg to protect the installations and in between to play colf for exercise. – Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam