

The origins of golf have been debated for many a year, and the arguments will continue for years to come. But whatever our opinion, we should be aware of the possible antecedents of the game and know how they were played if we are to enter the discussions. Henry Jacobowicz has undertaken a comprehensive study of one of these antecedents, *Jeu de Mail*, and has passed it to TTG. The first part, dealing with the history and bibliography follows. The second part, covering how the game was played, will appear in the next issue. We are most grateful to Henry for sharing his work with us.

Jeu de Mail

by Henry Jacobowicz

FOR ALMOST five centuries *Jeu de Mail* was a very popular game in France. So popular that during the 17th and 18th Centuries every French town of some importance had its *Jeu de Mail* course. The interest in the game then declined. It declined so much that it progressively disappeared from everywhere but from two towns: Montpellier and Aix-en-Provence which finally closed their *Mail* courses in the 1930's.

There were two kinds of *Jeu de Mail*. An 'in town', or royal, game and a cross country version called *Jeu de Mail à la chicane*. The royal game was played on well tended sand courses (pic 1), having a length of about 400 meters, delineated by two lines of trees and walled with wooden boards. The players usually went near the target in three or four strokes before 'holing out' through an iron hoop (pic 2). *Jeu de Mail à la chicane* is best described in a 1634 painting by a Flemish artist Paul Brill. Painted in Rome it is on display today in the Minneapolis Institute of Arts (pics 3-5). At the height of its popularity the royal game was the version played the



Le Roi et ses courtisans jouant le jeu de Mail sur un terrain de sable.

Le passage par la chicane. Le temps que l'original Louis XIII passait le temps.

most and it spread across Europe with courses known to have existed in Paris, London, Madrid, Köln and Utrecht, which are remembered until today by plazas and streets named *Mail* or *Mall*.

This paper presents and describes *Jeu de Mail* to the golfing reader by following the same pattern as golf books: some historical facts, the main rules, the clubs and balls, instruction and a bibliography which, to my knowledge, may be nearly exhaustive. We will focus our attention on *Jeu de Mail à la chicane* and especially on the Montpellier version which was to be played only on roads and lanes, avoiding the bordering lands. In other places the game was played cross country, even on farmed land or vineyards, but unfortunately there is a total lack of documentation on this most interesting facet of *Jeu de Mail*. The first part will present the game of *Jeu de Mail* and the printed word 1659-1939. The second part will detail how the game was played.

Of all sports, golf gave birth to the largest literature and *Jeu de Mail* to the smallest. Only four *Jeu de Mail* books are known. One is a compilation of poems (8) and one is the transcript of radio talks given in 1937 (28) about the lost game in Aix-en-Provence which had closed five years earlier. Only two books explain how to play *Jeu de Mail* and for us BGCS members it must suffice, two being a collection as Joseph Murdoch used to say. The first *Jeu de Mail* book was



Attitudes du Joueur



published by Joseph Lauthier (26) in 1717. It was translated into English by James Cunningham (14) in 1910. It explains how to swing and the rules of the royal game. The second book, more important for us golfers, was published by Sudre (30) in 1772. It deals with *Jeu de Mail à la chicane* and is our main source of information on the cross country game as it was played in Montpellier.

Rules on *Jeu de Mail* were published much earlier than those of Lauthier. They can be found in game dictionaries called *Académie des Jeux*, the oldest recorded one being from 1659 by De La Mariniere (23). In a chapter entitled *Le jeu royal de palle-mail et commeil se joue à présent* he tells us that the King of France, as well as the French nobility, plays the game. It was reprinted twice in 1665 and 1668 (24)(25) with other games added but *Jeu de Mail* rules unchanged. These rules were once more reproduced in a 1696 anonymous copy (3). We had to wait until the seminal work of Lauthier to find the one and only piece of *Mail* instruction ever written. In this book the previous rules are reorganised and updated. From then on, it is this text, including the instruction section, which will replace the chapter on *Jeu de Mail* in all subsequent editions of the *Académie des Jeux* (4)(5)(6)(7)(13) from 1718 to 1842.

The second, and last, book on how to play *Jeu de Mail* by Sudre reproduced the instruction section by Lauthier with some minor, but fundamental, changes to the grip and stance. The rules part is, meanwhile, very different as it applies to the cross country game and its Montpellier peculiarities. Before printing his work, Sudre asked the twelve



THE GAME OF MAIL

reproduction on a larger scale of the scene foreground showing the player apparently guiding the sphere to the short channel to the goal for which the players are making.

Masters of Mail or *Palemardiers*, a professional union instituted in 1668, what we would call today club pros, and some of the best *Jeu de Mail* players to review and approve his work. They did so in writing at the end of his book.

In 1822 Grasset, a *Palemardier*, and Ricard a member of the *Ordre des chevaliers du bois roulant* (Order of the Knights of the rolling wood), the *Jeu de Mail* club of Montpellier, reprinted what is now a very rare edition. A later edition was published in 1844 by a local Montpellier newspaper, *Le Babillard*, with six lithographs added and a new introduction from the paper's editors. Among other things this introduction tells us that the preceding editions of the book are almost impossible to find and "one has to pay a very high price when by the greatest chance, he is happy to find a copy." Even this new edition went scarce as Andrew Lang laments in Hutchinson (21) on seeing only one copy of this book but not buying it due to the ransom price of ten guineas which was asked for it.

The book was printed at least one more time in 1888, thanks to another *Palemardier* named Audier (30) who was then the manager of the club *Société du jeu de mail des Arceaux*.

The similarities of *Jeu de Mail* and Golf seemed so peculiar to British golf writers that already in *The Golfer's Manual* by A Keen Hand (2) two pages were devoted to the description of *Jeu de Mail* in Montpellier with these words "...it is exactly our golf but played under different circumstances..."

G Robb (1) reproduced, without acknowledgement, these pages. Garden Smith (20) expresses in 1912 his



THE GAME OF MAIL

A larger reproduction of the left-hand corner showing a club player using the tall and what appears to be a rather curious two-spear club and a bag of balls.



The Game of Tennis

From the right-hand bottom corner. The dress of the players, the clubs and ballmallets, showing a remarkable variety of types of clubs.

amazement in observing the great similarities between the rules of Golf and of Jeu de Mail " ...when the first codes of golf were drawn up, we have the fact that the contemporary rules of golf bear a strong resemblance to those of Jeu de Mail published in France by Lauthier and Sudre a little earlier. Many of the similarities are, of course, natural in games having a similar object, but, here and there, there are points of a purely arbitrary nature dealt with in exactly the same way, and in almost the same expressions, as they are in the early golf codes, and it is hard to believe that this can be the result of accident. An interesting fact in this connection, and one which lends colour to the presumption that our early golf codists were familiar with the rules of Jeu de Mail, is that Montpellier, the headquarters of the French game, was at that very period the chief station d'hivernage in the south of France. In the eighteenth century it was what Cannes and Nice are to-day, and was greatly frequented by the British."

More recently, in 1942, Percy Boomer (9) refers to an eighteenth century Jeu de Mail instruction book he bought in a second hand bookshop as an indication that already more than two centuries ago somebody had described the fundamental s of a sound golf swing.

In order to understand the old age of Jeu de Mail publications the reader is reminded that the first book on golf, "The Golf", dates back only to 1743, that the first golf book, "The Golfer's Manual," is as recent as 1857 and that the Saint Andrews golf rules were first printed almost one century after De lo Mourners Academy de jocks.

Golf historians looking for the origins of Golf started searching everywhere but Scotland. Jeu de Mail was one of the candidates with Dutch Kolf, Flemish Chose and Roman Paganica. But apart from very patriotic French authors, only a handful of British historians support the Jeu de Mail hypothesis. Harry Wood (31) was the first. More recently Robert

Browning (10) confusing Jeu de Mail and Chose claimed that Chose (he meant Mail) was learned by Scottish soldiers in France in the fifteenth century and brought back to Scotland to create golf between 1421 and 1457, a theory reaffirmed by Fred Hotter (19) in a book entirely devoted to prove this conjecture.

I am not an historian and will not take part in the controversy. Like Canada Dry is to alcohol Mail had the colour of Golf, Mail had the taste of Golf, but Mail was not Golf, and I tend to side with Garden Smith (20) when he says "... one cannot accept the present idea that early Scots borrowed golf from the continent ... The poor Scots are denied the possibility of having a game of their own, evolved by themselves in accordance of their own ideas and temperament and suited to their country and climate. How the importation idea arose, it is impossible to conceive. The evidence is all against it, but writers on golf have nearly followed it like sheep."

Like man and ape having a common ancestor, golf and Jeu de Mail had a perhaps a common ancestor. In that case Jeu de Mail was the ape.

End of first part

Henri Jacobowicz

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- Pic 1 A Pall Mall course. **D'Allemagne** [15]
 Pic 2 The grip and holing out. **D'Allemagne** [15] reproduced from **Lauthier**
 Pic 3-5 Detail of the Paul Brit painting: the *léve* club; teeing the ball; the pro shop. **Browning** [10]