FROM COLF TO KOLF

The same word, a world of difference

By Geert & Sara Nijs

In the Middle Ages and the Renaissance era, the characters 'c' and 'k' have been used in the Netherlandish language indiscriminately. The name of the ancient stick and ball game, played from the 13th century until the 18th century in the Low Countries, has been written both with a 'c' and 'k': **colf** and **kolf**. The pronunciation remains the same. The 'new' stick and ball game (18th century), played on an enclosed field and indoors, was also written indiscriminately as **colf** and **kolf**.
It is not surprising that such name giving caused confusion in 'golf history land' through the ages. The confusing mix-up of these names has given many authors tools to proof that c(k)olf is, or is not golf, or to put it mildly that it looks like golf or does not look like golf.

Perhaps Reverend Mr. Walker saw in 1795 the Stadlander-Inn kolf court, one of the many kolf courts in and around the city of Amsterdam, at the end of the 18th century –
Nicolaas Matthijsz. Aartman (1713-1760), drawn in 1755 – City Record Office, Amsterdam

Reverend Mr. Walker, one of the ministers of Canongate in Scotland, wrote about the game of kolf in 1795, when he was a resident in 'Holland'. He explained the short game of kolf, very popular at that moment, and concluded: "**Clearly golf is no more kolf than cricket is poker."** ('Golf', Badminton Library, 1890). Mr. Walker was probably not aware of the fact that before the game of kolf became so popular, Flemish and Netherlandish people played a long club and ball game from the 13th century until the 18th century, that at least looked very similar to golf.

It was Steven van Hengel, the Netherlandish colf historian, who suggested to split the spelling in **colf** for the 'ancient' game and **kolf** for the 'new' game ('Early Golf', 1982). Although there is no linguistic reasoning for this suggestion, it does however clarify the difference between the two games.

Some linguists have put Van Hengel to the sword about this suggestion, not understanding the non linguistic but simple reasoning of it (Heiner Gillmeister – 'Golfjournaal', April 2005).
Van Hengel's suggestion was not taken up by too many authors about the history of golf and therefore historians are sometimes, deliberately or inadvertently, mixing up these two games.
Even modern, well respected authors are explaining the new short game as being the ancient colf game and vice versa, and as a consequence concluded that colf has no resemblance whatsoever with Scottish golf (Malcolm Campbell – 'The New Encyclopedia of Golf', 2001).

In this short study, we will try to clarify the difference between colf, the ancient long game, and kolf, the relatively new short game.

The game of colf

Much has been said and written about the game of colf as it was researched and published by the late Steven van Hengel in his book 'Early Golf' in 1982. As described by Van Hengel, colf was a stick and ball game in which a ball was hit with a curbed stick, later a wooden shaft with a metal face, with the aim of reaching a target in the fewest possible strokes. Not very different from the games of crosse (choule), golf and mail (pall mall) (Geert and Sara Nijs – 'CHOULE – The Non-Royal but most Ancient game of Crosse, 2008).
The game came into being in the Low Countries around the end of the 13th century and the beginning of the 14th century. At the end of the 17th century and the beginning of the 18th century, for several reasons, the game ceased to exist.

The game of kolf replaced the ancient game and became as popular as colf was before.
Colf, a long game, was played in the streets and churchyards in the towns and later on the roads, tracks and the open acres and fields in the ramparts outside the city walls, moving also to the frozen canals, rivers and lakes during the Little Ice Age (16th and 17th century).

The game of kolf

Kolf was originally a short game, using initially the old colf clubs and balls and played on a kind of mini-jeu de mail alley, in the open air.
Today, the game has developed into an indoor game, using specific kolf clubs & balls and rules for the game, which have no relationship to the ancient long colf game.

Some call the change from colf to kolf an evolutionary development, others consider the change as degenerative. The 600 men and women who, after more than 300 years, still play this game with full enthusiasm, are proud of their colf/mail ancestors. They are assembled in 33 societies under a coordinating organisation that carries the name 'Koninklijk' (Royal) since 1985, the year that the federation celebrated its 100th anniversary.

The rise and fall of the game of kolf

It is still not clear why and how kolf developed besides colf in the 18th century and later to the detriment of colf and mail, and in the end to the total overhaul of colf, until it was in turn overhauled by, among others, the indoor game of French billiard at the end of the 19th century.
The ancient game of colf was a tiresome game, a cold game, a dangerous game, a muddy game and an uneconomic game. The Netherlandish playwright Bredero (1585-1618) mentioned the dangerous game in 'Moortje' (1615), one of his comedies:

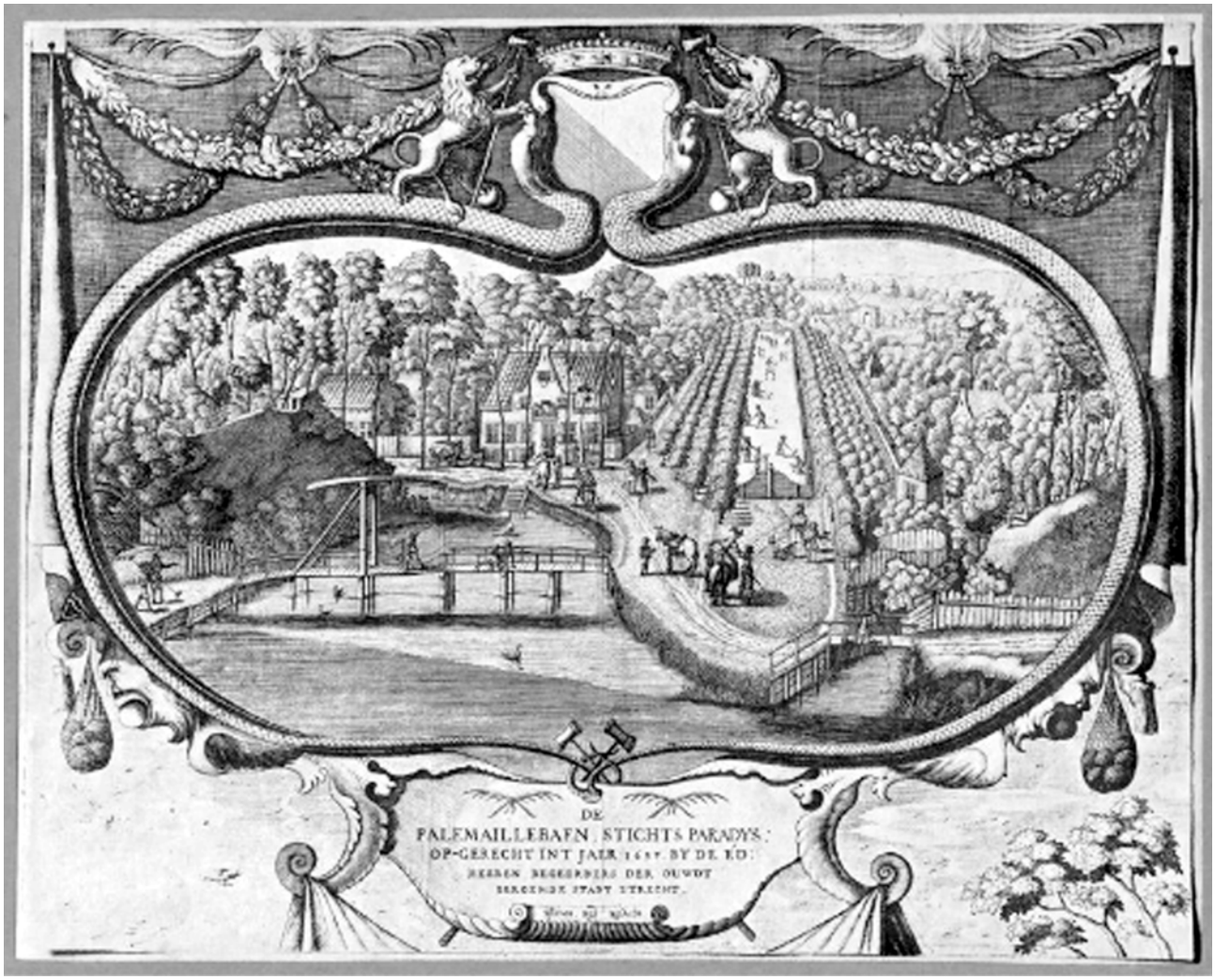
'At my right
a good woman
got a colf ball at her head.
If I had the power,
I would ban this game.'

The game was played over longer distances. Because the game was played in winter, these 'playing fields' were often very muddy or hard frozen and so hardly passable. Colf did not have many written rules. Rules were made during play, or rather they were not, with as a consequence heated discussions, resulting in screaming, swearing and fighting. Accidents caused by balls flying around, hitting other players and passers-by, and smashing windows from houses and churches, forced authorities to ban colvers further and further away from the town.

One of the earliest painters of colvers on the ice was the famous South Netherlandish Pieter Bruegel the Elder; detail of 'The Ice skaters near the St. Joris Gate in Antwerp', created already in 1561 – (Engraving from Frans Huys after Bruegel's painting – Koninklijke Bibliotheek Albert I, Prentenkabinet, Brussels

When the Little Ice Age occurred in the 16th and 17th century, many colvers took more and more to the slippery ice of canals, rivers and lakes to find a place for their game between the many other skaters on the ice. The Little Ice Age coincided with the so called 'Golden Ages' of Flemish and Netherlandish industry, trade and art. The Golden Ages brought prosperity to many people, who liked to show their wealth by their clothing and their richly equipped houses. It is said that in the age of prosperity, painters in the Low Countries produced approximately eight million paintings, including the many winter landscapes with colvers.

Trotting through muddy fields did not fit into the ideas of the well dressed new rich. The clean flat surface of the ice was more appropriate. However, it was also clear to them that playing colf as they did in the fields, was not possible on the ice. A full swing could propel the ball for 'miles' and would certainly hit the many others on the ice. The rather crude iron headed clubs and the wooden balls were gradually replaced by the all wood 'kliek' (Scottish cleek) and the hair or feather filled leather ball. Therefore, colf became a shorter game, more target oriented than distance oriented. The ball was kept low, or even rolling, when pushing towards the target. The target itself changed from a tree, a door or a hole towards a stake in the ice.



The 'Maliebaan'(Mail alley) in Utrecht. In 1637, the court was built especially for the bourgeois and for the students of the new university. The court was considered by King Louis XIV of France as the most beautiful he had ever seen. –
Copper engraving by Hendrik Winter, 1645 – Het Utrechts Archief, Utrecht, The Netherlands

The wealth in some parts of the Low Countries opened the door for the sophisticated culture of the French bourgeois, visible in the attire of men and women. The 'importation' of the game of 'mail', called 'malie' in Netherlandish, fitted in quite well.
'Jeu de mail' was a French game, played on hard courts with a length of up to a 1.000 metres, bordered by several lines of trees, adjacent to the wine house. On both sides of the alley, a post was positioned. The object of the game was to hit the posts in the fewest possible strokes. The game was played by kings, nobles and bourgeois.

In the first half of the 17th century, several 'maliebanen' (jeu de mail alleys) were constructed in both the Southern and Northern Netherlands, to provide the bourgeois with a far more sophisticated stick and ball game. No mud, no swearing and fighting and no interference with other people: only 'our kind of people' (Louis Beumer, 'Geschiedenis van de Utrechtse Maliebaan en het Maliehuis', adaptation of a manuscript by W.A.G. Perks, 1970).

The game of mail had two drawbacks. First, you had to pay for hiring clubs and balls (you were not allowed to use your own colf clubs and balls) and paying a 'green fee'. These people were like the Scots – they were real misers – hating to spend their money unnecessary.
The other drawback was that the game was tiresome. You had to walk 'for miles' and therefore, the wine house was too far away to recover and to have one or two glasses of wine.
The innkeepers of the wine houses were not very satisfied with the money they earned with the maliebaan and the wine house; it was not a profitable business. They saw economic advantages in providing the mail players with a comparable game that was less tiresome and took them not so far away from the consumptions.

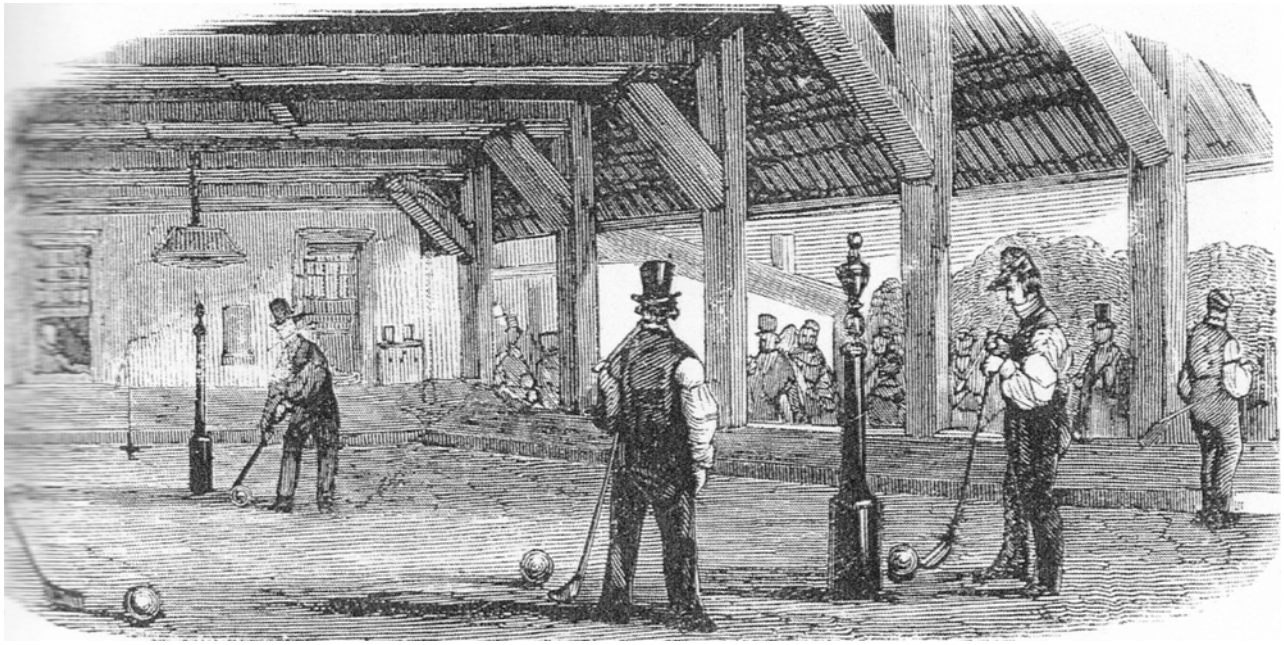
They constructed short versions of a mail alley, some 30 metres long, on which their customers could play with their own colf clubs and balls. Playing on such a small alley did not take much time and the terrace in the shadow of the lime trees was nearby and very tempting for a glass and a nice conversation.
The revenues for the innkeepers were so interesting that in a rather short period of time, hundreds of pub owners in and around the towns started to exploit these mini-mail/colf alleys.
The new game became very popular and hand-tennis halls and 'beugel' (ring bowls) courts were adapted to accommodate the kolvers (*C.A.M. van Woerden,* 'Kolven "Het plaisir om sig in dezelve te diverteren", 2002).

In the town itself, the available space for a kolf court was fairly limited. Therefore the dimensions of the courts became smaller, so that they could more easily fit in the fore courts of the inns. In town, some of the new kolf courts measured only 8 to 12 metres (*Dr. A. van Hulzen*, ' 250 jaar Kolfbaan', 1981), not so different from the size of the unofficial dimensions of beugel courts: 10,5 x 5,5 metres (*Erik de* Vroede, 'Het grote volkssporten boek', 1996). Furthermore, many hand-tennis and beugel players left their ancient games and joined the ranks of the kolvers.

The move from the long colf game to the short kolf game had, of course, severe consequences for the equipment and the rules of the game.

The clubs became heavier, sturdier and longer. The balls also became bigger (twice as big as colf balls) and relatively soft. These balls were pushed, not hit anymore and kept rolling over the flat, hard surface of the small playing field. The posts were not the final target of the game. The ball was hit against the post and from there it ricocheted into small marked fields behind the post with different point values.
At the summit of its popularity, there were more than 500 of these indoor kolf courts all over the Northern Netherlands.
Also in Brussels, Antwerp and other towns in the Southern Netherlands jeu de mail alleys were laid out. For unknown reasons the new game of kolf never caught on in the Southern Netherlands (present Belgium).

However, nothing is forever. In the course of the 19th century a new game, French table billiard entered the entertainment field, followed by theatre and dancing. Again the landlords, probably the world first entertainment 'marketeers', saw this as a more interesting market for their 'kolf' halls.
In a kolf hall, only a few people could play the game at the same time. Such a hall could accommodate several billiard tables and even more dancers and theatre lovers.
As with indoor 'kaatsen' (hand-tennis) before, in a relatively short period of time kolvers were ousted from most of the halls by the billiard players, dancers and theatre lovers. Also many kolvers became billiard players.



For the game of kolf also special half open courts were constructed, as shown in this drawing from 1841 – Illustration from Henry Brown in the book 'De Nederlanden', 1841

Already in 1878, the last kolf hall disappeared in Amsterdam. In 1911, there were approximately only 100 kolf courts left and the numbers continued to drop.
At present, only in a small part of the province of North-Holland and in the city of Utrecht, the game of kolf is still alive. There are 250 women and 350 men, organised in 33 societies, under the umbrella of the Royal Netherlandish Kolf Federation, who still enjoy playing the more than 250 years old derivate of the ancient game of colf (by courtesy of Annette Klinkert, former President of the Royal Netherlandish Golf Federation).

In the course of time kolf clubs and balls, originally from the colf game(on the left), were adapted to the specific requirements of the kolf game (on the right). Clubs became bigger heavier and sturdier to push balls rather than hit them. Balls became bigger and softer to limit the bouncing effect.

The resemblance between colf and kolf is only the use of a club and a ball, that is all. The clubs are different, the balls are different, the playing field is different and the rules of the games are completely different. As a consequence, we could say, as a variant of the expression of Reverend Mr. Walker in 1795, that**: 'Clearly, kolf is no more colf than golf is poker'.**

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In no way kolf today resembles the ancient field and ice game of colf. Only the use of clubs and balls reveals the parentage of the game.