

## Mail

The game of mail as it was played in France until 1939 is probably younger than the games of colf, crosse and golf. According to Anton Gill ('Croquet – The complete guide', 1988), "the game itself can be traced back to Italy and the 'Giucator di palea a maglio' mentioned in the carnival songs of Florence by Giovanni dell'Ottonaio, soon after 1500".

The earliest references to the French jeu de mail are from the 15<sup>th</sup> century. As far as information goes, the game has always been played with spherical balls made of wood. The 'palemardiers' (pro's), the exclusive ball makers, used the roots of the boxtree. The place of the knots in the ball was important as the centre of gravity of the ball was decisive for the flight characteristics.

According to Mr Sudre ('Le Noble Jeu de Mail de la Ville de Montpellier', 1772), the ball was hammered with a stone to roughen the surface.

This hammering can be seen on a Italianistic painting (1624) from the Flemish painter Paul Bril which is on display in the Minneapolis Institute of Arts in the U.S.A. ('CHOULE – The Non-Royal but most Ancient Game of Crosse', Geert & Sara Nijs, 2008). This would add distance and improve the flight characteristics, but the balls we have been able to examine do not show any such marks.

Before the ball went on sale, the ball maker played very carefully with the ball with short swings for a limited period of time. This extreme accuracy in production and handling was needed because the mailers played on a very long but narrow 'fairway', often hundreds of metres long and approximately 5 metres wide. Hitting straight was of decisive importance.

According to Joseph Lauthier ('Nouvelles règles pour le jeu de mail', 1717), balls of different sizes and weights were used depending on surface, wind, rain and the weight of the mail club. He did not mention the relative sizes or weights.

In literature, we often find stated that mail balls were much bigger than crosse or colf balls, or that these balls had the size of a croquet ball or a modern tennis ball.

It is assumed that balls bigger than 6 centimetres were used on the long mail alleys (court game), while the smaller balls were used in the 'chicane' game (the game played on the sand paths, tracks and the ramparts outside the town).



*In the Musée du Vieux Montpellier in Montpellier, for hundreds of years the centre of 'mail à la chicane', one ball and two mail clubs are stored in the depot. Information about the use of these clubs and ball was not available. The ball was 6.0 centimetres in diameter, but no information could be given about the weight or the kind of wood and the ball did not show any hammering marks.*

In the Musée du Vieux Montpellier in Southern France, a chicane mail ball was stored in a store room. No information could be given about weight or the kind of wood used for the production of these balls. No knowledge was available about the game of mail, for hundreds of years a very popular game in and around the town of Montpellier.

*These balls were found on a flea market in Saint Rémy de Provence. The second-hand sellers had not the slightest idea what they were offering. They had never heard of jeu de mail, one of the most popular games ever played in Southern France. The small balls were probably used in the chicane mail game. They do not show any hammering marks and neither does the large ball, that was probably used on mail courts. – Private collection*



At a ‘marché aux puces’ (flea market) in Saint Rémy de Provence, we found 3 mail balls. One was made of hornbeam, had a diameter of 8.0 centimetres and a weight of 260 grams. The others had a diameter of 5.4 and 5.6 centimetres and had a weight of 60 and 70 grams, respectively. The smaller balls were probably used in the chicane game; the big one was meant for playing on the mail (boulevard) alleys. Michael Flannery describes mail balls between 6.5 and 10.0 centimetres with weights of 140 to 200 grams (‘Golf Through The Ages, 600 years of golfing art’, 2004).

Some years ago, a mail ball was found together with two mail clubs in the attic of a house along The Mall in London. According to Ian Henderson & David Stirk (‘Golf in the making’), the ball made of boxwood was 6.5 centimetres in diameter and had a weight of 160 grams.

The straight hit was an absolute necessity. The mail alley was often not more than 5 metres wide, with a length of several hundred metres. Along the course there was a low boarding, maybe a foot or so high. Hitting the ball ‘out of bounds’ was a costly affair.



*This photo of the jeu de mail alley in Angers shows how narrow the playing field of the mail game was. A straight hit was an absolute must.*

The surface of the mail alley consisted of battered earth, sometimes covered with a thin layer of shells or sand.

Samuel Pepys wrote on Friday 15 May, 1663, in his diary: “Up betimes and walked to St James’s, where Mr Coventry being in bed I walked in the Park, discoursing with the keeper of the Pell Mell, who was sweeping of it; who told me of what the earth is mixed that do floor the Mall, and that over all there is cockle-shells powdered, and spread to keep it fast; which, however, in dry weather, turns to dust and deads the ball.”

In his article ‘Golf – The True History’ (‘Golf International Magazine’, June/ July 2009), Michael Flannery states that bounce and roll equals the carry of the ball. Players kept the ball more rolling than flying to reduce the risk of hitting the ball out of bounds. This is in line with the inclination of one of the two club faces of approximately 5°.

*A royal ‘malie’ (jeu de mail) player on the mail alley in The Hague, The Netherlands. The ball is hit in such a way that it hardly gets airborne but will roll most of the distance towards the target. Information about the distances achieved with the balls on mail alleys is diverse. –*

*Adriaen van de Venne, ‘A game of Pell-Mell’ (c.1620-1626) from an album of 102 drawings – © The Trustees of the British Museum*



*Performance of wooden mail balls*

Mail balls were of a high quality. The choice of the boxwood roots with their knots decided the centre of gravity and therefore the quality of the ball. The careful initial use by the palemardier guaranteed a straight hit when the player made the right swing. The meticulous attention given to the quality of the mail ball during the production seems to be much more severe than with the wooden balls of the 'cousin' games. As a consequence, we expect that the mail ball was rather expensive. No detailed information about production costs have been found so far.

The necessity of hitting the mail ball very straight made a good swing absolute necessary. Therefore so much attention was given on 'how to swing' in the 'instruction books' from 'La maison académique: Le lev royal de Palle-Mail, & Comme il se jou-ë à present' (1659), 'Nouvelles règles pour le jeu de mail' from Lauthier (1717) and 'Le Noble Jeu de Mail de la Ville de Montpellier' from J. Sudre (1772).



*The very upright backswing with the bent arms of the well-known mail player in the book of Lauthier ('Nouvelles règles pour le jeu de mail', 1717) makes one wonder how far he could hit the wooden ball on a favourable low trajectory.*

What about the distances achieved with these boxwood balls?

Let us start with Robert Browning. He wrote in 'A History of Golf' that a skilful player 'at the Pall Mall' could drive these mail balls 350 metres with his light, supple long-handled mallet. Several other authors have revealed the same feat.

The origin from this questionable statement probably finds its origin in the book 'Golf' from the Badminton Library from 1890 (see this chapter under 'Crosse'). The 400 yards mentioned in the book started to develop a life of its own, as can be seen in the book of Browning, where he even mixed up mail with crosse and copied incorrect 400-yard achievements. Several other authors just copied Andrew Lang or Robert Browning.

In 'Golf Through The Ages', Michael Flannery stated that players on the mail alleys could reach the target in 8 to 10 strokes, including approach and 'putting' through the ring or against the stake. The average distance achieved must have been between 125 and 150 metres. Good players could add 10 to 15 metres.

Also Adolphe Anglada ('Le Jeu de Mail de Montpellier de 1494 à 1940', 1985) says that distances of 160 metres could be achieved.

In 'Divertissements innocens, contenant les règles du jeu des eschets, du billiard, de la paume, du palle-mail, et du trictrac' (1696), the following is stated: "When there is a match in front, those following will not tee off until the others are at least hundred paces away and cry 'Garde!'" This implies that ordinary people were able of driving up to 75 metres. A strong player could at least double the length when driving a teed ball.

One of the greatest palemardiens (professionals), Louis Brun, an 18<sup>th</sup> century master from the French Provence, drove a series of balls 400 paces or 275 metres on battered soil (Michael Flannery in 'Golf Through The Ages').

In 'Jeu de Mail', an article in 'Through The Green' Magazine, December 2002, Henri Jakubowicz wrote that in Montpellier, on an artificial chicane course, players hit the ball 100 metres on a small, narrow course of 200 metres.

This is the only information so far about distances achieved on chicane tracks. In the same article Jakubowicz, stated that players on a 400 metres alley needed 3 to 4 strokes before putting through the iron hoop, so an average of 100 to 130 metres. On a 750 metres alley, 4 to 5 strokes (averaging more than 150 metres) were made before approaching ring or post.



*A rare picture of a jeu de mail à la chicane player. This mail variant was played until 1939 in the Montpellier/Aix-en-Provence region in the Southeast of France. The game was mainly played on sandy paths, fosses and ramparts, etc. around the towns.  
– From Marks & Spencer's 'A history of Golf'*