

Nature, measure of all things

Over the years, the influence of nature on the Scottish and continental games did not get much attention. Why did players use wooden balls of approximately the same size?

Should golfers use balls defined by the size of boxwood branches?

Do we accept that the whippy feature of the ash wood shaft was enhanced by the moon phases and that the growth of certain weeds determined the end of the playing season?



Most mature branches of the box shrub have a diameter of 5 – 6 centimetres. Most golf-like balls were made of boxwood and therefore had a dimension of less than 6 centimetres.

Boxwood for a very hard ball



Buxus sempervirens, or box, was widely spread across western and northern Europe. In Britain, in Southern England and in the Firth of Forth region in Scotland, this shrub or small tree was abundantly available. – <https://data.nbn.org.uk> © National Biodiversity Network 2015

Boxwood is a hardwood that does not split easily, is not difficult to manipulate, and does not become soggy when submerged in water or in other moist situations for a period of time. In the early golf region, the Firth of Forth, the *buxus sempervirens* or simply boxwood was sufficiently available as it was in the Low Countries in the early colf region.

The box is a slow-growing shrub or small tree, reaching 5–6 metres in height. The branches reach a diameter of 5–6 centimetres, which closely matches the diameters of the wooden balls from the 15th and 16th centuries found in the Netherlands.

This diameter limited the maximum size of the golf balls made from this wood. Notably, the leather ball successors of both golf and colf balls were not significantly different in size from the wooden boxwood balls.

Could the initial size of boxwood branches have determined the dimensions of Netherlandish ‘hairy’ leather colf balls and the ‘feathery’ leather balls from Scotland, and even modern golf balls?

The moon for a whippy shaft

Most colf, crosse and golf clubs had shafts made of ash wood. The ‘crossetier’ (crosse club maker) in the Hainaut region selected an ash tree with a trunk diameter of approximately 25 – 30 centimetres. The tree was cut, not sawn, at a height of 1.50 metres.

The best time to cut the selected trees was between October and March, when there were no leaves left on them. In that period, the last quarter of the moon was the best cutting time because of the descending sap in the tree.

The heading of this sub-chapter could also have been “Slurry for long-lasting clubs”. The crossetiers of the Belgian/French clubs immersed the ash-wood shaft cut in statu nascendi for four or five months in slurry. An alternative was to immerse the embryo shaft in linseed oil for two or three months.



Before carving the ash wood into a basic crosse shaft, it is immersed for some months in a slurry or linseed oil to preserve the wood. – Musée d’Histoire et de Folklore, Ath, Belgium – Photo Geert Nijs

Cattle, the start of the season

Until the mid-20th century, crosseurs in Belgium and France played the game of crosse on the wastelands, meadows, and agricultural land around the towns and villages. When in summer cows, sheep and horses grazed on the pastures, and crops were growing, the crosseurs were not very welcome to play amongst the livestock and the crops.



In the meadows, the crosseurs were only welcome when the livestock returned to the barns. The players had to leave the playing field in spring when the cattle left their winter stalling.

When in autumn, after the harvest of the crops, vegetation stopped growing, and last but not least, the cattle left the land to return to their winter accommodation. The farmers, who probably played the games themselves, allowed the crosseurs to return to their fields to start playing again. The opening of the new season mainly was around All Saints' Day on the 1st of November. The players could use the fields until the dandelions started blooming, the agriculteurs sowed the agricultural fields, and the cattle returned to the meadows.

The closing of the season, which often coincided with Easter Monday, was celebrated with the finals of the regional or international tournaments.

It would be interesting to know whether, with the games of colf, golf, and mail, the same relations with nature occurred.

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Dandelions, the end of the season

The dandelion is a wild herb, also called horse flower, lion's tooth and in French 'pissenlit'. All over Europe, in spring, people went into the wastelands and meadows to search for this plant, known for its very healthy properties. The young leaves are rich in vitamins A, B, C, and D, as well as minerals such as iron, potassium, and zinc. The leaves are full of flavour when used in salads, a welcome change after a winter with mainly cabbage as the only vegetable.

People in the countryside were well aware of this tasty, healthy weed. In particular, the humble people of whom there were many, went into the fields to pick these free of charge and before other fresh vegetables were in bloom. At that time, however, the crosseurs were still playing their game on the dandelion fields. Picking the dandelions while crosseurs were hitting their 'chouettes' (crosse balls) was rather dangerous.

To protect the dandelion pickers against the flying objects from the crosseurs, the village council proclaimed the end of the crosse season when the dandelion harvest was due to begin.



In spring, young dandelion leaves were eaten as a salad or as a substitute for spinach. It is the first fresh, freely available vegetable of the new season. Crosseurs had to leave the fields so that people could pick the leaves without danger.



It was the 'garde champêtre' (village constable) who walked through the streets of the village with a bell or a drum to inform the villagers that it was the end of the crosse season. – <http://images-01.delcampe-static.net>

It was the village 'garde champêtre' (village constable) who went into the villages, walking through the streets, ringing his bell or beating his drum, to inform the villagers that the crosse season had come to an end and that the fields were open again for the people to pick the dandelions. Today, crosseurs play the game in enclosed, private or communal fields, and the dandelion no longer plays a role in the season's closing rituals. The major inter-regional tournaments in which many crosseurs participate often take place on Easter Monday, and they are usually the official closing matches of the crosse season.