

Mail too frivolous for women?

Royalty and nobility have always had their own rules. Though involvement in mail may have been considered as unsuitable to women, this did not apply automatically for women of the higher echelons.

When King François I of France introduced jeu de mail into Fontainebleau, the game became also very popular with the ladies of his retinue who could not play 'jeu de pelote' (hand-tennis [Jean-Marie Lhôte, 'Dictionnaire des jeux de société', 1996]).

Catherine de Medici (1519-1589), wife of King Henry II and mother in law of Mary Queen of Scots, was an active mail player.

The humanist and historian George Buchanan wrote in 1582 in his 'Rerum Scoticarum Historia' (History of Scotland) that Queen Mary 'indulged in sports that were clearly unsuitable to women' (Olive M. Geddes, 'A swing through time – Golf in Scotland 1457 –1743'). This shows the attitude towards women playing pall mall in the 16th century when it was considered as a frivolous, risqué and not ladylike sport.

Mary, who learnt the game of mail during her thirteen year stay in France, took this game with her when she returned to Scotland. Mary allegedly played pall-mall and/or golf in 1567. This claim apparently derived from a charge from her half-brother, the Earl of Moray, put forward to the Westminster Commissioners in 1568. He accused Mary of playing pall mall and golf at Seton Palace, only a few days after the murder of her husband, Lord Darnley. (See chapter 'Pall Mall in Great-Britain', Scotland)

Already at the beginning of the Renaissance, queens, princesses and other noble ladies in France were allowed to decide for themselves whether to play the noble game of mail in the castle gardens or on the 'grand courts' in the great cities.

In the 16th and 17th centuries, the nobility and the bourgeois and even the kings of France played the game of mail in the city of Lyon but not the women. They were only spectators and admirers of the players. They stood along the alley and applauded the good strokes of the men, but they would never have touched a mail club.

However, there was one woman “who entered the playing course, took one of the mails and challenged the victors who just had finished their match”. This fearless woman was Louize Charley Lab(b)é, ‘La belle Cordière’ (1524-1566), the young wife of a wealthy rope merchant and a well-known poetess. She was also known as a proud horsewoman who once as a lansquenet followed her father in the army of King Henri II and behaved extremely bravely during the siege of Perpignan.

Louize is probably the first ‘bourgeois’ female mail player known by name. When she played the mail game on the alley of the ‘Bella Cura’ in the heart of the town, the enthusiastic Lyonnais followed her along the alley, admiring her address and fighting spirit. Louize was the favourite and whenever she entered the mail court, everybody would support her. Her fighting spirit never diminished, and she always stayed determined. There was a low murmur from the spectators when she addressed the ball, changing into a loud applause when she hit the ball very far and straight. She was very good, and even the defeated players were proud to have played against her.

(Louis Edouard Fournier, ‘Histoire anecdotique des jeux, jouets et amusements avant 1900’ [Anecdotal history of games, toys and distractions before 1900], 1889)



Louize Charley Lab(b)é, la belle Cordière, was a regular player on the Bella Cura mail alley. When the young woman challenged the best mail players, the enthusiastic Lyonnais followed her, admired and applauded her fearful swing. She is probably the first ‘bourgeois’ female mail player, known by name. –

Picture by Pierre Woeiriote de Bouzey, 1555 – Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris

No documents have been found so far about women or children playing the game of 'maliën', as 'jeu de mail' was known in the Netherlands. There is only one painting showing a woman playing maliën together with a man on the Malieveld in The Hague, The Netherlands. It is not known who the playing lady is, but it was painted by Adriaen van de Velde in 1625, and is the oldest known picture of a woman playing jeu de mail.

One of the very few presentations of women playing the game of mail. It is not known who the lady in this picture was and whether it was common practise that women took to the mail alley – Adriaen van de Velde, 1625 – From 'Golf Through the Ages', Flannery & Leech



Charles d'Aigrefeuille wrote in 1737, in his 'Histoire de la ville de Montpellier', that jeu de mail was so popular that 'les enfants de Montpellier naissent un mail à la main' (the children from Montpellier are born with a mail in their hands). Contrary to this saying, we have not so far found any documentation about children playing this popular sport.