

The maliebanen

The public courses as built in the Netherlands in the first part of the 17th century were not different from the mail courts in France. In general they were straight alleys varying in length between 600 and 1,000 metres, depending on the space (or perhaps the money) available and a width of approximately 5 metres. The terrain had a surface of battered earth, covered with a layer of pounded shells or fine sand, and was bordered with a low fence that had a few openings to get in or out of the court. On the fence, lines were drawn and figures and numbers were written to give the players an indication of how far they had hit the ball.

Alongside the lane several rows of trees were planted, mostly elm trees and/or lime trees.

Between the rows of trees there were paths laid out for people to stroll in the shade of the trees, meeting each other and looking at the people playing the mail game.

Adjacent to the public field there was always a mail- or wine-house. It was the house of the mail master who was often appointed by the authorities or the leaseholder. The game was considered as a tiresome one that made one thirsty. In the house itself or in the gardens the players could recover, relax and have a good glass of wine. As the years went by the interest in the game continued to dwindle and the mail house developed into an independent home for exclusive societies.

Apart from the public ones private courts were laid out in the gardens of mansions and castles, as decoration or to be used by the owner and his guests. Remains of these playgrounds show that they could be even shorter than 300 metres.

How to play

Each mail alley was equipped with a starting point that was also the finish of a 'round' of mail and at the other side there was the turning point, a stake or a ring from where the match continued towards the finish. The targets were different: in Utrecht there were two stakes while the one in The Hague seemed to have elevated targets. It is unclear what types of targets were used on the other Netherlandish playing fields.

The targets were placed at both ends of the track at some distance from the ‘rabats’ (high end boards). The basis of the game was very simple. He or she who could ‘round’ the course in the fewest number of strokes was the winner of the match. It is said that sometimes players bet on the number of strokes they would need to reach the final target.

Players made their first stroke from near the starting/end point in the direction of the opposite turning target. The ball was kept low and rolling to avoid the ball being played over the boards and ending up ‘out of bounds’. It is said that average players could hit the ball 100 metres, roll included, while the most experienced players could hit the ball up to 200 metres, roll included, depending on the surface and the condition of the terrain. After reaching the turning target players continued the way back, towards the end target.

In Utrecht, a hoop had been placed additionally in the middle of the lane where the ball had to pass before continuing the match towards the turning target; it is unknown if such half-way obstacles were used elsewhere.

It was not an easy game, as one had to hit the ball ‘far and sure’. It was not a matter of taking a club and just hitting the ball; one had to be taught ‘how to swing’. Who the teachers (professionals) were is not always known.

*From ‘Het maatschappelijk leven onzer Vaderen
in de XVIIe eeuw’*

*“De malie en de klos, de kloot die sij hantieren,
De bal, die sy de baen met kracht doen overswieren,
Sy maecken ‘t broose lijf tot eenen vasten klomp,
Een Davids in ‘t gevecht.”*

(The club and the ball, the ball they handle,
The ball that they sweep with force across the alley,
They make the fragile body into a strong torso,
David in the fight.)

(Johan van Someren in ‘Het Maatschappelijk Leven onzer Vaderen in de XVIIe eeuw’ [Social life of our ancestors in the 17th century], Dr. Gilles Denijs Jacob Schotel, 1869)

The books, ‘Les maisons académiques’ (descriptions of all kind of games and containing also the rules of ‘paillemail’) of which the first one of a long series appeared in 1659 and ‘Nouvelles règles pour le jeu de mail’ by Joseph Lauthier, 1717, did not exist when the game came into vogue. There only circulated a French pamphlet from around 1630: ‘Les Loix dv Paillemail’ (see chapter ‘The rules of the game’).

Near the starting/final target there was the mail house where the players could recover after an exhausting game, have some refreshments and a relaxing discussion with their playing mates and other players ‘of their own kind’. The public courses were constructed and owned by the local authorities who rented them out, often for a period of three years, to a keeper of both court and wine house, whose function was to maintain the playground and the house, to repair whatever was necessary and to keep order on and around the course. He collected green fees and fines, he produced, rented out and repaired clubs and balls, looked after the guests in the clubhouse and sometimes he acted as professional and referee as well. His income depended on the active use of both mail-course and -house by players and other passers-by.

Maliecolven and cloten (clubs and balls)

The equipment of the players, rented most of the time from the mail master, consisted of a wooden ball, the ‘maliecloot’ or ‘ball’, and was hit with a ‘mallet’ or a ‘maliecolf’, having a long flexible wooden shaft with a velvet grip. On the lower end of the shaft, a cylindrical head was attached, with a metal band at both ends of the cylinder, to protect the wood against damage by the impact of the hard wooden ball and to increase the weight of the head.



A ‘maliecolf’ consisted of a long whippy shaft. This shaft, approximately 1.00 metre long, was inserted in a cylindrical head with two faces. Both faces were enclosed with metal bands to protect the wood and to increase the weight of the head. Shafts were often made of hazel or ash and the head of walnut.

Because the ball had to roll, it is not sure if there was a difference in the inclination of the strike faces, as was the case with the mail clubs in London and in Paris.

There were no standard dimensions neither for the 'kloot' nor for the 'maliecolf'.

Public mail courts

Four public courts were constructed in the first half of the 17th century:

- 1609 The Hague (diplomatic centre)
- 1637 Utrecht (university centre)
- 1637 Leiden (university centre)
- 1651 Amsterdam (commercial centre)

How many private courses were built is unknown.