The Little Ice Age in the Low Countries

The history of the game of colf represents only a marginal part in the many books about the history of the game of golf. For many golf history writers, colf is still a relatively unknown game. Colf is often described as an ancestor of ice hockey or just a stick and ball game only played on ice. The Netherlandish standard dictionary (Van Dale) translates the word 'kolven' (playing kolf) into English as '± (pall-)mall' while the name 'colf' does not appear at all in the dictionary. The famous J. Paul Getty Museum in Los Angeles describes the game pictured prominently on a painting of Hendrick Avercamp as an ancient ice hockey game.

How come that when a player is preparing to hit a ball, while his partner or opponent is waiting patiently and a 'ballemerker' (in golf [fore] caddie) is attending the target, a stake, this game is called ice-hockey by so many (ill-informed) historians? – Hendrick Avercamp, c.1615-1620, 'A Winter Scene with Two Gentlemen Playing Colf' – Digital image courtesy of the Getty's Open Content Program

Even a virtual guide of the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam, the Netherlands, informed us that the game shown on the ice scene represents a kind of ice hockey.

It is remarkable that, contrary to the three other related games, croquet, golf and mail, there are so many paintings and drawings of the colf game. Even more remarkable is that the large majority of these pictures show people playing the colf game on the frozen lakes, harbours, ponds, canals and rivers in the Low Countries. Most of these pictures date from the period 1550 to 1700.

Why is it that so many pictures represent colf players? Why is it that these players were depicted mostly while playing on the frozen waters? Why date these paintings and drawings mainly from this period?
Isn't it understandable that so many authors concluded that the game depicted on ice was an ice game and could not have had any relationship with golf, which was played only on the links of Scotland, as described in so many books about the history of golf?

In this chapter, we will shed some light on the rather peculiar game of colf as played in the 16th and 17th centuries on ice.

Little Ice Age

Between 1550 and 1700, there was a period of icy winters in Europe, the so-called Little Ice Age. Before that period, a lowering of average winter temperatures was already noticeable, just as temperatures after 1700 rose step by step, but could still be very low.
The temperature during that period was 1.5° to 2.0° lower than today's average. This lowering does not sound serious, but it caused a significant effect on daily life in Scotland and in the Low Countries (and of course in other countries).
The Little Ice Age was not a period of permanent deep freeze with only terribly cold winters, but a period of volatility between cold and freezing periods. The second half of the 16th century and the first half of the 17th century were icy. The effects of climate change were less severe for the people in the Low Countries than in the countries further north, like Scotland. Temperatures remained on a cold but more acceptable level for harvesting sufficient food for the people.

A remarkable piece of testimony to the bitter winters during the Little Ice Age. The painting shows a pile-up of ice coming in on the flood at Delftshaven. – Cornelis Jacobsz van Culemborch, 'Piled-up ice in Delftshaven', 1565 – Museum Rotterdam

This engraving shows the boundless pleasure of the people of the Low Countries in amusing themselves on the frozen waters during the Little Ice Age. – Jan van de Velde (II), 'Skaters on the ice', 1627 and/or 1631 – Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam

When in a Netherlandish winter temperatures go below freezing point, old and young, rich and poor take their skates to the frozen waters to skate, to ice-dance, to sledge. However, no colvers are seen anymore; the game of colf is completely forgotten. – Photo by Harry Bresters, 2009 – www.schaatsmolentochten.nl

Till this day, when in winter the temperature permits, and that is nowadays not that often anymore, thousands of skaters participate in the ancient and famous 'Eleven Cities Tour', a 200-kilometre tour on frozen canals and lakes around eleven towns in the province of Friesland. Although finishing the tour is the main objective, he who succeeds in passing the finish line first gains eternal glory. – Photo by ANP, 2010 – www.hartvannederland.nl

The main consequence for the Flemish and the Northern Netherlanders was the frozen waters. Goods, often transported by boats from one region to another, now also had to be transferred with sledges drawn by horses on the ice. Frozen rivers facilitated contact between people. In summer, because of the lack of bridges, it was more difficult to visit friends and family. Now they could go on a visit more easily by skating on the ice without making detours.

The oldest references to the game date from the 13th century onwards, when people played the game of colf basically on land and when there was a cold winter, also on the ice. Skating was very popular in the Low Countries and has always been close to the heart of every Netherlander from the Middle Ages until today. Whenever there was ice, they took their skates to amuse themselves. It is not surprising that they took the equipment for their other addiction too, combining skating and playing colf on the ice.

Colf on the ice

In handwritten illuminations and hand-painted religious books from the 15th century, there are presentations of colf players not only on land but also on the ice around the ancient Flemish towns.

An ordinance of the council of the city of Leiden from 1455 banned colf in the town as well as on the frozen canals in the town. Such documents and pictures show that before the Little Ice Age, colf was also played on ice whenever the winter was cold enough.

Detail of the 'Martyrdom of the Saints Crispin and Crispinian' made by Aert van den Bossche, a Southern Netherlandish painter, 1494. In the background of this painting, people are enjoying themselves on the ice. This painting is one of the oldest pictures of jocularity on the ice outside the most severe part of the Little Ice Age (1550-1700). Contrary to the paintings of the 17th century, the skaters, colvers, etc., were not the centre of the picture but only part of a religious presentation. – Muzeum Narodowe (National Museum), Warszawie

In the ancient town of Leiden in 1455, it was forbidden by the council to play the game of colf on the frozen canals. Because of climate change today, it is exceptional that in winter the ice on the canals is strong enough for the people of Leiden to do what their forefathers did and were penalised for by the council. – http://straatkaart.nl

Religion

During the Middle Ages, the Christian clergy were, in general, in favour of people amusing themselves on Sundays and on religious festive days of which there were many. Amusement and pilgrimages full of cheerfulness and happiness surrounded the processions ('De Volksvermaken', Jan ter Gouw, 1871). In the eyes of the clergy, playing was praying. (For detailed information, see chapter 'Religion' in 'CHOULE' The Non-Royal but most Ancient Game of Crosse', Geert & Sara Nijs, 2008.)

Games were included in the religious calendar. On many festive days, people went to play games after having attended Holy Mass. The clergy often organised these games in honour of special (local) saints. The clergy themselves played games, separately or together with the parishioners, and organising these games gave the clergy the opportunity to control the behaviour of the community better and to prevent any excesses.

In the first noticeable period of playing games, often in town, ordinances or decrees in relation to religion were hardly ever issued; playing games on Sundays was allowed. People were even encouraged to participate in such amusement, albeit after Mass. The majority of bans and consequent penalties refer to the misbehaviour of the players. Even the clergy were sometimes unable to control the misbehaviour of the players, their recklessness, their swearing, fighting, screaming, betting and public drunkenness.

The first church-related ordinances issued to ban the games concerned mainly the churches and not the religion itself. One of the many such decrees was an ordinance of the council of Leiden in 1463, in which it was forbidden to play any game or other amusement within a distance of 10 'roeden' (1 roede = 1 rod or perch of about 5 metres) from the church, the cloister, the hospital or any other religious-related institution. Playing colf on public roads was not banned.

When in the 16th century the economy grew, and towns became more crowded than ever before, the players of games such as colf became a real nuisance to the magistrates of the cities. Therefore, there was a significant increase in the number of ordinances against playing colf and other games in town. It became more and more difficult to practice the game.

Alas, there was still no end to the grief of the colf players. Around 1550, the Protestant religion in the Northern Netherlands dethroned the Roman Catholic religion, confiscated their churches and forbade the Catholic faith.

Since records began, the name day of St Joseph, 19th March, was a feast day in the village of Anvaing in the Belgian Borinage. On that day or the Sunday thereafter, the inhabitants of the village gathered to go to a festive mass in the village church. After the religious celebrations, the people went into the fields to play, among other things, the game of crosse. The final target of the 'parties' (holes in golf) was the door of the chapel of St Joseph, three kilometres from the village. Crosse was part of the religion in the Catholic region. Playing crosse at such an occasion was an outward token of religious participation.

When the Reformation advanced in the Northern Netherlands and finally took over from the Catholic religion, the attitude towards playing on Sundays changed completely. With the Calvinistic clergy, Sunday was a day for praying, and the name days of saints were abandoned. In an economy where people had to work at least six days a week, not much time did remain for playing some colf. – Anonymous, illustration from Samuel Clarke's 'The marrow of ecclesiastical history' (1654) – © Trustees of the British Museum

The attitude of the new religion to playing games and other amusement was utterly different. In the Roman Catholic Church, there was ample place for sports both on Sundays and on special religious feast days. In the Protestant religion, there was no place for sports. Especially Sunday, for most people the only day free of work, was the day for worshipping and not for playing games. Special festive days, other than Christmas, Easter and Whitsun, did not exist anymore; for the colf players and other sportsmen, playing games became practically impossible.

How religion brought ice and colf together

The severe winters between 1550 and 1700, when the waters were frozen almost every year, were a godsend for the colvers who had lost nearly all of their playing possibilities. As explained above, people from the Low Countries have always been very fond of enjoying themselves in the winter outside. Especially colvers, completely frustrated by the minimal possibilities they had in and outside the town, went en masse to the frozen ponds, lakes, canals and rivers to play colf where the new clergy and the town magistrates did not harass them. Here, they could play their game because on the ice, players did not care about ordinances, decrees, prohibitions, etc.

What the church forbade happened on the ice in the open, the only space where the rules and laws of daily life never had any legitimacy. On the ice, people decided for themselves what was allowed and what was not. Believers of the new religion found, first secretly but later more in the open, non-religion-related amusement and even replaced the (Catholic) winter Carnival feasts with boundless enjoyment on the ice, where nobody would be judged on the Calvinistic moral values as they were applied back in the town. Of course, the clergy supported by the town magistrates tried to act against this uncontrolled refuge where the Protestant morality was ignored, especially on Sundays, although without much success. From that period dates the saying that 'the Dutch thaw out when it freezes'. ('Schaatskoorts: we hebben het weer maar waar komt het vandaan?' [Skate fever: we have it again but where does it come from?], Marnix Koolhaas, 2014)

The frozen waters during the Little Ice Age were a kind of 'safe haven' against religious laws and council harassment forbidding play on Sundays. Publicans set up their 'mobile' taverns to provide the skaters, sledgers, ice-dancers and colvers with food and beverage. On these Sundays, there was an elated mood on the ice. – Antonie van Stralen, c.1639 – www.iceskatesmuseum.com

Colf on ice in pictures

In 1568, an independence war began between the Low Countries and the Spanish Empire that would last for almost 80 years. The northern part of the Low Countries was able to throw off the Spanish yoke, but the southern part could not free itself, not even with the help of the northerners and remained for many years under Spanish and later Austrian rule.
In the meantime (c.1550), the Protestant religion gained a firm stronghold in the north while the Spanish authorities repressed a similar development in the south.

Since the 15th century, the Southern Netherlands have lived in an extraordinarily rich Golden Age. The cloth industry, the tapestry production, art, international finance and trade, etc., in the main cities, such as Brugge, Gent, Antwerp, Brussels and Leuven, brought richness to the people.
In Antwerp, there was approximately one painter per two hundred fifty inhabitants. Antwerp had at that time a hundred thousand inhabitants. Antwerp was the main international port of Western Europe and the financial centre of Europe, whereas Brussels was the administrative and diplomatic centre of the Duchy of Burgundy. Brugge and Gent were the first industrial towns in the western hemisphere. Here, workshops produced the most renowned handwritten religious books; tapestries from Brugge and Brussel covered the walls of the homes of kings and aristocracy all over Western Europe.

In Antwerp, the revolt against the Spanish Catholic empire marked the beginning of the Eighty Years' War. The new Protestant religion found fertile soil in the revolting humanist town. When the Spanish army suppressed the revolt, all Protestants had to leave the city, and many of them went to the Protestant towns in the north.

When the now Spanish harbour of Antwerpen was blocked by the northern armies, many thousands of people in business, financial people, manufacturers and artists left Antwerpen for the cities of the north, such as Haarlem, Leiden, Delft, Utrecht and Amsterdam. In just a few years, these towns counted between 30% and 50% inhabitants from the Southern Netherlands, while in the south, the number of inhabitants in the cities reduced by almost the exact percentages.

In the Flemish Golden Age, 1450-1600, Antwerp became the most important town in Western Europe. The harbour was the main port in Europe, and it was the capital of European finance, trade and culture. The city had a hundred thousand inhabitants and circa five hundred painters. – 'The Kranenhoofd on the Scheldt', 1622, Sebastiaan Vrancx – Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam

The economy, the arts and science in the main towns of the Northern Netherlands started to develop because of the increasing wealth of the people. The avalanche of Flemish and Brabant manufacturers, artists, scientists and business people brought its Golden Age to the north and gave a tremendous boost to its development in the Northern Netherlands for the elite as well as for all strata of society. The Northern Netherlands became, in a few decades, one of the wealthiest regions in the world, only challenged by the Golden Ages of the city-states of what is now Italy and the Golden Age of the Southern Netherlands between 1450 and 1600.

In these times of abundance, the visual arts in particular started to develop as had never been seen before. In the Renaissance period, art was mainly religion-related. The top clergy, the aristocrats and the royals were the main customers for paintings, drawings, tapestries, etc.

Around 1550, the Northern European Renaissance developed. In the Southern and Northern Netherlands, this Renaissance development became visible in the presentations in paintings and drawings, which were no longer devoted only to religious subjects but to secular subjects as well. In this northern Renaissance, customers of art were not the clergy anymore but ordinary people. The rich and powerful wanted to be portrayed as being powerful and wealthy, both privately and as members of important societies.

Painters such as Rembrandt van Rijn and Frans Hals were the exponents of this avenue of art. As said above, ordinary people became fairly prosperous too, and they were as eager to show their wealth off. Therefore, they started to decorate the interiors of their houses with paintings, tiles, furniture, etc. There developed a strong demand for paintings showing pretty pictures of daily life, still lives, sea-, land-, town- and ice-scapes. Between 1500 and 1800, hundreds of painters produced more than eight million paintings. Ice scenes, with or without colvers, were an interesting part of this production. (Astrid de Beer, article 'Schilderijenbezit [Private owned paintings] in Maastricht' in 'De Maasgouw', 1998)

In the Little Ice Age, playing colf on the ice by commoners was more popular than ever before for reasons explained above. It goes without saying that paintings of such winter scenes, depicting colvers prominently, were in great demand. Also, the paintings representing life at home, the so-called genre paintings, regularly showed colf clubs and balls somewhere in the fore- or background. It shows that playing colf in general and specifically on ice was a more than average pastime in the Netherlands.

Such an attractive art market urged painters in the country to specialise in some of these niches to earn a decent living. There were all sorts of painting studios with a master and several journeymen (assistants) and students for nearly 'industrial' production of paintings for the ever-increasing market. It is known, for example, that Jan van Goyen, a well-known painter and probably a master of a studio with several journeymen, produced more than a thousand paintings. Rembrandt van Rijn had a work studio in which several assistants and apprentices completed paintings from the master according to his exact instructions. Further, it was relatively common that painters, who created land and ice scenes, used specialised painters to include the decoration in the paintings.

Since antiquity, pictorial art without a religious or allegorical relevance did not exist. It was Pieter Bruegel the Elder (1525-1569), the famous Southern Netherlandish painter, who created the earliest representation of a pure winter landscape in which people enjoyed themselves on the ice. This painting, called 'Winter Landscape with Skaters and a Bird Trap' (1565), had no religious or biblical connotations.

It took almost half a century before these 'ice-scape' innovators were followed by 'ice' painters in the Northern Netherlands. The Protestant religion in the north did not have a positive attitude toward portrayals in whatever form of God and his saints or of presentations of merrymaking that could distract the attention of the believers from the spiritual values of life. During the first half of the 17th century, this severe religious stance smoothed out step by step to a level at which it was possible to make pictures showing people enjoying themselves. The northern Renaissance and Humanism strongly supported this new developing art.

The most salient painter of winter scenes in the 17th century was Hendrick Avercamp. The painter, born in 1585, lived and worked most of his life in the Hanseatic town of Kampen on the eastern side of the Zuider Zee. Hendrick died in 1634 in Kampen.

In this winter landscape, painted in 1565, for the first time, there are colf players together with other people just enjoying themselves on the ice, independent of any religious significance. This painting was so much in demand that several copies were made. – 'Winter landscape with skaters and bird trap' by Pieter Bruegel the Elder, 1556 – Koninklijke Musea voor Schone Kunsten van België, Brussel

Avercamp, inspired by Pieter Bruegel and other Flemish landscape painters in the Southern Netherlands, soon specialised in winter landscape painting for which there was a growing demand in the commencing Golden Age of the Northern Netherlands. In several of his paintings, he included colvers on the ice very prominently. If he was a colver himself is unknown. In the painting in which he included a picture of himself, he is not carrying a colf club and does not seem to participate in one way or the other in a colf game.

It is interesting to see that often colf players were exceptionally well-dressed, bourgeois alike, while players in the background were more often portrayed as ordinary people. The bourgeois players, sometimes accompanied by a (young) 'ballemerker' (in golf a caddie), were probably hired to carry the overcoat of the player(s), a spare colf club or as a fore caddie to warn the other people on the ice and to attend the stake that served as the target of the game.

Top: In this painting, Hendrick Avercamp probably included himself in the presentation. It is unknown if he was a colver himself, although he put colf players more prominent in the foreground than most other painters. In this painting, he does not show himself to be active in playing the game.

Detail of the above painting. Avercamp has probably included a 'selfie' in the picture. – 'Winter landscape with numerous skaters' (c.1615-1620), Hendrick Avercamp – Staatliches Museum Schwerin, Germany

In several of Hendrick Avercamp's paintings and those of his contemporary colleagues, the colf players are sometimes accompanied by mostly a young ballemerker who holds the overcoat of his master when he is going to hit the ball. Sometimes these ballemerkers do carry a spare club and take care of the bottle of encouragement. In the field, fore caddies are depicted attending the stake, the target; probably they kept an eye on the ball when hit and warned other people of the approaching ball. – 'Skaters' , Hendrick Avercamp, c.1615 – The Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts, Moscow

Buyers of such paintings preferred the 'visual upgrading' of the game because, for the well-to-do working class, it would be much more acceptable to have such a bourgeois painting instead of pictures of people in rags.

Avercamp was the most beloved of all Netherlandish painters of winter subjects for the apparent reason that he delights the viewer with his witty narration. It is unknown how many paintings were made by Avercamp and how many of them were ice-scenes with colf players. Neither is it known whether Hendrick made use of assistants and apprentices to complete his pictures. One estimates that there are still a hundred of his paintings in existence.
Because of the popularity of enjoying oneself on the frozen rivers and lakes and the great demand for the paintings of this winter pleasure, Avercamp inspired many painters with his paintings, and they followed in his steps. However, most of them were not as specialised as Avercamp.

Only at the beginning of the 20th century was it discovered that there was still another Avercamp who painted winter scenes. Until 1920, the paintings made by Barent were attributed to Hendrick, his uncle and probably his teacher.

Barent Avercamp was a nephew of Hendrick Avercamp. He too made many paintings of winter scenes with colf players in the foreground. – 'Enjoying the ice', Barent Avercamp, 1630-1679 – Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam

Barent was not a full-time artist; he was also a timber merchant and the president of the Saint Luke Guild in his hometown, Kampen. He probably produced fewer paintings than his uncle.

(Much information about Hendrick Avercamp is derived from 'Frozen Silence', Albert Blankert and others, 1982.)

The end of it all

In the course of the years, mainly after 1650, the world for the Netherlanders changed. The rigidity enforcing the Protestant laws against playing games, especially on Sundays, was smoothed out step by step. At the same time, the severity of the Little Ice Age diminished, the winters were less cold, and lakes and rivers froze less. For the colf players, it opened the possibility to play on land without being harassed all the time by pulpit or council.

By the end of the 17th century, there was hardly any colf on the ice or on the fields, reducing the demand for the ‘colf on ice’ paintings. The Golden By the end of the 17th century, there was hardly any colf on the ice or on the fields, which reduced the demand for the ‘colf on ice’ paintings. The Golden Age was near the end of its ‘lifetime’. Albeit that after so many years enjoying mainly short colf on a flat, hard, icy surface, close to the refreshment stalls on the ice, colvers were not that eager anymore to play the tiresome long game in the muddy fields around the towns.

For the Netherlands, 1672 is known as a disastrous year, or ‘annus horribilis’. That year, Charles II of England, Louis XIV of France, and the bishops of Köln and Münster declared war against the Netherlandish Republic, marking the beginning of the decline of Netherlandish global power and the end of the Golden Age.

The colvers who lost their annual winter amusement found a warm welcome with the publicans in and around the towns. These publicans prepared small boarded courts with a flat hard surface on which the colvers could play colf as they had done on the frozen waters. For the landlords, the benefit was an increasing turnover of refreshments. Furthermore, the enthusiasts of the now-named kolf game could play all year round. This short kolf game became as popular as the long and ice colf game was before. It meant the final blow to the game that was more popular than any game has ever been since then.

Times have changed. The game of colf is lost in the midst of time, and only a few hundred kolvers, organised in a dozen clubs, play the indoor game on covered kolf courts in just two of the twelve Netherlandish provinces. He whose ancestors played colf can now be found by the hundreds of thousands on the many (Scottish) golf courses all over the Netherlands and Flanders. The Scots won the mother of all colf/golf battles; the Netherlanders have accepted the defeat.

The final surrender of Netherlandish colf to Scottish golf. The foundation of the first golf club in the Netherlands, the Koninklijke (Royal) Haagsche Golf & Country Club in 1893, marked the start of the invasion of Scottish golf in a country where colf and its successor kolf had ruled the lands for more than seven hundred years.
– www.golf.nl

Further reading

About Pieter Bruegel de Oudere (The Elder)

- 'Pieter Bruegel de Oudere', Philippe en Françoise Roberts-Jones, 1997
- 'Pieter Bruegel de Oudere – Boeren, zotten en demonen', Rose-Marie en Rainer Hagen, 2001

About the winter landscapes in the Little Ice Age

- 'Frozen Silence', Albert Blankert and others, 1982
- 'HENDRICK AVERCAMP Master of the Ice Scene', Pieter Roelofs and others, 2009