

La Soule

La soule or *choule* is a folk ballgame practiced in France. The game is played usually between two (sometimes more) competing teams representing different local identities, for instance, bachelors versus married men, uptown versus downtown, sometimes different villages. The point of *la soule* is to bring the ball—called *soule*—to one's own goal or to the goal of the opponent, using hands, feet, or sticks.

After giving up the ball, which sometimes happens ritually three times, the teams try to catch the ball and engage in a collective scrum. When one player succeeds in grasping the ball, the players run through the landscape, through fields and bushes, urban environment, and rivers. This can be interrupted by scrums and fights with the other teams posting at the way. When finally a goal is reached, the winning team is celebrated with a prize. If the goal is one's own, the winning place will be the starting point for the game of the following year. All this is accompanied by merriment, dancing, drinking, and eating pancakes and engages the whole local community. There is little or no restriction concerning time, space, or the size of the teams, which may vary between some dozens and some hundreds. Rules of the game are more or less implicit. There are two additional versions of the game. *Soule à la crosse* is played with sticks. And *melat* (in Brittany) is a more open and brutal form of the game.

In Breton mythology, the game is dated back to Celtic prehistory. But historically, *la soule* is recorded since the 12th century. The game is related to British Shrove Tuesday ball games and Cornish hurling the silver ball. It was chiefly played at ritual days, mainly around Shrove Tuesday, Easter, or the patron saint's day of the parish. In early times, clergy and nobility participated, noblemen generally patronizing the match. Between the 15th and 19th centuries, however, *la soule* was prohibited again and again by ecclesiastic and secular authorities, the official argument being its idle and violent character.

During the 19th century, modern soccer and rugby developed partly out of this type of folk ballgame, and the traditional *soule* became marginalized. In its traditional forms, *la soule* continued at single localities until 1930–1945. Since the 1980s–1990s however, a revival has been successfully tried at different places. This revival was sometimes connected with cultural (Breton, Celtic) regionalism, promoting Breton versus French identity.

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Further Reading

- Cegarra, M. 2000. *Jeux de balle en Picardie. Les frontières de l'invisible*. Paris: L'Harmattan.
- Moëlo, S., and J. P. Le Bihan. 1986. *Kergohann hag ar vellad./Kergohann et la soule*. Loudéac: Dastum.
- Renson, R. 1981. "Folk Football: Sport and/or as Ritual?" *The Association for the Anthropology of Play Newsletter* 8(1): 2–8.

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