From colf to kolf

Dear ladies & gentlemen,

Before I start with the presentation, I would like to welcome Mr Do Smit and Mr Cees van Woerden, members of the Royal Dutch Kolf Association, who have contributed to the contents of this presentation, and who will be our hosts on Saturday morning at the Kolfclub ‘Utrecht St. Eloyen Gasthuis’.

In the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, the characters 'c' and 'k' were indiscriminately used in the Netherlandish language. The name of the ancient stick and ball game played from the 13th century until the 18th century in the Low Countries has been written with a 'c' and 'k': colf and kolf.
The pronunciation remains the same.

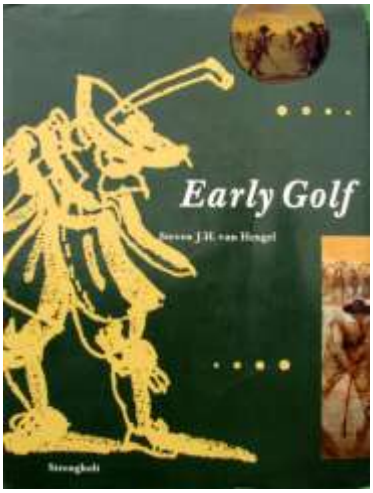
The 'new' stick and ball game (18th century) played on an enclosed field and indoors was also written indiscriminately as colf and kolf.
Unsurprisingly, such name-giving confused and still confuses 'golf history land'. The confusing mix-up of these characters has given many authors tools to prove that c(k)olf looks like golf or does <u>not</u> look like golf.

Stadlander-Inn kolf court
Nic. Matthijsz. Aartman, 1755 – By courtesy of City Record Office, Amsterdam

Perhaps Reverend Mr Walker, one of the ministers of Canongate in Scotland, who was a resident of the district of 'Holland' in 1795, saw the Stadlander-Inn kolf court, one of the many kolf courts in and around the city of Amsterdam when he wrote about the game of kolf. He explained the short game of kolf, which was very popular then, and concluded:

"Clearly golf is no more kolf than cricket is poker."

Mr Walker was probably unaware that before the game of kolf became so popular, Flemish and Netherlandish people played a long club and ball game from the 13th century until the 18th century that looked very similar to golf.



Steven van Hengel, the Netherlandish colf historian, suggested splitting the spelling in colf with a 'c' for the 'ancient' game and kolf with a 'k' for the 'new' game.
Although there is no linguistic reasoning for this suggestion, it does prevent the confusing mix-up, at least in writing.

Van Hengel described colf as a stick and ball game in which a ball was hit with a curbed stick, later with a wooden shaft with a metal face, to reach a target in the fewest possible strokes.
Not very different from the games of:

Crosse (Choule)

Golf

Mail (Pall-mall)

The game started in the Low Countries around the end of the 13th century.
At the end of the 17th century, the game ceased to exist for several reasons.

Colf, a long game, was played in the streets and churchyards in the towns and later on the roads, tracks and the open acres and fields outside the city walls on the ramparts, also moving to the frozen canals, rivers and lakes during the Little Ice Age in the 16th and 17th centuries.

One of the earliest painters of colvers on the ice was the famous South Netherlandish Pieter Breugel the Elder; detail of 'The Ice skaters near the St Joris Gate in Antwerp', 1550. – Engraving from Frans Huys after Breugel's painting – By courtesy of Museum Plantin-Moretus Prentenkabinet, Antwerp, Belgium

The ancient game of colf was tiresome, cold, dangerous, muddy and uneconomic. The Netherlandish playwright Bredero also mentioned the dangerous game in one of his comedies:

"At my right, a good woman got a colf ball at her head.
If I had the power, I would ban this game."

People played the game over longer distances.
Because the game was played in winter, the 'playing fields' were often muddy or frozen and, therefore, hardly passable.

Colf had few written rules. The players made rules during play, or rather, they didn't, which had, as a consequence, heated discussions, resulting in screaming, swearing and fighting. Accidents caused by balls flying around, hitting other players and passers-by, and smashing windows from houses and churches, forced authorities to ban colvers time and again from playing in the towns.

Fighting was not the 'prerogative' of ancient hockey players. This detail from a 16th-century illumination shows that in colf, fighting was not as exceptional as some want us to believe. – By courtesy of Koninklijke Bibliotheek, Den Haag, The Netherlands

Top: On this detail of a pen and ink drawing from Hendrick Avercamp, 'A game of kolf on the ice', from around 1620, the man is playing with a white leather-covered ball. It looks like he is aiming at a hole or a stake guarded by a 'fore caddy' at a considerable distance. The ball will certainly roll and not fly to the target. The player uses a lead-headed colf. – Private collection

In the middle: Replica of an anonymous painting in the clubhouse of the Kennemer Golf & Country club

Bottom: Playing colf on the ice developed into a game of concentration and accuracy, much more than hitting the ball long distances. It starts to look like the short kolf game. – Detail of the painting 'Diversions on the ice' by Barent Avercamp, c.1655 – Private collection

When the Little Ice Age occurred, many colvers extended their playing fields to the slippery ice of canals, rivers and lakes to find a place for their game between the many other skaters on the ice. The Little Ice Age coincided with the so-called 'Golden Ages' of Flemish and Netherlandish industry, trade and art. These Golden Ages brought prosperity to many people, who liked showing their wealth through clothing and richly equipped houses.

In the age of prosperity, painters in the Low Countries produced an estimated six million paintings.
You can admire a replica of one of these paintings in this clubhouse.

The full swing, as depicted in this detail of an etching after Hendrick Avercamp, can only be seen as artistic freedom. Hitting a ball in such a way would endanger other people on the ice. – Simon Fokke, 1625 – Private collection

A full swing could propel the ball for 'miles' and would undoubtedly hit the many others on the ice. Therefore, colf became a shorter game, more target than distance oriented. The ball was kept low or even rolling when played towards the target. The target changed from a tree, a door or a hole towards a stake in the ice.

The wealth in some parts of the Low Countries opened the door for the sophisticated culture of the French bourgeois, visible in the attire of men and women. The import of the game of 'mail', called 'malie' in Netherlandish, fitted in quite well. 'Jeu de mail' was a French game played on hard courts with a length of up to 1.000 metres, bordered by several lines of trees adjacent to the wine house. On both sides of the alley, a post was positioned. The game aimed to hit the posts in the fewest possible strokes.

Kings, nobles and bourgeois played the game.

No documents prove that a royal ever played the maliebaan at Utrecht in the Netherlands. King Louis XIV walked over it and considered it the most beautiful mail alley in Europe. – Herman Saftleven, c.1660, Atlas Munnicks van Cleeff – By courtesy of Koninklijke Verzamelingen, Den Haag, The Netherlands

Bottom: In 1685, Romeyn de Hooghe engraved the famous garden of Enghien, 35 kilometres south of Brussels. To the right is the mail alley with the 'Pavillon du Mail' at the end, where the players relaxed after their 'round of mail'. – Koninklijke Bibliotheek, Den Haag, The Netherlands

Top: The 'maliebaan' (jeu de mail alley) in Utrecht was built in 1637 by the council to attract students for the new university and for the bourgeoisie of the town to have physical exercise and entertainment. – Colour etching by Jan van Vianen, 1697 –
© Trustees of the British Museum

Middle: From the last part of the 17th century on, colvers changed from the cold colf game on the ice to the short kolf game on the courts near or in the taverns. – Drawing by John Indigo Greenwood, 1761 –
Private collection

Bottom: A beautiful early 20th-century tile tableau of an open-air kolf court, on display in the kolf court of the Kolfclub 'Utrecht St. Eloyen Gasthuis',
The Netherlands.

In the first half of the 17th century, several 'malie-banen' (jeu de mail alleys) were constructed in both the Southern and Northern Netherlands to provide the bourgeois with a far more sophisticated stick and ball game. No mud, swearing, fighting and interference with other people: only 'our kind of people'.
The game of mail had two drawbacks. You were not allowed to use your own colf clubs and balls, so you had to pay for hiring clubs and balls, and you had to pay a 'green fee'. These people were like the Scots; they were real misers, hating to spend their money unnecessarily.
The other drawback was that the game could have been more tiresome. You had to walk 'for miles'; therefore, the wine house was too far away to recover and have one or two glasses of wine.

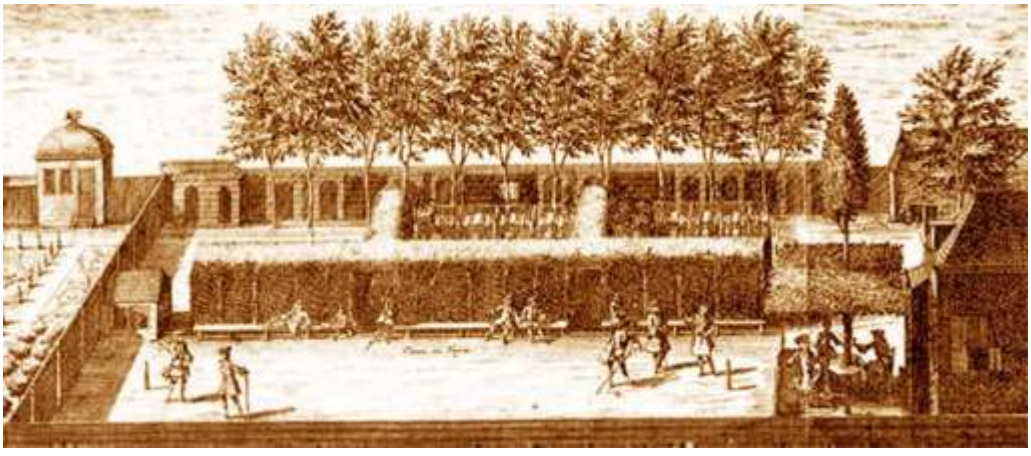
The innkeepers of the wine houses were not very satisfied with the money they earned from the mail alley and the wine house; it was not a profitable business. They saw economic advantages in providing the mail players with a similar game which one could play in town. A game that was less tiresome and did not take the players far away from the wine house.
Kolf was originally a short game, using the old colf clubs and balls, and played on a mini jeu de mail alley indoors and outdoors

For the aristocrats and rich bourgeois, playing kolf in their private gardens became an attractive alternative for the long mail game; it was less tiresome, less time-consuming and had the same standing as the previous long game. – Drawing by J.H. Muntz, c.1770 – Stichting NGA Early Golf

They constructed short versions of a mail alley, some 30 metres long, where customers could play with their colf clubs and balls.
Playing in such a small alley did not take much time, and the patio in the shadow of the lime trees was nearby and very tempting for a glass and a good conversation.
The revenues for the innkeepers were so attractive that in a relatively short time, hundreds of pub owners in and around the towns started to exploit these mini-courts.

Above: View of the kolf court near the Groote Huys op Zuidwind at 's- Gravezande. – Aert Schouman, 1749 – Private collection

Bottom: Colvers moved from the long mail alleys and the open colf fields to the small kolf courts, where a cool glass was at hand under a (trimmed) lime tree after a short round of kolf. – Enclosed kolf court near the Pauwentuin (Peacock Garden) Amsterdam, built before 1740.– Detail engraving by Adolf van der Laan, 1740 – From Van Hengel's 'Early Golf'



Top: In the 18th century, no official regulations existed concerning dimensions, etc. This small open court has remarkably high borders. Collection KNKB

Middle: Such a small kolf court could fit more easily in the forecourt of the inn. – Kolfbaan de Olifant at Maarssen, J.H. Verheijen, c1820 – By courtesy of Het Utrechts Archief, Utrecht, The Netherlands

Bottom: Game of kolf – J. Halff Jr, c1850 – From Bargmann's 'Serendipity of Early Golf'

The new game became very popular. Hand-tennis halls and ring bowl courts were adapted to accommodate the kolvers.

The available space for a kolf court was limited in the towns. Therefore the dimensions of the courts were smaller so that they could more easily fit in the forecourts of the inns. Furthermore, many hand tennis and ring bowl players left their ancient games and joined the ranks of the kolvers.

The move from the long colf game to the short kolf game had severe consequences for the equipment and the rules of the game.
The clubs became heavier, sturdier and longer.
The balls also became bigger and relatively soft. These balls were pushed, not hit anymore and kept rolling over the flat, hard surface of the small playing field.

Three kolf clubs from 1900-1918.The club on the left is in a green cloth cover, the club in the centre is for playing with rubber balls, and the right-hand club is for sajet balls. – From Van Hengel's 'Early Golf'

The posts were not the final target of the game. Players hit the ball against the post, and from there, it bounced into small marked fields with different point values behind the post.

At the summit of its popularity, there were more than 500 indoor kolf courts all over the Netherlands. However, nothing is forever.
During the 19th century, a new game, French table billiard, entered the entertainment field, followed by theatre and dancing.
Again the landlords, probably the world's first entertainment 'marketeers', saw this as a more attractive market for their 'kolf' halls. In a kolf hall, only a few people could play the game simultaneously. Such a hall could accommodate more billiard players, dancers, and theatre lovers.
As with indoor hand tennis, in a relatively short period, kolf was ousted from most halls and replaced by billiard, dance and theatre.

Kolf societies were, and often still are, a kind of social club in which members played the game and read newspapers, discussed politics, played cards, had their glass of genever and smoked a good cigar. Not exactly the environment for women or children. – Engraving P. van Looy, 1880 – Private collection

Bottom: These men playing in this beautiful exclusive kolf court have probably done very well in life. – Painting by Jaap Oudes, c.1900 – Private collection

Example of a billiard hall. – From Jean Marty's 'Billiards

Many kolvers became billiard players. Already in 1878, the last kolf hall disappeared in Amsterdam.
In 1911, about 100 kolf courts survived, but the numbers continued to drop.
Only in a small part of the province of North Holland and the city of Utrecht the game of kolf is still alive.
According to the Koninklijke Nederlandsche Kolfbond, there are still 15 kolf courts in March 2023.

The game has developed into a complete indoor game, using specific kolf clubs, balls and rules, which have no relationship to the ancient long colf game.

Today the kolvers are organised in 28 societies, 10 for women, 14 for men and 4 mixed.
These men and women still play the more than 250 years old derivate of the ancient game of colf enthusiastically.

The resemblance between the old and the new game is only the use of a club and a ball. The clubs, the balls, the playing field, and the rules of the games are entirely different.
As a consequence, we could say, as a variation on the expression of Reverend Mr Walker, that:

"Clearly, kolf is no more colf than golf is poker".

Thank you for your attention!