

Boy caddies in colf, mail, crosse and in golf, even young girls

In the history of European stick and ball games, most written references to children playing come from crosse. Colf is the most documented through visual sources. We'll explore the evolution from games like colf, mail, and crosse to the lively modern game of golf!

Colf

In the history of colf, there is hardly any written evidence about people helping colf players with any support during play. Before the Little Ice Age (roughly between 1550 and 1700), from the 14th century onwards, no pictures showed this type of assistant.

Furthermore, a colver colf played with only one club. A servant did not need to carry clubs, and players could easily take some spare balls in their own pockets. Moreover, colf players were mainly ordinary people who could not afford to hire boys to make sand tees, warn other people of approaching balls, or look for lost balls.

A detail of this painting shows a young boy standing near the colf player, probably holding the overcoat when the player in the icy-cold weather will strike the ball, obviously also the function of a hired colf caddy. – 'Winter Games on the frozen river Ijssel', c.1626, Hendrick Avercamp – Courtesy of the National Gallery of Art, Washington, Woodner Collection, Gift of Andrea Woodner



Thanks to an endless series of drawings and paintings from the Little Ice Age, telling us almost as much as words can do, we know that in colf on frozen surfaces of the canals, lakes, ponds and rivers, young boys acted as caddies and 'ballemerkers' (ball pointers). During that period, rich players hired ballemerkers to help them to find their way on the crowded ice fields. Most of these pictures show boys standing near a stake or shallow hole in the ice to point to the player the position of the target.

Looking closer at the pictures, people of a somewhat higher echelon have entered the ice colf scene. They seem to play with more expensive leather balls, sometimes even filled with feathers. These players could afford to engage young boys to serve them during play.

After the Little Ice Age, players went to play on small 'kolf' courts. Servants only brought a glass of wine on the shady terrace in front of the nearby winehouse. If the innkeepers paid boys is unknown.

Mail

In the chapter 'The caddy in jeu de mail - Porte-lève or porte-mail', my contribution of May 2023, you can read all I know about the mail caddies.

There are no documents mentioning boys as porte-lève or porte-mail. Only the painting of Paul Bril shows a young boy.



Detail of a painting (1624) from the South Netherlandish painter Paul Bril with a boy on the right, a porte main (caddy), carrying a spare club in his hand and several balls in a sack over his shoulder. When a club or ball breaks, the 'commercial' assistant of the paleardier could provide (at a price) new ones. The boy used the long stick for retrieving balls from unplayable lies. – Courtesy Minneapolis Institute of Arts, The William Hood Dunwoody Fund

Crosse

As far as documented information goes, jeu de crosse has always been a game for commoners. These commoners played the game with only one 'dual-purpose' crosse club, and sometimes, the members of the same team played together with only one club. They also carried some spare inexpensive 'chouettes' (balls) in their pocket. Caddies did not need to take clubs and balls for the players or perform other simple jobs on the field. Even if there were a need for assistance, players would not have had the money to pay for it.

The situation changed somewhat with the introduction of the celluloid and nylon chouettes in the 1930s. These balls were too 'precious' to lose during play in the fields. Therefore, the players sometimes hired young boys, called 'verseurs', to look for these valuable crosse items during the game. These boys, often the children or grandchildren of the players, avid crosse players themselves, were rewarded for their assistance with wooden 'chouettes' (balls) and an all-wooden 'chambot' (children's crosse club), followed up by the real thing: the iron-headed 'crocheton' (crosse club). (Edgard Hismans, mayor of Quaregnon, in 'Mail Crosse Golf ou l'Histoire du crossage en plaine' by André Auquier, 1983)

Because crosse was a game for the commoners, there was no interest in pictures of boys acting as verseurs.

In this traditional school class photo from 1934 in the French Avesnois region, undoubtedly, several young boys played crosse on their free Thursday afternoons and acted as verseurs for their fathers or grandfathers on a Sunday afternoon. – From 'En Avesnois ... au fil des saisons 1919-1939', Robert Leclercq



Golf

When noble golfers appeared on the links at the beginning of the 17th century, servants carried their clubs.

If not, there was always a local clubmaker or ballmaker to oblige; if all else failed, there was always a boy at hand. These boys appear, on cue, to carry clubs. Montrose paid a boy in 1628, Kincaid in 1687 and Foulis in 1692. ('GOLF Scotland's Game', David Hamilton, 1999)



The oldest picture of a boy caddy dates from 1787. Whether the boy was indeed acting as a caddy or his presence was just staffage for the portrait of William Inglis, captain of the Honourable Company of Edinburgh Golfers, is unknown.

For one time, William Inglis is less important than the boy carrying his clubs, so he is cut off from the picture. The first clear depiction of a young boy acting as a caddy dates from 1787. The boy has the clubs of Inglis under his arms on Leith Links. – David Allan – Scottish National Portrait Gallery, Edinburgh, Scotland



Girl golf caddies are beating the boys in Guernsey and teaching them manners. – 'Punch' 12 April 1889 and 'The Morning Leader', Tuesday 18 April 1889 – Cuttings in the Priaulx Library collection

Not known or seen in the games of colf, crosse and mail, but in golf, I found information about girl caddies on the Isle of Guernsey.

I quote the Priaulx Library:

"Among the attractions of Guernsey are the golf links at Lanresse on the north of the island, extending over several miles of breezy common that ends on the sea shore. There is a large club of ladies and gentlemen, and there you may see the unusual spectacle of young girls doing duty as golf caddies. There is no School Board in the island and no compulsory education law, so young Guernsey learns lessons or not, according to its own sweet will, and the reward of a shilling per day and lunch, tempts many girls between the ages of seven and 16 to follow the ball and enlist as regular attendants to their own special patron or patroness. The illustration is from a photo of two of these young girls who are to be found every day on the links; they are sturdy lasses with deeply tanned skins.

An objection at one time strongly urged by some of the leading clergy in the locality was that the life is too rough for the girls, as they must necessarily associate with the boys similarly employed. But as for the fear that they might become rude and wild and use bad language, one of the oldest golf players there declares that the result is just the reverse. Instead of the girls deteriorating they have improved the manners of the boys on the links. The majority of players also – says our Guernsey correspondent – prefer to have girl golf caddies as being quicker and more attentive to their duties."

We leave the continent to find Eddie Lowery in the U.S.A., who is best known as the 10-year-old caddy of Francis Ouimet during the 1913 U.S. Open, which Ouimet won in a playoff over Harry Vardon and Ted Ray.

There are undoubtedly other boys who acted as caddies for famous players.



The original iconic photograph of Lowery and Ouimet striding down the fairway together. – Golf Memorabilia Auction, September 2020