

Nature, measure of all things

In the course of the years not much attention has been paid to the influence of nature on the Scottish and continental games.

Why did players use wooden balls of approximately the same size?

Could it be that golfers used balls defined by the size of boxwood branches?

Do we accept that the whippy feature of the ash wood shaft was enhanced by the moon phases and that the end of the playing season was determined by the growth of certain weeds?

Most mature branches of the box shrub have a diameter of 5 – 6 centimetres. Most golf (-like) balls were made of boxwood and therefore had a dimension of less than 6 centimetres.



Boxwood for a very hard ball



*The *buxus sempervirens* or box was widely spread over western and northern Europe. In Britain, in Southern England and in the Firth of Forth region in Scotland this shrub or small tree was abundantly available. – <https://data.nbn.org.uk> © National Biodiversity Network 2015*

Boxwood is a hard wood which does not split easily, is not difficult to manipulate and does not become soggy when submerged in water or in other moist situations for a period of time. In the early golf region, the Firth of Forth, the *buxus sempervirens* or simply boxwood was sufficiently available as it was in the Low Countries in the early colf region.

The box is a slow growing shrub or small tree, reaching a height of 5 – 6 metres. The branches reach a diameter of 5 – 6 centimetres which matches closely the diameters of the wooden balls from the 15th and 16th centuries found in the Netherlands.

This diameter limited the maximum size of the golf balls made from this wood. It is notable that the leather ball successors of both golf and colf balls were not very different in size with the wooden boxwood balls.

Is it possible that the size of Netherlandish ‘hairy’ leather colf balls and the ‘feathery’ leather balls from Scotland (and today’s golf balls) were initially determined by the size of the box branches?

The moon for a whippy shaft

Most colf, crosse and golf clubs were equipped with shafts made of ash wood. The ‘crossetier’ (crosse club maker) in the Hainaut region selected an ash tree with a trunk diameter of approximately 25 – 30 centimetres. The tree was cut, not sawn, at a height of 1.50 metres lengths.

The best period for cutting the selected trees was between October and March, when there were no leaves left on the trees. In that period, the last quarter of the moon was the best cutting time because of the descending sap in the tree.

The heading of this sub-chapter could have been also “Slurry for long-lasting clubs”. The crossetiers of the Belgian/French clubs immersed the wood cut from the ash tree for the shaft in *statu nascendi* for four or five months in slurry. An alternative was to immerse the embryo shaft for two or three months in linseed oil.



Before carving the ash tree wood into a basic crosse shaft, it is immerse for some months into slurry or linseed oil to conserve the wood before carving it into to basic model for the shaft. –

Musée d’Histoire et de Folklore, Ath, Belgium – Photo Geert Nijs

Cattle, the start of the season

Until the mid-20th century crosseurs in Belgium and France played the game of crosse on the wastelands, meadows, and agricultural land round the towns and villages. When in summer cows, sheep and horses grazed on the pastures and crops were growing, the crosseurs were not very welcome to play amongst the livestock and the crops.



On the meadows the crosseurs were only welcome when the livestock returned to the barns. The players had to leave the playing field in spring when the cattle left their winter stalling.

When in autumn the crops were harvested, vegetation stopped growing and last but not least the cattle were taken off the land to return to their winter accommodation, the farmers, who probably played the games themselves, allowed the crosseurs to return to their fields to start playing again.

The opening of the new season was mostly around All Saints' Day on the 1st of November. The players could use the fields until the dandelions started blooming, the agricultural fields were sown and the cattle returned to the meadows again.

The closing of the season which often coincided with the Easter Monday, was celebrated with the finals of the regional or international tournaments.

It would be interesting to know if with the game of colf, golf, and mail the same relations with nature occurred.

Dandelions, the end of the season

The dandelion is a wild herb, also called horse flower, lions teeth and in French 'pissenlit'. These plants can be found in spring in the waste lands and meadows all over Europe. The plant has very healthy properties. The young leaves are full of vitamins A, B, C and D and contain minerals, such as iron, potassium and zinc. The leaves are full of taste when used as a salad, a welcome change after a winter with mainly cabbage as the only vegetable.

People in the countryside were well-aware of this tasty, healthy weed. In particular the humble people of whom there many, went into the fields to pick these free of charge and before other fresh vegetables were in bloom. At that time however the crosseurs were still playing their game on the dandelion fields. It is obvious that picking the dandelions while crosseurs were hitting their 'chouettes' (crosse balls) was rather dangerous.

To protect the dandelion pickers against the flying objects from the crosseurs, the village council proclaimed the end of the crosse season when the dandelion harvest was due to begin.



In spring the young leaves of the dandelion were eaten as salad or a kind of spinach. It is the first fresh freely available vegetable of the new season. Crosseurs had to leave the fields so that the leaves could be picked.



It was the 'garde champêtre' (village constable) who walked through the streets of the village with a bell or a drum to inform the villagers that it was the end of the crosse season. – <http://images-01.delcampe-static.net>

It was the village 'garde champêtre' (village constable) who went into the village, walking through the streets, ringing his bell or beating his drum, to inform the villagers that the crosse season has come to an end and that the fields were open again for the people to pick the dandelions.

Today the game is played on enclosed private or communal fields and the dandelion does not play a role anymore in the closing rituals of the season. The major inter-regional tournaments in which many crosseurs participate are often held on Easter Monday, and they are often the official closing matches of the crosse season.