

Clearly unsuitable for women

In the history of European stick and ball games, women have hardly ever played a more than marginal role. It took until the end of the 19th century for women in sports to become notable, often under the patronage of men.

During the many centuries of the games of colf, crosse, golf and mail, not much has been written, drawn or painted of women playing these games. It was far more the exception than the rule to refer in words or pictures to women hitting balls with a club. These games were considered (by men) to be unsuitable for women. Playing in the streets, churchyards, fields, and towns was unacceptable. In the Middle Ages, cursing, swearing, drinking, and fighting were more common.

Oldest illustration of a woman playing a stick and ball game (see next page for the details). –

By courtesy of Sam Fogg, London



Crosse too strenuous for women?

Men considered and still consider the game of crosse as being too strenuous for women and not very ladylike. However, it does not stop them from inviting women to come and play with them, unfortunately, with little success. Women have hardly been mentioned or depicted for as long as the game of crosse has been portrayed or written about.

The 'Valenciennes Book of Hours', called 'Les Heures de Guillaume Bracque' (c.1520), is an exception. On one of the folios of the book, one can see a woman striking at a ball with a 'crosse' (a curved stick).

*The oldest presentation of a woman playing jeu de crosse (see right-hand folio) is in the Book of Hours, made in Valenciennes, France, in the first half of the 16th century. Valenciennes was, at that time, until 1678, part of the Low Countries. – Illumination from the Hours of Abbot Guillaume Braque, c.1520 (between 1516 and 1547) –
By courtesy of Sam Fogg, London*



Detail of the famous tapestry 'La Peinture des Amours de Gombaut et Macée', produced in Flanders (c1580).

Two shepherdesses are playing a game called 'tiquet', a jeu de crosse variant that looks like ground billiards. –

By courtesy of Musée des Beaux-Arts, Saint Lô, France



Valenciennes lies in the ancient county of Hainaut where, according to Alexandre-Joachim Desrousseaux, ('Moeurs Populaires de la Flandre Française' [Popular customs in French Flanders], 1889) this game was popular in the 14th century, obviously for women too.

A more recent depiction of women playing a kind of jeu de crosse is in the tapestry 'La Peinture des Amours de Gombaut et Macée' (Portrait of the love affairs of Gombaut and Macée) displayed in the 'Musée des Beaux-Arts' in Saint Lô, France. This tapestry, made at the end of the 16th century, shows two country girls playing a game called 'tiquet', a shortened version of jeu de crosse.

One of the oldest written references to women playing the game of crosse is from Madame Albertine Clément-Hémery ('Histoire des fêtes civiles et religieuses, des usages anciens et modernes du département du Nord' [History of civil and religious feasts, ancient and modern customs in the department Nord], 1834) who described that in the past, in some areas of the French Avesnois, the old county of Hainaut, girls played the game of crosse in the open fields but only on Shrove Tuesday. Men and boys played this game exclusively for the rest of the year.

Zéphyr-Joseph Piérart confirmed her observation when he mentioned in his 'Guide complet du touriste, de l'archéologue, de l'industriel et du commerçant' (Complete tourist, archaeological, industrial and commercial guide) in 1862 that in some parts of the Avesnois, young women played the game of crosse. On Shrove Tuesday, the unmarried young women gathered at the pastures around the towns and villages to play crosse together or sometimes even against the young men. Piérart thought it thrilling to see young women playing a game meant for boys and men.

Alexandre-Joachim Desrousseaux wrote in 'Moeurs Populaires de la Flandre Française' that on Shrove Tuesday in the cantons of Bavay and Berlaimont (Avesnois), women played the game of crosse by the end of the 19th century.

In 1898, René Minon explained in 'La vie dans le Nord de la France au XVIII^e siècle' (Life in Northern France in the 18th century) that on St Catharine's Day and during Carnival women played 'jeu de crosse en plaine' (field crosse) like the men with iron crosses and wooden balls.

In 1900, Jules Dewert, wrote an article named 'Jeu de crosse' in 'Wallonia, recueil de littérature orale, croyances et usages traditionnels'. He told that in the Belgian Borinage and in the arrondissement of Ath women played crosse on Ash Wednesday with wooden balls as big as two fists. They played with wooden clubs.

Today, the game of crosse, in its different variations, is open to men and women. For women, there are no restrictions on becoming a member of a crosse society. However, the actions taken to involve them in the game have been unsuccessful, except for the 'target crosse' game, a 'putting' contest. The future for women's crosse does not look very promising. Their interest in the game so far has been minimal.

Colf only for men?

Colvers, the Flemish and Netherlandish neighbours of the Walloon and French crosseurs, hardly ever produced written evidence of women playing the ancient game of colf in town, in the fields or on the ice. From the early rise of the game in the Middle Ages until the fall of the game by the end of the Renaissance, not one mention has been found of women involved in the game of colf.

In the many famous winter landscape paintings from Southern and Northern Netherlandish painters, no women were depicted other than as spectators.

So far, only one picture of a woman holding a colf club is known. It is a 17th-century Netherlandish painting, representing a young lady taught by a friend, her husband or a colf professional how to strike a leather ball.

The colf game became extinct before the emancipation of women could make their first mark on ladies colf.

In the beginning, the game of 'kolf', the successor of colf, played in confined areas and later indoors, did not attract or did not allow women to accompany their husbands in socialising on the kolf court.

So far, this is the oldest presentation of a woman playing the game of golf. This Netherlandish painting from the 17th century shows a young woman learning the secrets of the game. – From 'Golf Through the Ages', Flannery & Leech





Kolf societies were, and often still are, a social club where members play the game and discuss politics, read newspapers, play cards, have their genever, and smoke a good cigar. Not exactly the environment for women. – Engraving P. van Looy, 1880 – Private collection

The kolf game, a short variant of the ancient colf game, became popular at the beginning of the 18th century. Colf and kolf were games that were not only played by the nobility and the top level of the bourgeois in the towns of the Netherlands.

The landladies of the wine houses (19th hole) were the first women to see and learn the game on their own courts. As far as the information goes, the pub visitors accepted these women without any problems, and gradually, more women entered the 'arena'.

However, the foundation of women's clubs was still far away. Women had to look after the children and the household. Moreover, men and women considered the kolf game too strenuous and not very ladylike. It took until the beginning of the 20th century for women to start to play kolf with men.

The turbulent 1960s changed the situation positively. Emancipation gained momentum, and the acceptance of long trousers as a female dress allowed women to choose the sports they liked.

Encouraged by their menfolk, women took to the kolf court. Men taught them how to play the game, and in 1964, the women founded the first ladies' kolf society, followed by many others. Soon, the ladies founded an association of ladies' clubs as part of the (Royal) Netherlandish Kolf Federation (KNKB). In 1991, the ladies' association merged with the Federation.

In 2003, it was for the first time that a woman became president of the Federation.

Today, most kolf clubs are still separate ladies' and men's clubs. Neither the men nor the women seem to want to change this into mixed clubs.

In 2010, there are 350 men and 250 women who are playing the ancient game of kolf.

(By courtesy of Annette Klinkert, former President of the KNKB, 2010)

The emancipation wave in the 1960s and the acceptance of trousers as acceptable clothing for women opened the kolf courts for them. Today, 40% of all kolvers are women, and they are united in women's kolf societies. –

From 'KNKB Kolfkalender'



Mail too frivolous for women?

Royalty and nobility have always had their own rules. When they considered involvement in the mail game unsuitable for women, this did not apply automatically to women of the higher echelons.

When King François I of France introduced jeu de mail into Fontainebleau, the game also became very popular with the ladies of his entourage who could not play 'jeu de pelote' (hand-tennis [Jean-Marie Lhôte, 'Dictionnaire des jeux de société' [Dictionary of society games], 1996]).

Catherine de Medici (1519-1589), wife of King Henry II and mother-in-law of Mary Queen of Scots, was an active mail player.

The humanist and historian George Buchanan wrote in 1582 in his 'Rerum Scoticarum Historia' (History of Scotland) that Queen Mary 'indulged in sports that were clearly unsuitable to women' (Olive M. Geddes, 'A swing through time – Golf in Scotland 1457 –1743'). It shows the attitude towards women playing pall mall in the 16th century, considered as a frivolous, risqué and not ladylike sport.

Mary, who learned the game of mail during her thirteen-year stay in France, took this game with her when she returned to Scotland. Mary allegedly played pall mall and/or golf in 1567. This claim is said to derive from a charge from her half-brother, the Earl of Moray, put forward to the Westminster Commissioners in 1568. He accused Mary of playing pall mall and/or golf at Seton Palace only a few days after the murder of her husband, Lord Darnley.

At the beginning of the Renaissance, queens, princesses and other noble ladies in France were allowed to decide whether to play the noble game of mail in the castle gardens or on the 'grand courts' in the great cities.

In the 16th and 17th centuries, nobility and bourgeois, and even the kings of France, played the pall mall in the city of Lyon but not the women. They were only spectators and admirers of the players. They stood along the alley and applauded the excellent strokes of the men, but they would never have touched a mail club.

However, one woman entered the playing course, took one of the mails and challenged the victors who had just finished their match. This fearless woman was Louise Charley Lab(b)é, 'La belle Cordière' (1524-1566), the young wife of a wealthy rope merchant and a well-known poet.

Louize Charley Lab(b)é, la belle Cordière, was a regular player in the Bella Cura mail alley. When the young woman challenged the best mail players, the enthusiastic Lyonnais followed her, admiring and applauding her fearful swing. She is probably the first 'bourgeois' female mail player known by name. – Picture by Pierre Woeriot de Bouzey, 1555 – Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris



She was also known as a proud horsewoman who once, as a lansquenet, followed her father in the army of King Henri II and behaved incredibly bravely during the siege of Perpignan.

Louize is probably the first 'bourgeois' female mail player known by name. When she played the mail game in the

alley of the 'Bella Cura' in the heart of the town, the enthusiastic Lyonnais followed her along the alley, admiring her address and fighting spirit. Louize was the favourite; whenever she entered the mail court, everybody supported her. Her fighting spirit never diminished, and she always stayed determined. There was a low murmur from the spectators when she addressed the ball, changing into a loud applause when she hit the ball very far and straight. She was outstanding; even the defeated players were proud to have played against her.

(Louis Edouard Fournier, 'Histoire anecdotique des jeux, jouets et amusements avant 1900' [Anecdotal history of games, toys and distractions before 1900], 1889)

No documents have been found so far about women playing the game of 'maliën', as 'jeu de mail' was known in the Netherlands. Only one painting shows a woman playing maliën with a man on the Malieveld in The Hague, The Netherlands. It is unknown who the playing lady is, painted by Adriaen van de Velde in 1625. It is the oldest known picture of a woman playing jeu de mail.



*One of the very few presentations of women playing the game of mail. The name of the lady in this picture is unknown as if it was common practise that women took to the mail alley – Adriaen van de Velde, 1625 –
From 'Golf Through the Ages', Flannery & Leech*

Women unfitted for golf?

Women's golf history closely follows the history of women's emancipation in Scotland and other parts of the British Isles.

There is no written or pictorial evidence of women who appeared to have been playing golf until the 19th century, except for Queen Mary, who is believed to have played some golf at St Andrews in 1563 and Seton Palace in 1567.

Another legend is that the Queen played golf against her lady-in-waiting, Mary Seton, and afterwards, the Queen presented her with a necklace to commemorate her victory.

The only document referring to women and golf is a 'kirk session' from 1612, rebuking a woman for instructing her son in the mysteries of golf in the town's churchyard on a Sunday; the session does not tell if she played the game herself (Jane George, 'Women and Golf in Scotland', 1997).

According to the Musselburgh Golf Club, women have played golf since the 18th century. The earliest 'official' women's golf tournament, between the fishwives from Musselburgh and Fisherow, dates from 9th January 1810. They played a putting contest. The winner's prize was a creel and a skull (small fishing basket and a head-dress) and two fine Barcelona silk handkerchiefs as consolation prizes. The fishwives were not only keen (putting) golfers; they also had an annual (ancient) football match between the married and the unmarried fishwives.

The official announcement does not clarify how often this annual occasion occurred before 1810 or after that.

The official announcement of the tournament

Musselburgh 14th Dec. 1810

The Club resolve to present by subscription a new Creel & Skull to the best female golfer who plays in on the annual occasion on the 1st Jan. next, old style (12th Jan. new), to be intimated to the Fish Ladies by the Officer of the Club.

Two of the best Barcelona silk handkerchiefs, to be added to the above premium of the Creel.

ALEX. G HUNTER, C”

(www.scottishgolfhistory.net/royal_musselburgh_golf_club.htm)



Here is a picture of how the women looked who played the first women's tournament on the Musselburgh links in 1810: the Fishwives from Musselburgh and Fisherow. – By courtesy of Edinburgh Photographic Society

Over the years, golf remained a men's game where they socialised and enjoyed the challenge away from the wives and the home.

Initially, women were allowed (by men) to play some golf: a putting or pitch and putt game on fairways not longer than 50 to 100 yards. At that time, women making a swing past their shoulders and performing publicly 'violent' swings were unacceptable.

The first ladies' club, the so-called 'Ladies' Golf Club', was established in 1867 in St Andrews.

In 1893, the First Ladies Championship occurred at Lytham St Annes, still on a pitch and putt course.

It was the well-known Horace Hutchinson who wrote an open letter in 'Golf' to Miss Blanche Martin, the first treasurer of the Ladies Golf Union:

"... Women never have, and never can unite to push any scheme to success ... They are bound to fall out and quarrel at the slightest provocation ... Constitutionally and physically women are unfitted for golf.... The first Ladies Championship will be the last ..."

However, this first championship was a great success, followed by many more. Legend has it that Horace Hutchinson changed his mind about women's golf and championships (www.kirkwoodgolf.co.uk).

It took until the beginning of the 20th century for women to start to play on real golf courses, and only in the second half of the 20th century did women enter professional golf.

It was in August 2007 that, for the first time, the Women's British Open took place on the holy grounds of the Old Course of St Andrews.

Competitor Annika Sörenstam, one of the greatest female golfers, said: "It is a big step for women's golf to play this championship at St Andrews ... I remember that when I played here as an amateur, there was a sign out there that said 'No dogs and women allowed'."

The original Life Association golfing print after Michael Brown's 'Aberdovey - Ladies Golf Championship 1901' shows Molly Graham putting and surrounded by her peers. –

Illustration from the article 'Legends of the Ladies Links', Liz Pook, 'Through the Green', magazine of the BGCS, September 2008





Women have captured their rightful place in the world of golf, both in the professional and amateur fields. Men no longer decide what suits women golfers and what is not. –

By courtesy of Jamie Lynn

Today, the game of golf is open for everybody, men and women, young and old, although there are still a few golf clubs in the world whose members think that golf is still a man's game, a rich man's game, a white man's game. Will they ever change their minds?