

Clubs for mail

As far as the history of the mail game goes, mail clubs were different from the clubs used in the other games. The few pictures and documents found show that mail clubs have always been a wooden cylindrical head in which a wooden shaft was inserted. Unfortunately there are no presentations in, for example, illuminations in Italian manuscripts or written documents telling us some more about how the original ‘pallamaglio’ clubs look like in the ‘pre-French’ period.

The game of mail was played with one club; yet there was a large variety of clubs as far as size and weight of the club head, and the length of shaft and the kind of wood that was used.

In his book ‘Nouvelles règles pour le jeu de mail.’ (1717), Joseph Lauthier explains the importance of using the right club:

“In order to acquire that exactness which is so necessary for this game, clubs of the same weight and length, duly proportioned to the strength and height of the player, should always been chosen. If the club be too long or too heavy, it catches the ground, and if it be too short or too light, it does not give sufficient force, and the ball is struck on the top or “by the hair” as they say. Each player, then, should choose a club which exactly suits him, of which he feels himself master, and of which the bulk is proportionate to the ball. It is wise to be careful in all these things.”

(Translated by Harry B. Wood in his book ‘Golfing Curios and “The Like”’, 1911)

Two clubs and a ball found in the vaults of the local museum of Montpellier. Covered with dust. The game of mail, rightly a game for kings and commoners, is completely forgotten, even by the curators in the museum and unknown by the people in the streets. – Musée du Vieux Montpellier, France



Page 111 top: The aristocracy enjoyed very much playing the game of mail in their own private gardens. Having such a mail court added prestige to the family when inviting ‘people of their own kind’ for some ‘divertissement’ (relaxation). In the palace garden of Schloss Heidelberg in Germany, people playing on the long mail court at the left of the garden had a beautiful view of what was once called the ‘8th wonder of the world’. – Jaques Fouquières, c.1620, painting on canvas – © Kurpfälzisches Museum Heidelberg

Page 111 bottom: Many towns had mail alleys constructed for the bourgeoisie and their guests for some physical exercise and relaxation. A mail court added much prestige to the towns. – Mail court in the Enghien Park near Brussels from Romeyn de Hooghe, 1685 – Koninklijke Bibliotheek, Den Haag, The Netherlands

The choice of the appropriate club depends very much on the ball chosen for the actual match. Basically the weight of the club head should be roughly twice the weight of the ball which is in average about 250 grams with a matching club head of approximately 500 grams. The choice of the ball and therefore the choice of the club depend very much on outside influences such as the structure of the course, the actual condition of the course and the weather conditions, dry or wet, and the direction of the wind, etc.

The game of mail was played on different kinds of ‘playing’ courts by different kinds of people.



The royals and aristocracy played mainly on long stretched private mails laid out in their own palace gardens. The playing surface was mainly beaten earth covered with a thin layer of sand or fine broken shells.

In 1845, a set of mail clubs and a ball were found in Pall Mall in London. The ball with a weight of 160 grams seems to be rather light for being used with clubs weighing both more than 700 grams. The shafts have an average length of 110 centimetres, the cylinder is 14 centimetres long and has a diameter of 5.4 centimetres. The lofts of the extremities of the head were 5% respectively 15%. –

© Trustees of the British Museum



The bourgeois living in the towns played on long stretched mail alleys laid out most often just outside the city walls near one of the gates. These courts had a beaten earth playing surface, covered with fine sand or broken shells. Often these mail alleys were commercially exploited by private persons or by ‘palemardiers’ (club makers). A kind of green fee had to be paid, clubs and balls rented, and the club house (wine house) was exploited by the palemardier or other managers as well.

Common people hardly ever played on these courts because it was far too expensive; consequently the bourgeois could play with their own kind of people without interference from the commoners.

The common people played in the streets of the towns following a self-chosen circuit. When the mailers were ousted from the town by the council, they continued to play the game outside the city walls in the dry fosses of the ramparts, or on the sandy paths through the agricultural fields or even on wasteland.



At one time, the road along the city walls was part of the mail circuit for the common people in the town of Avignon. The road was a sandy path with open fields on one side. When the town grew and the open fields were used for building houses, the mail circuit became a traffic road and the players had to leave the town for the open spaces in the countryside. – Detail of a map of Avignon from 1649; the commoners played their game intramural from the famous ‘Pont d’Avignon’ southwards. –

Musée Calvet, Avignon, France

Clubs (palemards) and balls were made by the palemardiers (club makers). These palemardiers were not only club and ball makers; they acted also as professional players, teachers, referees, owners or managers of the mail court, responsible for keeping the playing fields in good order, etc. The palemardiers had small enterprises with associates and assistants who produced and repaired palemards (clubs) and mail balls for sale or rent to amateurs. They rented 'porte-lèves' (caddies) to the players for carrying the 'lève' ((lofter in English), spare balls and clubs, and ball retrievers. They looked after the customers in the wine house, kept the mail alley in good order and repaired broken clubs.

Sometimes, the design and the markings on the club head show the maker of the club.

The wine or club house, next to the mail court, was the focal point. Here clubs and balls were made and repaired, the green fees were paid, clubs and balls hired and last but not least the players relaxed with a glass of wine after a friendly match and discussed business or politics with their own kind of people. – Daniël Stopendael, 1725 – Stadsarchief Amsterdam



Some well-known palemardiers were François Grasset, Louis Brun from Aix en Provence (La Bernarde), Georges Minier & Son from Avignon and Latour (club maker of the mail clubs found in London). It could well be that the royals and some of the aristocrats had their own palemardiers and porte-lèves, and played with their own clubs and balls made-to-measure for them.

The bourgeois made use of the palemardier associated to the mail court. They booked lessons, rented clubs and balls, paid green fees, asked advice about the rules of the game, had their clubs repaired or bought new clubs and balls, and ordered a glass in the ‘clubhouse’ after a match.

The common people who played in the streets or outside the ramparts and in the fields probably bought clubs and balls in the shop from independent palemardiers or perhaps made clubs themselves.

The head

As far as information goes mail clubs have always had cylindrical heads fixed to a long flexible wooden shaft. The club head made of hardwood, mainly from the roots of boxwood or evergreen oak, were not standardised and varied in dimensions and weight as did the design of the club heads.

Iron rings of different width were fastened around the two faces of the cylinder to protect the wood against damage from the constant impact of the hard mail ball against the striking faces of the cylinder and hitting against obstacles on the playing field. Moreover, the weight of the iron rings improved the balance of the club.

It is not known if such rings had always been part of the club head.

The shaft

The shaft of the mail club was made of ash wood or ‘micocoulier’ (lotus tree) and was strong and ‘whippy’. The length of the shaft depended on the height of the player, generally measured from the waist down to the ground corresponding to between approximately 1.10 and 1.20 metres (article of Andrew Lang in ‘Blackwood’s Magazine’, 1909). In some instances players used shafts measuring from under the armpit for making much longer strokes.

The shafts were fixed straight through the club head and glued. No holding pegs were used. The most common grip of the shaft was a strip of leather, wound around the end of the shaft over a length of 25 – 35 centimetres.



The shafts of the mail clubs were roughly 1.10 – 1.20 centimetres long, although sometimes a much longer shaft was used to achieve even more distance. The shaft was inserted straight in the wooden club head and fixed with glue. The grip was a strip of leather wrapped around the top of the shaft over a length of 25 – 35 centimetres. – Musée du Vieux Montpellier, France

The two faces of the hardwood cylinder of the mail club were protected against damage from the impact of the ball by iron rings. The iron rings improved the balance of the club as well. – Musée du Vieux Montpellier, France



The lève (lofter in English)

When a mail party had almost come to an end only the final stroke through the ring or the hoop had to be made. For this final stroke, use was made of a lève, a club totally different from the mail club, having a very concave head and a much shorter shaft than the mail club. When trying to reach the target, the wooden ball was replaced by a smaller iron ball which was placed in the spoon-like head of the lève. The ball was then ‘scooped’ through the ring. The lève was carried by the porte-lève, a sort of caddie. A team had only one lève to be used by each member of the team.

The ‘caddie’ did not only carry the lève but also some spare balls and clubs as well.

The shaft of the lève was short, less than 1 metre in length.

In the famous painting from the Flemish Italianist painter Paul Bril, called



‘Landscape with club and ball players’, a very long-shafted metal lève is used. This exceptional ‘club’ was not meant for scooping balls but as a ball retriever from unreachable places like ponds, ditches or any other obstacle. In the 17th century there were no telescopic ball retrievers available.

The ‘lève’ was a special iron club with a spoon-like head with which a small iron ball was scooped through a ring or a hoop. Looking at the Lauthier drawing, we wonder what the use of the lève was for scooping the ball through a ground ring. Scooping means to get the ball airborne which is not necessary. Only elevated rings need elevated balls. –

From ‘Nouvelles règles pour le jeu de mail.’, Joseph Lauthier

Conclusion

In the course of the centuries that jeu de mail was reasonably popular in the main cities of Europe and in the open fields in the French Languedoc region, not much changed in the design and the manufacture of the playing equipment. The game is completely forgotten both in the towns and in the Languedoc region. Even in Montpellier, once a kind of Saint Andrews of the mail sport, where it was said that children were born with a mail club in their hand, nobody remembers the game of mail, although even a road, an estate and a school are named after jeu de mail. In antique shops the name mail does not ring a bell, and in the local Montpellier museum, we had to explain in depth the game and the Montpellier history of the game before somebody remembered vaguely some strange sticks in the depot of the museum.

*An Italianate land scape from 1624 by the Southern Netherlandish painter Paul Bril. It is the only existing painting in which mailers, crosseurs or colvers act as staffage in a picture. –
Minneapolis Institute of Arts, The William Hood Dunwoody Fund, USA*



