

This article is the second part of Henri Jakobowicz's review of the game of *Jeu de Mail*, as played in the South of France until the middle years of the last century.

Jeu De Mail – Part Two

by Henri Jakobowicz

WE ARE interested only in the cross-country game, *jeu de mail à la chicane*, as played in Montpellier. The first part of this article put an accent on the bibliography of *Jeu de Mail*. This second part will present what we know about the origins of the game and how it was played.

Jeu de Mail historians searching early writings on its origins, dwelled on obscure one-sentence references to games played in the middle ages; some went far back in antiquity. D'Allemagne [15] quotes a Roman poet Quintus Ennius born 200 years BC who used the word *tuditantes*, which in Latin means pushing with a mallet, to write about young men driving wooden balls forcefully and deduces from it that *jeu de mail* had been played by the Romans. He then tells us that a number of similar games were played in the Middle Ages under different names depending of the province in which they were played. Touquon and Chuque are cited respectively by Ducange in 1416 and Godefroy in 1455. A three-dimensional Paris map from 1609 shows pictorially, little scenes of actual life in the French capital at this time. It shows people playing *jeu de mail* in two locations: one in the heart of the city; the other just outside its western ramparts. The best representation of old *jeu de mail* is the painting of Paul Brill already mentioned in Part 1 of this article. Andrew Lang mentions *jeu de mail* as one of golf's sister games [21] and quotes Hieronymus Mercurialis [27] writing in latin on *pila-malleus*, a ball-mallet game. He also tells us that the game of pall mall is probably older in Scotland than in England. Queen Mary Stuart played both golf and pall mall at St Andrews whereas the London Mall was only built after Charles I's restoration.

The development of agriculture in the seventeenth century confined *Jeu de Mail à la*



Fig 7. The Montpellier – Clapas course. Justerand [22]

chicane to roads and lanes around Montpellier in order to preserve farmed land. However these roads became much more frequented at the end of the nineteenth century. Playing *jeu de mail* became impossible, and in 1882 the *Chevaliers du bois roulant* rented a large field of two hectares (a golf course needs 50 to 100 hectares) in Clapas near Montpellier on which they re-created a *jeu de mail à la chicane* by criss-crossing the land with four metre wide lanes.

The players had to walk through four lanes having each a length of 200 to 220 yards before arriving at a touchstone. They generally played the game like our foursome, two against two, hitting the ball 100 yards while staying straight on the lanes. It



Figs 12 & 13. *Jeu de Mail* at Montpellier (ca 1910) Hilton & Smith [20]

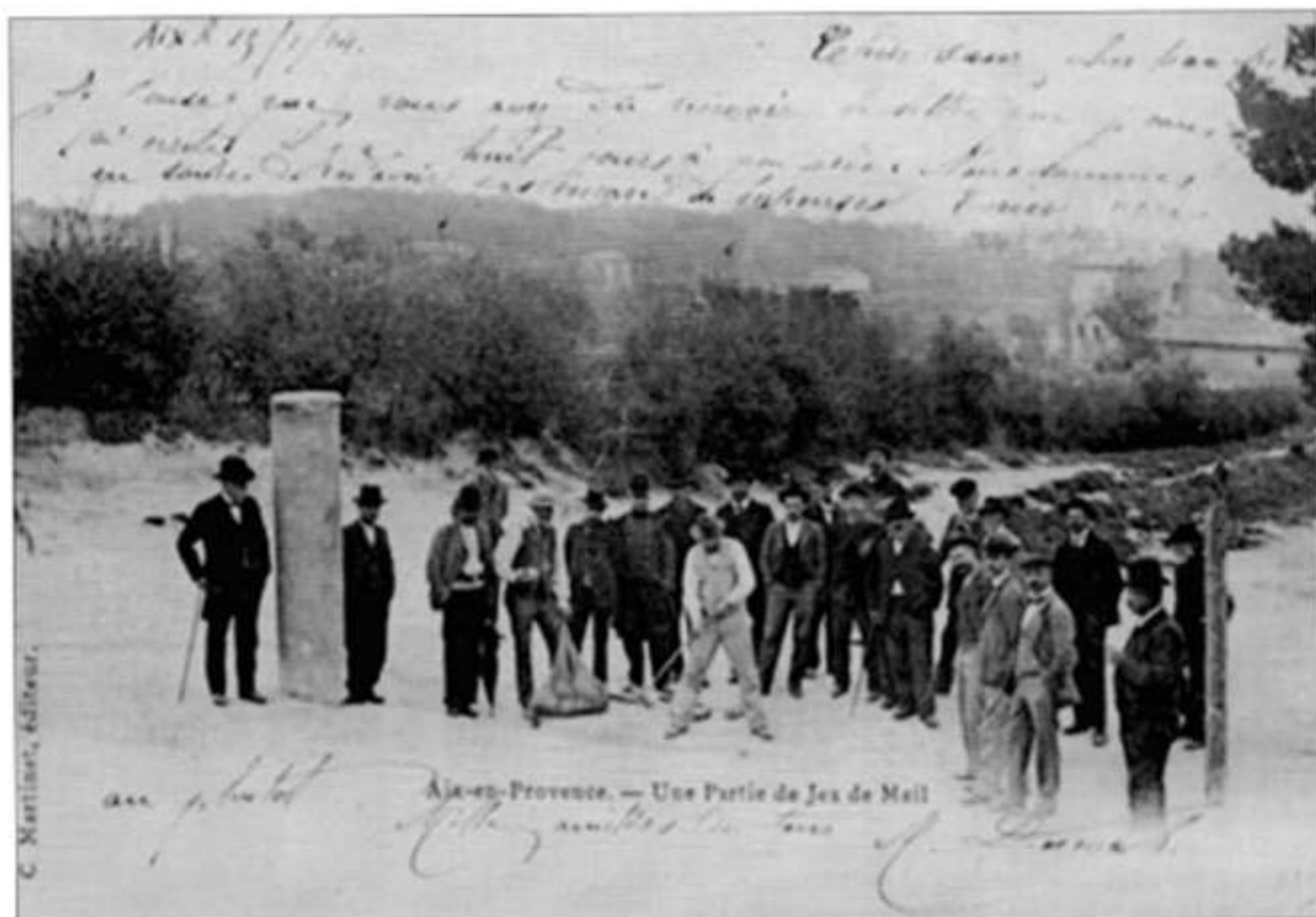


Fig 8. Post card of the Aix-en-Provence jeu de mail in 1903

seems that the cross country *jeu de mail* was also played at this time and so, at the end of the nineteenth century, Montpellier might have had two courses.

Jeu de mail however was coming to an end, losing its last players and its last two strongholds in southern France. The Aix-en-Provence *jeu de mail* [fig 8] was closed in 1932 and the Montpellier-Clapas *jeu de mail* was probably closed during World War II. I have heard that rugby is played on it today.

The game as played in Montpellier was described in Sudre's introduction:

There is not here, as in other towns, a specific closed *jeu de mail* mall. We play on roads and lanes in the town's surroundings. The detours we encounter are always opportunities to play difficult shots which require strength and skill, and which can be seen performed with marvellous accuracy: some players drive to 200 yards on the fly, which is not however all the game's science; you must know how to finesse your shots; how to get out of stony lies, from ditches or other hazards where the ball is often found; go over corners or high walls; know how to 'putt' to the touchstone to finish a game.

The rules are contained in 77 articles describing how to settle incidents occurring during a game and

the penalties to be applied. *Jeu de mail* players knew of out of bounds balls, water hazards, hitting another ball, air shots, broken balls or clubs and amazingly, etiquette rules dating back to the seventeenth century. A game was played by two, three or four players. Two players played two balls; three played three balls sometimes one against the best ball of the other two. And four players might play only two balls. In this foursome format each player on a side had to play his turn without replacement, not playing in turn costing a one-stroke penalty.

The game was played by 'holes up'. A hole was played between two touchstones. The first to play on each hole teed up his ball near a touchstone, not further than four steps. The tee was made with sand, small stones, wood pieces or rolled cardboard. The next players were to tee not further than a club length in front or behind the first player's tee. After driving no one had the right to displace, pick up or change the ball before 'holing out' which was done by hitting the next touchstone. The ball could only be changed if broken or split. The furthest from the target was the first to play. An air shot was counted as a stroke. The reckoning of the strokes was kept by saying that the longest driver was par and the others were more. If a player could not hit his second shot over the par player he was counted two more and so on.

The game was played on a very tight course: the roads, their ditches and non-farmed ground bordering the roads. The boundaries of the course were the surrounding land, farmed land, walls, fences, hedges, streams, trees or bushes. The ball was often out of bounds or lost except for the best players. A quarter of the rules deal with out of bound balls. And if you think that a stroke and distance is a harsh penalty you have not seen anything. In *jeu de mail* the out of bound ball was placed back on the road without loss of distance but with a three stroke penalty. With such penalties it is no wonder that the game disappeared. On the golf course, I am more often in the rough than on the fairway. If I had to add three strokes to my score each time I had to chip back on the fairway I would have quit golf long ago and sold my book collection in disgust. The out of bound limit applied vertically upwards, for example for a ball in a tree. As long as the land surrounding the course did not have a crop the players could enter it to search for their out of bound balls without damaging the harvest. This led to the closure of the game from May to the end of the harvest season, generally in July. Golfers, who, like me, roam for hours in knee-high grass in search of their balls, will be interested in knowing that *jeu de mail* players used especially trained dogs to find lost balls.

Lost balls were also penalised by three strokes, as well as balls in water, which were to be relieved like our lateral water hazards rule. Mud-covered balls had to be played as they lay. The only relief the rules authorized was cleaning the intended hitting spot on the ball with one finger. Only after hitting the ball out of the mud, could the player pick up and clean it before the next stroke. The same rule applied for balls covered by linen, grass cuttings, hay or manure. (Even in this situation no relief!)

The unplayable ball rule existed and you could drop your ball neither nearer nor further

to the touchstone for a modest three-stroke penalty.

The touchstone had to be of a diameter no smaller than the largest balls in use. In a former set of rules it can be found that the touchstone's diameter was to be the size of at least two balls. Does this have something to do with the four and a half inch golf hole? If in stroking in the direction of the touchstone the ball hit somebody or an animal the opponent could chose between letting the ball run its course and asking for a replay. If by hitting it a player sent his opponent's ball to touch the stone the stroke was taken for good. The furthest to the touchstone was to play first. The player could push away anything interfering with his line of play for a one-stroke penalty each time. He did that by hitting the obstacle, loose impediment or opponent's ball, with a croqueting blow of the mallet damped by a ball laid behind the interfering object. The croqueting stroke could be used, and counted one stroke, anywhere to 'chip' back one's ball or to push away a stone in front or behind the ball.

To win a hole a player had to hit the touchstone in the least number of strokes, but touching the stone was sometimes arguable if, for example, it was a faint side brush. The caddie's arbitration or the majority of the voices of the onlookers were used to settle the matter. A golf hole is obviously much better from this viewpoint. There can be no arguments as to whether the ball is or is not entirely in the hole.

One of the main features of the Montpellier *jeu de mail* was the forbidden corners. On a dog-leg, the same road making a turn, the player could play over the corner [fig 9] but corners taken to change direction from one road to another could not be played over.

It was said to be a reserved corner [fig 10]. When two roads crossed each other only the corner making the turn was reserved. All other corners could be played over.



Fig 9. How to play out of bound balls on doglegs
Sudre 1844 [29]



Fig 10. How to play on reserved corners. Sudre 1844 [29]

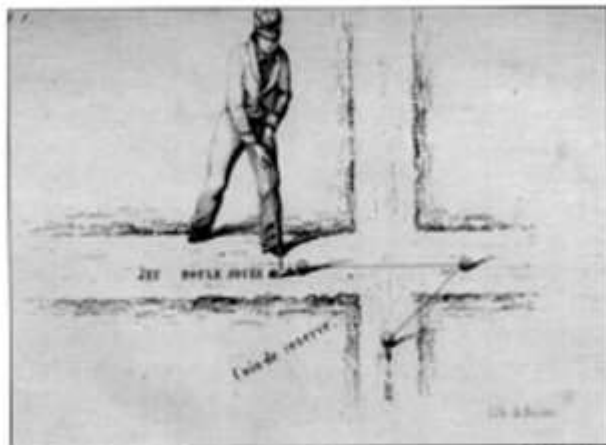


Fig 11. How to play on reserved corners at cross-roads. Sudre 1844 [29]

A player could, for example, play straight on the incoming road past the crossing and then play to the next road over the opposite corner [fig 11].

If you find this complicated and do not understand the reserved corners rules, do not worry. Neither did I until I wrote this article.

Practising a stroke to be played during a game was forbidden, but before starting a game a player could practise to the near touchstone. The player could do whatever necessary to have a good and stable footing even by removing or adding sand or gravel. He could push the bushes behind him with his back but was not allowed to use his hands to arrange the passage of the club. (I take here the opportunity to remind some of my golf partners that this rule still applies today in golf.)

Players knew of handicapping. A better player could give an advantage to his opponent by a number of strokes or by one or more free drops for out of bounds balls.

The ball was normally made out of a boxwood root and was the size of a tennis ball. The best balls were said to come from Naples in Italy and made from medlar trees. The wood was first left to dry, and then rounded. Balls had to be prepared; they were stone hammered by the *palemardiers*, played with half shots on gravelled soil to be hardened, and oiled with local herb juice to give them more weight. They were tested on the course to select the longest and straightest ones. Because they were made from a natural material *jeu de mail* balls did not have the true centre of gravity of our modern moulded golf balls. If their weight was biased they swerved in flight or bounced waywardly on hitting the ground. Players were advised to place the heavy side in line with the stroke to reduce the unwanted effects. Today we are advised to place the seam of Pro VI balls in line with the intended trajectory for longer drives. Old tricks for modern technology.

A good player had to possess different kind of balls and know their characteristics to choose the one most suited to the atmospheric or soil

conditions, the wind or the lie. When playing with back winds, on sandy soil or down slope it was better to use larger balls; with bad weather and wet ground it was better to play light balls. But with bright weather and hard soil it was better to use small balls.

Every book on *jeu de mail* since 1696 mentions the story of an extraordinary ball named *la Bernarde* reputed for its straightness and length, beating any ball by 50 yards. Its qualities were attributed to a perfect weight distribution, a natural miracle, and its happy owner was said to have refused repeatedly to sell it for large offers.

The club head was to be proportionate to the weight of the ball. Neither a heavy club with a small ball nor a light club with a large ball would produce a long shot. The ball was to have approximately half the weight of the club head. The club was similar to a croquet mallet. Its weight and size were also adjusted to the size and strength of the player. Too heavy or too long, it hit the ground in front of the ball. Too short or too light, it took the ball by the 'hair', (we would say topped the ball). The length of the club was generally from the waist to the ground but sometimes it could be as long as from the armpit to the ground for long driving.

The club head was made with a cylindrical wood mass reinforced with two iron bands. It was two-sided, one being flat for driving and the other having a tilted face to lift balls higher or to get out of hazards. The club head had to be prepared and hardened and this was done by hitting balls. The quality of different makers was acknowledged. It was recognised that the evergreen oak club heads made in Avignon by Georges Minier and his father were better made and played better than those of any other maker. The older published rules, before Sudre and Montpellier rules, mention the use of another club called *lève* (which means lifter) for holing out. The caddy was called *porte lève* (the lifter carrier). The club head had a cavity in its head that was not used to hit the ball. Instead the ball was placed in the cavity and pushed forward. In the in-town version of *jeu de mail* described by Lauthier, this club was very short, no higher than the middle of the thigh and the player replaced the wooden ball with a steel ball for holing out. The player holed out by throwing the ball through an iron hoop. In *jeu de mail à la chicane* the wooden ball was not to be lifted until hitting a touchstone. The lifter club, not mentioned in Sudre, might then have been the very long club seen in the Paul Brill painting. It is used by one of the players with his right hand only and the long shaft touching his back. The great length of this club might be justified, as noted by Browning [10], by its use as a ball retriever as demonstrated by other players in the same painting. But in the Montpellier game



Fig 6. Stance and Backswing. D'Allemagne [15] reproduced from Lauthier

described by Sudre it seems that the shot to the touchstone could be done by using the usual mallet club and croqueting the ball by placing a ball called *croquet* behind one's ball. If *jeu de mail* did not father golf, it at least gave us *croquet*.

The sole instruction text on *jeu de mail* was written by Lauthier. This text is a wonderful reminder for every golfer, (yes I wrote 'golfer'), on how to take his grip, stance and make his swing. Everything is said in less than five pages. Advice on how not to play:

There are some who play with the arms only, that is, who do not make this half turn with the loins.....they can never become good or powerful players, because they do not lift the mallet sufficiently high. Some lift it too far above the head or shoulders, some only waist high, and strike the ball with a jerk, as if they were cracking a whip. There are some who straddle in a strange fashion.....others raise the left elbow trying to guide the stroke...All these styles are bad and displeasing and ought to be changed.

The golfer will recognise some of his pro's advice: turn your hips, don't over swing, don't hit but swing the club. And advice on how to play properly: how

to grip the club, place the feet, take the stance, make a back swing and hit the ball.

The instructions of Lauthier are very slightly modified by Sudre for the grip and stance, which are similar to the closed position seen at this time in St Andrews. Did *jeu de mail* benefit from golf players vacationing in Montpellier? Sudre himself says: 'Englishmen (in France they say 'English' for 'British') coming to this town at first do not understand why so many people are pleased by running, as they say, after a piece of wood, but they rapidly discover their error, and we see them going three against three, two against two and then one to one to better enjoy, they say, the pleasure of the game.'

The hands are near each other, like our two-handed baseball grip: left hand first, right hand under. The thumbs of both hands cross over the shaft and touch the other fingers. *Jeu de mail* players were advised not to put the thumbs on top or on the near side of the shaft because it produced a curved flight. We would now say not to use a strong or weak grip to avoid slicing or hooking. Players were told to always wear gloves on both hands in order to hold the club more firmly and spare the hands from callouses. The arms were to be not too straight nor

too tight. They had to feel relaxed to allow an easy and free movement.

The feet were aligned with the line of flight, the right foot a little behind the left, the ball in front of the left heel and legs not too far apart, knees neither straight nor loose but firmly braced for a good hit. Altogether the position of a man fighting an opponent. The ball is neither too far nor too close to the player who is advised to stay level on his knees during the swing. They also knew of the waggle, (they said for aiming the ball), and were told to do it only once if possible, as players taking too many waggles were those who seemed to miss their shots more often. The body, slightly inclined from the hips, neither too upright nor too bent, was to turn slowly behind from the waist up to the head but without losing sight of the ball. This half turning of the body was said to give a wide circular backswing to the club, which is necessary to produce the great centrifugal force coming from a wide arc. The club was to be lifted slowly as a unit with the body, without swaying. After a little pause at the top of the movement the club was swung vigorously, without forgetting to add power from the wrist.

Advice was also given for odd lies: a lower ball was to be pulled to the left and a higher ball was to be pushed to the right. No golfer will argue with that. Practice was not forgotten. The masters and good players were said to train their skill by hitting half shots to one another, killing two birds with one stone: improving their game and at the same time, hardening the new balls. For beginners it was advised not to try the impossible task of hitting long drives like the masters immediately. Instead, they should begin with quarter then half shots and progressively and patiently acquire the skill to play the long game with accuracy and sureness.

Lauthier said about *jeu de mail*: 'It can be played at all ages, from childhood to old age. Its charm

does not consist in hitting long strokes, but in playing truly and neatly, without display. When in addition, one can also drive far and sure, one is a perfect player.' 300 years ago, they already knew what golf means to us. Golf and *jeu de mail* coexisted and probably enriched one another: swing hints for *jeu de mail* from Scotland; disputes settlement with rules for golf from France.

The cross country game of *jeu de mail à la chicane* retreated to small enclosed fields and died there. *Jeu de mail* disappeared with the loss of its natural playground. It makes me think that it is not the space age multilayer balls, the titanium clubs or even the hole which characterises golf. It is its playground, the links. The links, and especially those of St Andrews, gave golf its ability to survive from the Middle Ages until today on unfarmed, unbuilt areas. With the advent of inland courses golf spread worldwide. All golf courses in the world are made more or less to resemble the eighteen St Andrews holes. They imitate the number of holes and even the number of par three, four or fives. They also imitate the bunkers in places where bunkers never existed.

Golf is Scottish to me because the links are Scottish. One of my friends told me that this will certainly please a Scottish audience very much. My answer was that I played the Old Course in St Andrews once and I just want to be able to go back.

I do not know if *jeu de mail* fathered golf or not. I am inclined to say no but due to a great number of similarities I think that they are somewhat related. By its similarities with golf *jeu de mail* had attracted many golf historians and these similarities might now attract golf book collectors who will find it interesting to add to their collection, very scarce books that are much older than any existing golf book.

