



King François I brought jeu de mail to Fontainebleau near Paris and made the game for the first time a real royal game. – Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris

In France, the game was called ‘The Noble Game of Mail’, although the game could have been called ‘The Royal Game of Mail’.

The first French king who reigned in the ‘mail’ era was François I (1494-1547). According to Elisabeth Belmas, professor of history at the Paris XIII University, it was François I who introduced jeu de mail into Fontainebleau (Elisabeth Belmas, ‘Jouer Autrefois’, 2006).

It became very popular with the retinue of the king as well, especially by the ladies who could not play ‘jeu de pelote’ (hand-tennis [Jean-Marie Lhôte, ‘Dictionnaire des jeux de société’, 1996]).

His son Henry II (1519-1559) was an avid mail player, as was his wife Catherine de Medici.

It was here that Mary Stuart, the future Queen of Scots, got to know the game when she lived with the French royal family between 1548 and 1560.

As all kings did, Henry II travelled his realm regularly to show his presence to the people and to take care of royal business. He never failed to go to the nearby mail alleys to challenge local players. In Lyon on the ‘Belle Cura’ (beautiful court) he had even his own chair (throne) placed under the foliage of the lime trees at the mail court. From there he watched the performance of the best female mail player, ‘la belle Cordière’ (the beautiful wife of a rope merchant) who was, ‘even for men’, unbeatable (see chapter ‘Women and children’).

(Louis Edouard Fournier, *Histoire anecdotique des jeux, jouets et amusements*)

In 1559, Mary Stuart married François II, the new king of France. François died at the age of sixteen from an abscess in the ear, although according to several unsubstantiated reports, the crown prince François, son of King François I, was poisoned by an Italian, le Comte Sebastiano Montecuculli, when he returned perspiring from a 'partie' of mail and drank a glass of poisoned water.

We have found, so far, no information about possible jeu de mail activities from his successor King Charles IX (1550-1574). It is known that he was a keen 'jeu de paume' (hand-tennis) player, but pallemail is not mentioned in the survey of his sporting life.

King Henry III (1551-1589) played jeu de mail regularly at Saint-Germain-en-Laye, which game he preferred above the 'courte (short) paume' game, because it was less tiresome (Henri Carré, 'Jeux, sports et divertissements des rois de France', 1937).

Also the next king, Henry IV (1553-1610), was an ardent mail player. During his reign and that of his son Louis XIII, jeu de mail was the favourite entertainment for 'Les Grands'. In each public garden, space was allocated for the mail players, both in existing and new constructed gardens.

When 'le bon roi' (the good king) Henri IV was murdered, he was succeeded by his son Louis XIII (1601-1643), who, like his father, was hooked on the mail game. As a child he went with his governess Madame de Montglat to the 'palemail'.

(Christian Bouyer, 'Louis XIII: la montée de l'absolutisme', 2006)

Under the reign of Louis XIII, his minister Cardinal Richelieu had constructed the new 'Palais Royal'. He included a vast space for the jeu de mail on the 'Allée de marronniers'.

His son Louis XIV (1638-1715), the famous 'roi soleil' (sun king), was not only a keen mail player, he also loved the scenery of a mail alley. As a young boy he learnt to play the mail game in the gardens of the Royal Palace. He had an alley laid out in Paris, and when he was at Utrecht in the Netherlands, he openly admired the beauty of the 'maliebaan' (the mail alley) there and wished he could take the alley with him to Versailles.

(Louis Beumer's transcription of 'Geschiedenis van de Utrechts Maliebaan en het Maliehuis' after a manuscript by W.A.G. Perk, 1970)

In his memoires, the Duke of Saint-Simon wrote several times about the king being a very frequent mail player (Stanis Perez, 'La santé de Louis XIV: une biohistoire du Roi-Soleil', 2007).



Louis XIV liked jeu de mail very much. On the occasion of the birth of the heir to the throne, the 5th and 6th June 1662, he gave a demonstration of his address skills for 15,000 spectators. When in 1685, he got his first attacks of gout, he had to stop playing the game and he switched over to a kind of indoor mail or table billiards. – Engraving by A. Trouvain, 1694 – Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris

When for health reasons the game became too strenuous for the aging king, a kind of indoor mail game was invented, the so-called table billiards. The king's withdrawal from the alley for the billiard table marked the beginning of the end of the jeu de mail on the alleys.

His successor Louis XV remained hooked on jeu de mail as his father was. In his 'house' there were several 'porte mains' (jeu de mail caddies). The game was still considered as the best game for one's health and suitable for all ages, from childhood to old age.
(Elisabeth Belmas, 'Jouer Autrefois', 2006)

No documents have been found showing any interest from his successor Louis XVI in the mail game. He was decapitated in 1793 after the French Revolution.

Jeu de mail à la chicane played on the ramparts and tracks around the towns in Southern France survived till the first half of the 20th century, without however any involvement of kings or later presidents.

Survey of French kings and their possible connection with jeu de mail:

Francois I	(1494-1547)	Yes
Henry II	(1519-1559)	Yes
François II	(1544-1560)	A bit
Charles IX	(1550-1574)	Unknown
Henry III	(1551-1589)	Yes
Henry IV	(1553-1610)	Yes
Louis XIII	(1601-1643)	Yes
Louis XIV	(1638-1715)	Yes
Louis XV	(1710-1774)	Yes
Louis XVI	(1754-1793)	No

King Louis XVI was the last king of France. During his reign ‘jeu de mail aux grands cours’ died and became forgotten.

One could say that jeu de mail during its existence of more than 200 years was not only a ‘noble game’, it was indeed the **‘royal game of palemaille’**.

There are no documents proving that the maliebaan at Utrecht in the Netherlands was ever used by a royal. King Louis XIV walked over it and considered it as the most beautiful mail alley in Europe. – Herman Saftleven, c.1660, Atlas Munnicks van Cleeff – By courtesy of Koninklijke Verzamelingen, Den Haag, The Netherlands

