

The caddy in jeu de mail

Porte-lève or porte-mail

Only a little documentation shows that in the early stages of the Italian game, players engaged 'pallamaglio' assistants. However, we assume that the royals and the aristocracy certainly had their own 'assistants' and perhaps a 'private' club and ball maker, and a 'mallio' teacher or a combination of these three functions.

When the pallamaglio game arrived in France, Suisse and Germany at the end of the 16th century or mid-17th century, we saw that the royals and the aristocracy employed a 'commis', 'porte-lève' or 'porte-mail' (in France) and 'lakai' (Germany) with all kind of responsibilities concerning the mail game like maintaining the mail equipment, the mail court and assisting his master during play on the court.

*A German aristocrat, playing 'baille maille' on his private court in Schleißheim. In the foreground are two lackeys, as was still the name of the mail caddies in Germany ('Das Golfspiel.', Ph. Heineken, 1898). –
Painting by an unknown painter displayed in Lustheim Castle, Bavaria, Germany*



In the 16th century, German aristocracy already played jeu de mail; they constructed mail courts in their 'Schlossgarten'. So-called 'lakais' (lackeys) were employed to assist the noble players during the game on the court. Because the 'porte-mails' and 'lakais' were part of the 'servant' organisation of the chateau, and therefore were probably dressed in an official uniform.

The French royal family counted several officers as 'porte-mail and billard', a situation that lasted up to and including the reign of Louis XV, which ended in 1774.

('Jouer autrefois', Elisabeth Belmas, 2006)



Detail of an 'Italianate' painting (1624) from the South Netherlandish painter Paul Bril with a boy on the right, a 'porte main', carrying a spare club in his hand and several balls in a sack over his shoulder. We need to find out the function of the extremely long stick. –

By courtesy of the Minneapolis Institute of Arts, The William Hood Dunwoody Fund

The function of the 'porte-mail', belonging to the service of the chamberlain, was to carry a case containing garments, a mail club, a lofter and balls and to give to the king when he asked for it.

(‘Dictionnaire historique des arts, métiers et professions exercés dans Paris depuis le treizième siècle’, Alfred Franklin, 1906)

The oldest written references to a porte-lève or a porte-mail in the mail game date from 1696. In ‘Divertissements innocens, contenant les règles du jeu des eschets, du billiard, de la paume, du palle-mail, et du trictrac’. Under the heading ‘Regles du Royal Jeu de Palle-Mail’ one can read under rule 70:

“Les Porte-leves & les Laquais qui suivent la boule de leurs Maîtres, doivent être hors du Mail, afin qu’ils n’avancent ou reculent les boules.”

The porte-lèves (literally translated into 'carrier of the lofter') & the lackeys following the ball of their master have to stay off the course, not to move the balls forward or backwards.

Also, in 1696, King Louis XIV charged an officer to carry the 'iron mass' with which he played the game. This man belonged to the service of the 'grand-maître de la garde-robe' (grand master of the wardrobe). When his porte-mail Gabriel Le Louhel died in 1696, he gave an order to his treasury to pay 200 livres to the heir of Le Louhel. And Louis XIV appointed a new porte-mail in the same year.

(‘Dictionnaire critique de biographie et d’histoire : errata et supplément pour tous les dictionnaires historiques, 2ème édition corrigée et augmentée d’articles nouveaux, Auguste Jal, 1872)

In the booklet ‘Nouvelles règles pour le jeu de mail’, 1717, Joseph Lauthier gives a ‘job description’; under the rules for the ‘maître du mail’ (mail master), or his ‘commis’ (assistant) or the ‘porte-lèves’ the last rule is dedicated to the porte-lèves:

“Les Porte-Leves doivent aller toujours devant le coup, autant qu’il est possible, pour crier gare, prendre garde aux Boules, empêcher qu’on ne les change ni qu’on ne les perde, et les remettre dans le Jeu quand elles sont sorties, vis-à-vis l’endroit où elles se trouvent.”

If possible, the porte-lèves always have to be ahead of the players:

- Shout 'gare' (fore)
- Look after the balls
- Ensure they are not changed or lost, and put them back in play when they are out of bounds.

In 'Le noble jeu de mail de la Ville de Montpellier' from J. Sudre (1772), the responsibilities of the porte-lèves are still the same, but Sudre changed their name into 'porte-mails'. It could well be that, at that time, players did not use the lofters (lève) anymore.

On the 'bourgeois' courts, the 'caddies' were part of the organisation of the 'palemardier' (mail club and ball maker) and also acted as servants in the 'clubhouse' and cleaners of the court. We suppose they were well dressed, but about their garments, there is no information.

The 'assistant' situation on the public mail courts, where the bourgeois played jeu de mail, was pretty different. When players (mostly bourgeois) went to play a 'round' of mail, they paid a kind of 'green fee' and probably hired clubs and balls.

The manager of the mail court, the 'palemardier' (club and ball maker), employed several assistants for all sorts of odd jobs on the court and in the workshop, but also to accompany the players as 'commercial' assistants.



*One of the very few paintings representing a jeu de mail player on a sandy path in the open field. There is no proof that field or street players had assistants to retrieve lost balls in the rough alongside the paths. Perhaps the dog standing next to the player was a retriever and was taught how to find lost balls. –
From 'A History of Golf', Steve Newell, 2003*

They would carry spare clubs and balls to sell or loan them if the player broke a club or ball or lost one. Furthermore, they looked for 'out of bounds' balls or retrieved balls from water or other hazards. They also carried the garments of the players when they prepared for a swing and perhaps carried a bottle of encouragement. They would warn other players ahead or those who turned the target pole or 'archet' and were returning to the final target goal.

In all information about 'Maliën in The Netherlands', there are no references to 'caddies' or 'ballemerckers'. The South-Netherlandish painter Paul Bril (see 2) certainly saw the game as played in Italy, where he spent most of his lifetime.

When people played the game on the roads and sandy paths near the towns, the so-called 'mail à la chicane' or 'Languedocian mail', they usually carried one club and one or two balls. We found no references to a kind of assistant who would have accompanied players. Usually, the player himself would carry his own club and ball and would look for his lost ball. When he broke his club, it might mean the end of the game.