Kolf: a historic game for modern people

KOLF IS HERE TO STAY

THE GAME

Kolf is in no way to be confused with golf (although it can well claim to be a close relative of that game). Kolf is played on an indoor course some 17.5 metres long and 5 metres wide, marked with cabalistic-looping scoring lines, and with an ornate wooden post planted at each end. Nowadays, a Kolf court has a floor made of a sort of plastic and needs to be as water- level as possible.

There are three players in a match and each has his own bail. The bails are quite large and are made either of *rubber* or *sajet* (this is a bail made of wool and covered with leather). The rubber bails are the most popular, although they have to be at least 80-100 years old before they are fully mature. The older the rubber gets, the less spring it has, this in turn encourages a better roll and that in Kolf is most important.

The club used has a very strong wooden shaft and a heavy metal head. Such a club is known as *a "kliek"*. The head on the *kliek* used for the rubber ball is somewhat larger than that used for the *sajetball*, the reason being that the rubber bail is slightly larger and heavier.

The aim of the game is to hit the post at the far end, having started from the starting post. Then to hit the post at the starting end and then to return the ball back to the far end, or scoring end, and this all in three strokes. The posts are set at an angle of 85% towards each other, so that the bails don't jump when they hit the posts.

in playing the game, the player often makes use of rebounds on the wails of the court, similar to billiard. The closer the bail finishes to the end wall, the higher the player's score. In a tournament, players play a total of 15 games, each game consisting of 3 shots and usually 5 games are played in succession, the winner being the player with the highest total of points.

Every player is placed in one of five classes according to his skill. Sometimes, the lower classes are given the advantage of extra points, so they can compete on an even basis with a player from a higher class. Clubs play against each other, and there's also a national championship every year. Since 1966, women play too.

The method in hitting the ball is different for each player. The style is very individual. The players generally crouch very low, adopt a wide stance, with the hands being quite a distance apart on the *kliek*. During the stroke, which is short and requires great feeling, the head of the *kliek* never leaves the ground. It is of the utmost importance that the player keeps his body extremely still. No special clothing is worn and players play the game wearing normal street shoes.

It is a game played al a sedate pace, often with the accompaniment of a *jenever* or a good cigar. Nowadays there are few Dutchmen, even, who understand its intricacies and subtle charm.

Kolf is played today by 31 clubs on only 14 courses — compared with the hundreds which existed before — and by less than 1,000 people out of Holland's population of 16 million:

about 350 men and 250 women. Of the 14 courses still in use, all but one are in the tiny villages of North. Holland. A in the old days, they are invariably attached to café's or social centres.

The modern kolf players deny that they are merely bit actors in a museum piece; while we don't expect our sport to oust such newcomers as football; we claim It is not only thriving, but is attracting sufficient newcomers to assure its future.

HISTORY

The ancestry of kolf is long and intriguing, reaching well back beyond most of the reliable written records. There's every evidence, however, that it had its roots in yet another Dutch invention... the game which the world now knows as golf:

Early Europeans, no less than modern Europeans, were sport fanatics. Documents as far back as the year 1200 mention four popular games involving both club and ball: *chole* in Belgium and France, *jeu de mail* in France, and *beugelen* and the *klosbaan* in Holland.

Chole was probably the closest to modern golf It was played with iron-headed clubs and a wooden ball, and the aim was to reach a given target in the minimum number of strokes.

Jeu de mail was not dissimilar, except that it was played with a metal hammer. It could be played on a course, but the most popular form was *mail a la chicane,* which went cross-country.

The two Dutch sports, *beugelen* and the *klosbaan,* both involved hitting the ball through a narrow gap on the set course. *Beugelen* still survives, in fact, and can be seen in the southern Dutch province of Limburg.

In the interchange of fashion and trade, all these games tended to spill across the hazy national borders. Holland developed its own version of *jeu de mail,* which it called *maliespel,* about the same time as the English court set up a *mail* course on the wide avenue now known as Pail Mail.

But it was a combination of *jeu de mail* and *chole* which seems to have appealed most to the sporting instincts of the Dutch. They called the new game *colf,* and within a few years they had become a nation of passionate players. They played with a variety of balls and types of stick and the rules seem to have been arbitrary in the extreme.

The game was played in the streets, in public squares, or anywhere there was sufficient space. Sometimes the players set up a pole which they could use as a target, other times they simply picked a handy local landmark and let rip. The winner, invariably, was the one who reached the chosen point in the minimum number of strokes.

The cost of all this sporting activity, in broken windows and spectator injury, was not welcomed by the authorities. Indeed, the best indication of the sport's widespread popularity is the number of official ordinances which were made against it. In Amsterdam, for instance, *colf* players were banned from the long and narrow street known as the Nes, under penalty of having their clothes confiscated. In 1456, they were banned from playing around and *inside* the church at Naarden. And in many other cities and towns they were banished outside the municipal limits.

In winter time, at least, the problem was less severe. When the canals and lakes froze over, many Dutch *colf* players took to the ice, finding an ideal playing surface and all the space they needed.

At some time during the Middle Ages, the *colf* craze seems to have travelled across the North Sea to Holland's trading neighbour, Scotland. While the Scots may claim to have invented the game of golf — and certainly they did perfect it in its modern form — the evidence is that the original idea was brought back by Scottish merchants to St. Andrews, in the country of Fife, from Hanseatic ports where *colf* was being played. Indeed, apart from this sport, there were niany Dutch linguistic and architectural influences on this peninsula of Scotland which are still evident today.

But oddly, while Scotland was developing golf as a spacious outdoor game, the Dutch were doing exactly the opposite with *colf* Instead of playing in the open, more and more were adapting the game to a form that could be played on the old *maliespel* courses, which mostly adjoined cafés and inns.

Increasingly, these courses were roofed over, until finally the new game was entirely played indoors. Thus was born the unique Dutch game of *kolf*

From the beginning of the 18th century, the game caught on quickly. Records show that by 1769 there were about 200 courses in Amsterdam alone, of which more than 30 were covered; in 1792 there were 350 courses in the whole of Holland, almost half of them covered.

Initially, players used the same sticks as they had for *colf*, with bails made of tightly-wound wool, covered with leather. But as *kolf* developed, a larger bal! came into use, more suitable for the new form of the game, and the sticks became correspondingly heavier.

A major technical breakthrough came in 1830, when bails made of gutta-percha, an early form of rubber, were introduced. These balls were larger still, the gutta-percha softer and less resilient than the rubber of today. They were used as well as the wool-and-leather bails, rather than replacing them.

Exactly why *kolf* swiftly began to fade in popularity towards the end of the last century, no one is certain. There was competition from newer sports such as football and cycling, of course, but a more likely reason seems to have been that the cafe-owners, who operated most of the courses, found that they were no longer economical.

One by one, the courses fell into desuetude, and the space was used otherwise. Today many an old café's dance floor or billiard table hides what once was a *kolf* urse.

Of the 14 courses still in use, all but one are in the tiny villages of North Holland. The one course still to be found outside North Holland is in Utrecht, in the St. Eloyen Gasthuis. This beautiful course is the oldest in Holland, and although it bas been restored more than once over the years, its history dates back to 1730. The Gasthuis (or almshouse) is a building owned by the city's ancient guild of metal smiths an it is rich in tradition.

One problem with a sport as old as *kolf* is the equipment. There are a few craftsmen who still make the special metal-beaded sticks, or *klieks* but no one who manages to manufacture the riht balls.

Fortunately, the life of both sticks and bails is long. Most modern players use equipment which has been passed on from father to son, or friend to friend, or is borrowed from the club. Some make their own wool-cored balls, or restore old ones which have already given many year's service. Most of the rubber balls in use are at least 80 years old, which makes them true sporting antiques; the trouble is that modern rubber bas too much bounce for the *kolf* course.