

Colf only for men?

Colvers, the Flemish and Netherlandish neighbours of the Walloon and French crosseurs, hardly ever produced written evidence of women playing the ancient game of colf in town, in the fields or on the ice. From the early rise of the game in the Middle Ages until the fall of the game by the end of the renaissance, not one mention has been found of women involved in the game of colf.

In the many famous winter landscape paintings from Southern and Northern Netherlandish painters, no women were depicted other than as spectators.

So far only one painting has been found of a woman holding a colf club. It is a 17th century Netherlandish painting, representing a young lady who is being taught by a friend, her husband or a colf professional how to strike a leather ball.

Children, mainly boys, are painted often in a stately pose. The colf clubs are generally far too big and too heavy to be used by the depicted children on the playing fields, and the colf equipment certainly belonged to their fathers.

It is hard to believe that these young boys played colf, certainly not in such expensive and unsuitable clothing.

Page 21: Although there are no presentations found so far of women actually playing the game of colf, this Netherlandish painting from the 17th century shows at least a young woman being taught the secrets of the game.— From 'Golf Through the Ages', Flannery & Leech



It was not uncommon that boys, until the age of 6 or 7 years, were dressed like girls and portrayed in their long dresses. After that age boys started to wear trousers. This explains why many authors see these painted children as girls instead of boys (Philippe Marchand, 'Pride and Joy. Children's portraits in the Netherlands, 1500-1700', 2009).

Many paintings of young children (mainly boys) holding colf clubs in their hands were made in the 16th and 17th centuries by Netherlandish painters. The rich attire and the far too big colf clubs (from their fathers) show that the depictions are a kind of 'stately portraits' of rich men's children, rather than of sporty children. – Stately portrait of Maurits de Héraugières at an age of 2 with a leaden colf club and a leather ball, painted by Adriaen van der Linde in 1595 – Private collection



Boys were not only depicted in stately poses in rich attire with colf clubs (and leather balls) in their hands. In the 16th and 17th centuries many so-called 'genre' paintings were made in which everyday life was shown. Famous representatives of this genre were Pieter Breugel, Pieter de Hoogh and last but not least the Northern Netherlandish painter Jan Steen. In several of his genre paintings boys are depicted carrying a colf club in their hand.

The presentation of boys with colf clubs in 'genre' paintings shows that the game of colf was part of daily life for 'common' boys in the 17th century. In this engraving an excited boy receives a wonderful colf club (Scottish cleek). – Johannes de Mare (1829) after Jan Havicksz. Steen (1669 – 1670) – © Trustees of the British Museum



Especially his painting ‘The feast of Saint Nicholas’, in which a boy gets a colf club (a Scottish cleek) as a present from Saint Nicholas (Santa Claus), suggests that colf was part of daily life for boys.

A confirmation that children indeed played colf in the early days of the game can be concluded from the excavation in 1992 of a ship from the reclaimed Zuiderzee, now the IJsselmeer, near the village of Biddinghuizen, the so called ‘Biddinghuizer colfschip’. Part of the cargo consisted of 16 colf clubs, including four small ones: two right-handers and two left-handers, half as heavy as the ‘grown up’ clubs and meant for children. The ‘colf ship’ sank in 1540 not far from the harbour of the town of Kampen, an important hanseatic town, where young and old colvers were perhaps eagerly waiting on the quay for their clubs to arrive.

The ancient hanseatic port of Kampen counted many colf players. The excavated ‘Biddinghuizer colfschip’ sank in the Zuiderzee on its way to the colvers, awaiting their colf clubs on the quay of the harbour. – Kampen from ‘Blauw’s Toonneel der Steden’, 1652 – Scanned by George M. Welling © The Jewish National and University Library, Jerusalem



The colf game became extinct before the emancipation of women could make their first mark on ladies colf.

In the beginning the game of 'kolf', the successor of colf, played on confined areas and later indoors, did not attract or did not allow women or children to accompany their husband and father in socialising on the kolf court.

The kolf game, a short variant of the ancient colf game (see chapter 'From Colf to Kolf') became popular at the beginning of the 18th century. Colf and kolf were games that were not only played by the nobility and the top level of the bourgeois in the towns of the Netherlands.

Women had to look after the children and the household. Moreover the game of kolf was considered by both men and women as too strenuous and not very ladylike. It took until the beginning of the 20th century for women to start to play kolf with the men.

Kolf societies were, and often still are, a kind of social club in which members not only played the game but also discussed politics, read newspapers, played cards, had their glass of genever and smoked a good cigar. Not exactly the environment for women or children. – Engraving P. van Looy, 1880 – Private collection



The landladies of the wine houses (19th hole) were the first women to see and learn the game on their own courts. As far as the information goes, these women were accepted without any problems, and gradually more women entered the 'arena' though the foundation of women's clubs was still far away.

The turbulent 1960s changed the situation dramatically. The emancipation gained momentum and the acceptance of long trousers as a female dress opened the possibilities for women to choose the sports they like.

Encouraged by their menfolk, women took to the kolf court. They were taught by men how to play the game and in 1964 a first ladies' kolf society was founded, followed by many others. Soon the ladies founded an association of ladies' clubs as part of the (Royal) Netherlandish Kolf Federation. In 1991, the ladies' society merged with the Federation.

In 2003, it was for the first time that a woman became president of the Federation.

Today, most kolf clubs are still separate ladies and men's clubs. Neither the men nor the women seem to want to change this into mixed clubs.

In 2010, there are 350 men and 250 women who are playing the ancient game of kolf;

(By courtesy of Annette Klinkert, former President of the Royal Dutch Kolf Federation, 2010)



The emancipation wave in the 1960s and the acceptance of trousers as acceptable clothing opened the kolf courts for women. Today 30% of all kolvers are women, united in women's kolf societies. – From KNKB 'Kolfkalender'