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## JEU DE CROSSE – The non-royal but most ancient game of 'crosse'

By Geert & Sara Nijs

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### *Introduction*

Most of the members of our association, being historians or collectors, have probably read books about the history of golf. Practically without exception, we learnt in these books about the ancient continental golf-like games '*mail*', '*colf*' and '*choule*'.

Why these three games? Weren't there many more stick and ball games on the continent?

The *game of mail* is probably mentioned because this game was played by kings and nobles; many historians love to research and publish about the lives of kings and nobles.

The *game of colf* is probably mentioned because historians could not ignore the existence of hundreds and hundreds of beautiful paintings from famous Flemish and Dutch painters.

But why is the *game of choule*, as the game is erroneously called (the real name is '*jeu de crosse*'), emphatically mentioned in all these history books? As far as we have been able to discover, it was not or hardly played by kings or nobles. No paintings were made by famous artists. It was not played in the then centres of the world, as *mail* and *colf* were.

Could it be because this game was mentioned for the first time in 1890 in a 'golf history' book, namely 'Golf' from the 'Badminton Library'?

Generations of (Anglo-Saxon) golf historians have been (and still are) grateful for the information given in this book, because they concluded that they did not need to learn

French, nor cross the Channel or the Atlantic, to find out for themselves about this peculiar game. Even in one of the latest books on the history of golf, from Marks and Spencer (published in 2003), straight forward use is made of the almost 110 years old information from the Badminton Library. The main reason being, that since then no research whatsoever has been done on this subject.

Also continental historians, for whom the French language is a lesser problem, have never dug into the past and present of this game. In the latest publications on golf's history, continental authors hardly mention or even ignore the existence of this game. Have they concluded that the game is or was a too marginal a note in the history of stick and ball games? And herewith they ignored the fact that, *mail* and *colf* being already dead for centuries, thousands and thousands of '*crosses*' (clubs) and millions of '*choulettes*' (balls) were made, while golf in Britain was still a game for the happy few.

What then is this game, called '*jeu de crosse*' or '*crossage*' by the few hundred remaining *crosseurs* in northern France and southern Belgium. We would like to explain to you how this game is played today. Perhaps we will have the opportunity in the near future, to tell you more about the history of this almost thousand years old game. A game that was embedded in the daily life of many thousands of commoners. A game so closely linked to religion. A game immortalised in art, literature, music, poetry and language as no other stick and ball game.

### *Just a Sunday club match*

When a club match is organised, the members of the '*société de crosse*' gather in the clubhouse. The organising committee starts to divide the *crosseurs* into '*équipes*' (teams). The club players are classified into two groups: A-players (low handicaps in golf) and B-players (high handicaps in golf). The committee makes sure that every B-player is assigned to an A-player.

This combination is not only made to have a fairer competition; the A-B combination is also made for A-players to share their experience in swinging, choice of *crosses* and the strategy of the game with the B-players. *Jeu de crosse* does not know professionals or books about 'How to swing'.



*The 'tirage' (draw) in the clubhouse of the society 'La Revanche - La Soulette Finésienne', at Feignies, France. The draw decides which teams will play against each other.*

To decide who will be playing against whom, a '*tirage*' (draw) is held. Numbers, representing the teams, are put in a hat or a sack. Drawing the numbers decides the attachment of the teams. Having loudly commented on the results of the draw, the *crosseurs* finish their drinks and move to the point of departure on the *crosse* field.



*The start of the 'contrat' (agreement). Heads or tails decide which team may determine the routing of the partie. In crosse there is no fixed routing as in golf.*

Before the first '*partie*' (the first hole in golf) commences, the two teams have to make up a '*contrat*' (agreement).

First, the routing of each *partie* (hole) has to be decided upon. '*Pile ou face*' (heads or tails) decides which team describes the course of the *partie*. In *jeu de crosse* there is no fixed routing as in golf. For example, the team that won the toss (team Y), decides that the *partie* will be played from the tee, via target number 4 (a metal board called '*planchette*') to *planchette* number 2. In the second part of the *contrat*, it is decided which team will play as '*chouleurs*', playing in series of three strokes in order to reach the target, and which team will be the '*déchouleurs*', playing only one stroke (*déchoule*) per series, in order to prevent the *chouleurs* to reach the target.

The other team (Z), the team that did not prescribe the routing, will be first to propose the number of *déchoules* with a maximum of nine.



The second part of the *contrat* causes a lot of discussions between the team members: "Within how many *déchoules* can we expect to reach the *planchette*?"

Team Y can underbid this proposition. However, in case it did not propose a lower number, team Z plays against its own proposition. In case team Z refuses to make a proposition, team Y automatically will play against the maximum number of *déchoules*.

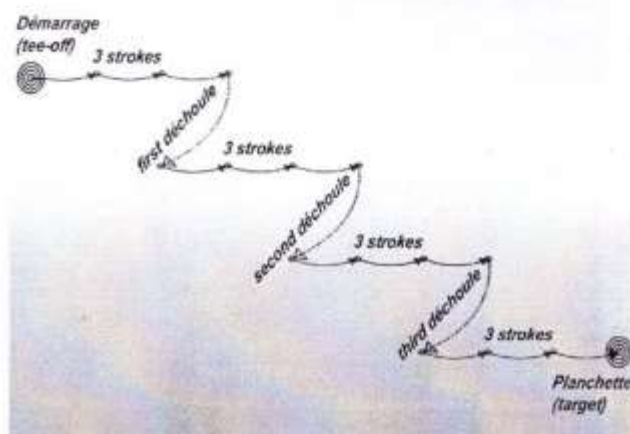


There are no specially prepared teeing off places. As in ancient golf, the '*démarrage*' is made just near the target of the previous *partie*. The younger players make a full golf-like swing, contrary to many elderly players who strike at the ball rather than through the ball.

The number of proposed *déchoules* and the possible underbidding depends on various

factors: the condition of the field, the routing of the *partie*, the distance of the *partie*, the presence of nearby *déchoules* areas. Also the quality of the team, concerning *chouler*, *déchouler*, long hitting, precision hitting, etc., is of utmost importance in deciding on the contents of the *contrat*. When all this tossing and bargaining has been done, the match can begin. The team that proposes the lowest number of *déchoules* begins the match as *chouleurs*.

After every *partie*, a new *contrat* has to be made for the next one.



*Scheme of a partie, based on three déchoules*

The *chouleurs* start with the '*démarrage*' (tee off). With some societies, it is allowed to make the very first *démarrage* with the *choulette* (a wooden or nylon elliptical ball) placed on a small elevation, for example a small heap of sand.

When a player makes his stroke, it is expected that the other players keep quiet and do not move.

One opponent stays with the *chouleur*. The other two *crossseurs*, one of each *équipe*, walk into the field in the direction where the *choulette* will be hit, to locate the *choulette* and to control that the *choulette* is placed upright on the exact place where it has landed.



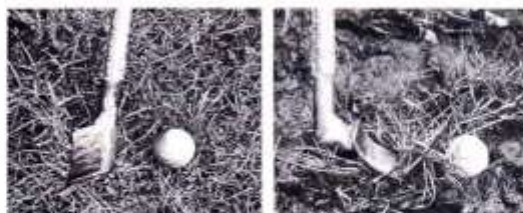
Hitting the *choulette* into the hazardous hedges is very rewarding. The *choulette* has to be hit carefully to make sure that it is very difficult to retrieve by the opponents.

In most societies, the *chouleurs* have three successive strokes, followed by one *déchouleur* by the *déchouleurs*. In other societies, the first stroke is immediately followed by the *déchouleur* from the opposing team. The three successive strokes can be made in turn by the two *chouleurs*, or one player makes all three strokes, the other team member then will hit the next three strokes. Generally the first two strokes are made in the direction of the *planchette*, taking however into account the condition of the landing area for making a decent second stroke. Especially the third stroke is of strategic importance.

Almost 75% of the strokes are made with the extreme concave '*pic*' face of the *crosse* (pitching wedge in golf), mostly because the lie of the *choulette* is so bad that the '*plat*' face (3-iron in golf) cannot be used.



The elliptical *choulette* may always be put upright on the exact spot where it landed. An opposing player is always nearby to check if the replacement has been made correctly.



The '*crosse*' club has two faces in one: one straight (3 iron) for easy lies and distance; the extreme concave face is for approach and difficult lies.

The '*crosse*' ball (*choulette*) is elliptical and made of hornbeam. The size is 4.4 x 3.6 cm. The surface has 5 shallow grooves to improve flight characteristics.

The hornbeam elliptical *choulette* can be hit with a *pic* face about 50-75 meters. Often, after two strokes, the *planchette* is still far out of reach. Therefore, the result of the third stroke (distance and direction) must have as a consequence that it prevents the opposing team to *déchouler* the *choulette* into very difficult hazards like ditches, hedges, muddy pools, etc.

Suppose for example: the *planchette* stands in a straight line with the *chouleur*. On the near left of the *planchette* is a hedge, on the right the field is open. The *chouleur* with his third stroke (with limited chance hitting the target) will strike the *choulette* so far to the right, that the *déchouleur* cannot reach the hazardous area from where it would be very difficult to retrieve the *choulette*.



The *déchouleurs* are always looking for possibilities to strike the *choulette* into the most difficult positions, to limit the progress of the *chouleurs*. During the *partie*, the team members are constantly deliberating about the strategy and the tactics to follow. Sometimes avoiding hazards is more important than nearing the target.

The *choulette* must always be played exactly from the spot where it landed. *Jeu de crosse* hardly knows the term 'unplayable'. Therefore more often than not, players are crawling on hands and knees under hedges or wading ankle deep through mud dogged fields, to try to retrieve the *choulette* into a playable area. Belgian *crosseurs* are allowed to swap the *choulette* for another more appropriate ball for the specific situation.

Only 'sorted tree trimmings' give a player a free drop within one 'crosse length' of the piled wood. Dropping a *choulette* is not always done by the *crosseur* involved (like in golf), but often by his adversary.



*The game of crosse does not know the term 'unplayable', even when you have to crawl on your knees to reach for the choulette. It is not allowed to push or shove the choulette. It is obligatory to make in every situation a swing movement. Hedges are the most terrifying hazards on most crosse fields. Often you need three strokes to retrieve the choulette, with the risk that the opponent quite easily can déchouler into the same hazard again.*

When the elliptical *choulette* has been hit into the 'nul' (out of bounds), the player must strike a new *choulette* from the original place, adding a penalty stroke.

Embedded *choulettes* in mud, molehills, etc., may not be put upright.

When the *choulette* disappears in a hole deeper than 10 centimetres, the *crosseur* should have a free drop.

The *chouleurs* team has won when it has reached the *planchette* within the contracted number of *déchoules*. When after playing the fixed number of *déchoules* the *planchette* is still not reached, the *partie* is finished and the *déchouleurs* team has won the *partie*. The team, which has won five *parties*, is the winning team of the match.

A match lasts four-five hours. When the match has finished, the players return to the clubhouse to celebrate victory or defeat with a round of drinks.

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