

# Why did it take so long to become a popular sport in Continental Europe ?

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## Giving some thought to the influence of "free time"

Did golf derive and develop from already existing games ? From the wonderful six kilo German publication of its golf history that last year adorned the celebration of 100 years Deutsche Golf Verband, one might conclude that golf developed out of games existing already six or seven centuries ago following a kind of Darwinistic process. As to the country of its origination the debate goes on, this will not be an issue in this publication. Indeed, present golf is very much alike a game that existed in Scotland and the Low Countries for many centuries. However, if the difference between a sport and a game is correctly given as: a sport is a game under agreed specific regulations; golf as a *sport* can pride itself of being one of the earliest regulated sports, with its origination in Scotland, where as we all know, in 1744 the golf rules were agreed and laid down.

That norm, that regulations determine the rules under which a sport is played, was at the same time the ground why Britain was so much earlier in having sports organised. Games were after all part of daily life all over the world, though we must be careful to use the word "daily". For the majority of people in those days, work was the thing that ruled daily life six days a week from sunup to sunset. Only Sundays work could – must ! – be interrupted. Funny enough, in large parts of society, Scotland to name one, this only free day must *not* be used for games, let alone sports.

It took a number of changes in public life that would greatly contribute to the development of games into sports. This had much to do with fundamental changes in society which took place in the first half of the nineteenth century, known also as the period of *the industrial revolution*. Where earlier about eighty percent of a population had their main occupation in agriculture, new methods in farming reduced the required manpower whose participants then had to look for some other way for supporting a family. The meanwhile developed mechanical manufacture took up half

the now surplus manpower from that area to be employed in factories. The major change in the lives of those concerned was, that they had been accustomed to a life in accordance with a natural timescale, i.e. the daily rhythm and the seasons, whereas they now had to adjust themselves to a *time-controlled* life. Seasonal labour provided that outside the season, mainly between November and April, there was time to enjoy games and a certain feeling of *leisure*. Few obligations commanded daily life during that period. It is therefore not surprising to find that in the early days, golf was principally a winter sport, as Hamilton showed.<sup>1</sup> Though golf was not a game that could be played by the ordinary people. For them the implements needed, clubs and especially the ball, were too expensive. Apart from the well to do, only club-and-ballmakers could play the game. Still, a great variation of other games, later to become regulated sports, were a popular pastime in that period. This all changed when the effects of *Industrial Revolution* became more and more visible.

It is in some way necessary to give special attention to a phenomenon which has taken such an influential place in present daily life, that it is hard to realise it once was a non existing part of a general life pattern: pastime. The English language doesn't even give it that special attention it has in Continental languages. "Freizeit" or "Feie Zeit" do not mean the same thing. Also in Dutch, one distinguishes between "Vrije tijd" and "Vrijetijd". In French one distinguishes "temps libre" from "temps á loisir". In general this means that difference is made between time in which obligations cease to exist, as distinguished from time that is given a certain meaning by using it for a different purpose. To be more precise: the negative connotation : "not-work-time", as distinguished from the positive connotation: "time to be used for something else".

As a side remark must be noted that the French word "loisir", meaning feeling free from obligations, very likely was the origin of the English "leisure". Leisure however meant in the English society of the nineteenth century a prerogative for only the well to do, the aristocracy and the gentry. Since they had few

obligations that had to do with work, the very existence of something *apart from work* like pastime, did not occur to them. Hence they knew just *leisure*. Being free to do whatever one took fancy to. I had to go into this a bit further in order to stress the importance of the "free time" or "pastime" phenomenon, in the development of sports and hence, in golf.

### Sport as a civilisation tool.

With a good deal of the workforce then employed in factories, the nineteenth century society took a different course. Labourers were housed in building concentrations around the factory with the result that hygienic conditions suffered. Absence of clean water or a sewer system caused widespread infections. A labour day might well be up to twelve hours and child labour was rife. Life seemed to present nothing else but work, eat and sleep. Small wonder that on Sundays, when work was forbidden, people reacted in engulfing themselves in rather radical entertainment. Fist fights, often in so called "pit fights", where two men in a pit hammered in on each other till one was incapacitated, together with other rough entertainment, along with profuse drinking, caused them to arrive only half capable at the factory on a Monday morning.<sup>2</sup> As a consequence production suffered in quantity and quality. The expression: "Monday product" for a product which functions badly, derives from that time. Clearly something had to be done to improve a way of life which could not be tolerated, neither from a commercial nor from a moral point of view. It became the beginning of an initiative known as the "civilisation process".

Working hours were reduced and a certain improvement in the living circumstances was undertaken. In order to structure the "non working time", some older existing games were taken as a basis for regulated sport. The idea being that sport with its regulations, would lay the basis for the general idea of being disciplined. Football was one of the most popular as it involved a greater number of people to be trained and required physical effort. It also required very limited space.<sup>3</sup> But mainly the objective was to get used to act under rules and regulations.

It must be noted that in order to be able to have groups of people act in sports against each other, means of transport had to be available so that teams from different areas could meet. In itself this requirement was a reason to regulate sport so that meetings could take place under generally known agreed rules. The meanwhile constructed railway system provided that possi-

bility. Football became by far the most popular pastime of the workforce. It served all parties concerned, both authorities and church, for improving moral standards. The factory management for improving labour efficiency and the workers themselves for having an opportunity to meet people from other areas in friendly meetings. Authorities were satisfied by the reduction of harmful behaviour and the Church for renewed interest in living according to moral standards. How did this work out for our subject: golf ?

Development of golf in Britain differs from the Continent.

Different from what maybe might be supposed, in England it did not take all that much time for golf to be accepted as a pastime for the general public. This has to do with an English custom in which individuals of related occupations, organise themselves in so called "societies". Most often men from the same professional area. This could involve artisans, bookkeepers or shopkeepers, which had a similar hobby. They would be very loosely organised with the main objective to just meet and share their way of pastime. Not so few of them developed "golfing societies". A band of men with golf as their hobby, not attached to any club but using existing golf facilities. "Green-fee players" or "free golfers" as they are known presently all over the continent. In the period that followed the introduction of the manufactured golf ball around 1850, hundreds of new golf facilities were being constructed. The cost of clubs and balls – both now under manufacture instead of hand crafted - was reduced to an extent that brought it within reach of a great many people. Clubs remained very private for a long time to the extent that though visiting societies could make use of the course, this did not include facilities of the clubhouse. Still, with the increasing prosperity in England, gradually societies would undertake to create their own clubs.

Around 1910 already hundreds of golf facilities had been constructed, many of them for people from the working classes. Why then did it take more than half a century to introduce golf as a general pastime on the Continent? We have to look at the industrial development in the main countries of Western Europe to find the grounds for this puzzling fact.

When industrialisation with its mechanical production in steam driven factories was imported from Britain, continental manufacturers visiting that country were introduced by their English counterparts to a way of life that was the privilege of the upper class-

es. Most typical and completely different from the Continental way of life was however, that sports participation consisted of a mixture of working- and upper classes. To be sure, the participants from either class were labelled: Amateurs and Professionals. Being *amateur* meant that the player did not *need* money he might make with sport. Different from the *professional* who made his living through sport. An amateur was by definition a *gentleman*. So in a team the “professional” could be the captain of a team, however not allowed in the clubhouse. A custom that has survived in many a golf club in Britain to this day.

Members of different social classes being in close contact during e.g. sports meetings, caused what the sociologist Norbert Elias (1897 – 1990) called a “drip effect”. Customs and behaviour, also the language from the higher echelons of society, gradually being introduced into the next lower echelon. This made the development and spreading of sports decidedly more lively.

When in the late nineteenth century young continental industrialists took the English sports back with them, they found no place in their own society to copy that way of life, although for different reasons. In Germany of the early twentieth century, class distinction was still very acute. Aristocracy and industrialists, together with the substantial “Bildungs Bürger” – the higher educated people – formed a class of their own, apart from general society and few social contacts existed between them, in either sport or any other part of daily life. Even the language provides for class distinctions for recognising a social position. The Netherlands never had much place for an influential aristocracy as it had been a republic for centuries and even when made a kingdom, it was said that The Netherlands were “a republic under a sovereign”. A situation which has not altered much to this day<sup>4</sup>. Class distinctions were based on wealth and influence. In France a kind

of mixture of the two societies existed. (Descendants from) the aristocracy were – and are – still regarded as a class apart, though their direct influence remained limited. Though class distinction did not entirely take that form, influential functions traditionally went to the old families and universities were populated mainly by their offspring. However, in either country industrialist families form a class apart and, unlike the situation in England, mixing of the classes was rare, decidedly so in sports. Sport clubs and organisations, also of the so called popular sports like football, were almost exclusively governed by the members of these upper classes.

Another factor delayed the introduction of particular sports. There was a certain dislike for sports which placed younger people in a situation of antagonism. The essence of most sports is to perform against a challenge. Either in norms such as time or distance as in athletics, or against each other in person or as a team. In particular the fact that one side had to be better than another, worried educators as being a source for developing less desired qualities. In Germany there was a decided preference for gymnastics and its acknowledged promoter “Turnvater Jahn” remains a celebrity to this day. Still in all countries a sport like football soon took the fancy of the greater public, not least because the employers found the effects on production and gen-



eral behaviour gratifying. Sports would divide into "folksports" with football as the most popular, and sports that remained the selected preference of the middle and upper classes, tennis, hockey and...golf. A last factor that made England differ from the Continent was that in England from the beginning, professional sport played a major rôle whereas in Continental Europe sport remained strictly amateur. Golf in Britain knew professionals from its early days not only in teaching but also in matches. That was the situation that would remain in existence until the first decades after WW II

#### Influence of the post war generation.

However, the post war generation that came into view, did not accept class distinction any longer and took the end of WW II as a starting point for a complete new look at authority. In their view the disaster of the WW II was mainly caused by the views of the pre war generation based on class distinction. A rather fierce demonstration of those ideals occurred in what now is known as "the Paris students revolt of '68". It would prove to be the beginning of a European movement by a new generation, that would constitute in a few decades a more egalitarian society, in which existing privileges were challenged. It is my contention that the students revolt of Paris 1968 may have served as a catalyser for a process of fundamental changes in society. Once those changes had come to rest in calmer waters, the social strata had taken a change that would open new ways of life for the society of Continental Europe. Particularly higher education which came within reach of all social classes, had its impact on the distribution of positions of power. Little remained in this way, exclusive for a specific class. Habits and customs were dispersed over general society, regardless of birth or financial position.

Yet another factor contributed to a new feeling of independence. In that same period, growing mobility caused by a fast growing economy, offered possibilities for movement into activities that earlier had to remain outside consideration: Golf to name one ! All this together caused that also golf could grow into one of the "popular" sports. A sport considered to be within reach of the general public.

#### The position of golf in a changing society

Having made this sidestep into sociological considerations, where does this take us with regard to the introduction and development of golf on the conti-

nent.

Let us first look at one reason for golf so long remaining limited to the ranks of the powerful and well to do in the countries concerned.

Golf needs large parcels of land. A minimum of 25 hectares for a nine hole course. That on its own formed already a limitation. Land was traditionally owned by either the aristocracy or the rich and powerful from the new industries or commercial companies. In Britain the social classes had their own way of mixing and staying apart through distinguishing "professionals" from "amateurs", land in possession of the upper classes was made available for sports as golf. A special case being that the railway companies, in order to attract passengers, made land adjacent to the railway lines available for construction of a golf course. Indeed many old golf courses - St.Andrews being one one of them! - can still be found near a railway line. Which shows again that golf was considered part of daily life. Not having that special social environment on the continent, land made available for golf remained restricted to those who belonged to the social class of landowners and their relations as lawyers, doctors, bankers and such. A strict "ballotage"<sup>5</sup> kept membership of clubs within their own social environment. On a question why they would, in that period, exclude others from being accepted as members, a very revealing, at the same time surprisingly clear reply came our way. Golf is a very social sport. People stay in each others company for hours in an intimate and private atmosphere. Just the two or three of them in a pastoral environment later to meet in the clubhouse with its own private atmosphere. This may invite conversation of a more private or even confidential nature. With as a consequence, as one member of an old traditional club put it: "We did not mean to keep people out, we just wanted to make sure that those accepted, would fit in". Since golf on the continent, contrary to the United Kingdom, always was a mixed sport - many clubs started with women in the committee - one had to be careful to have members acceptable within that ambiance. A desire to keep possible developing infatuations from leading to less desirable marriages. A large part of the younger generation in those days, were partner in the family business concern and marriages were calculated carefully in view of possible financial consequences.

This situation continued till about the period of the nineteen eighties of the twentieth century when a sudden and spectacular growth in golf participation took place, though in one country more lively than in another. As stated above, movements by the new post war generation did greatly contribute to accelerate a

process that in itself would have taken place, albeit perhaps in a less hectic manner.

New reasons to start a golf club / golf course.

Up until around 1980, there had been little reason to begin a golf club, or a golf course for that matter, for other reasons than as a facility for a group of people to have a private place of their own for their beloved pastime. Since, as was mentioned earlier, this involved having the necessity of a large parcel of land, this restricted participation. As an example, in The Netherlands, the first club was grounded in 1893 in the Hague, the now Royal The Hague Golf and Country Club ,

Thirty years hence in 1933 there were just 14 golf clubs with altogether some 2500 members. Another fifty years later in 1983 there still were only 30 clubs with a total of 15500 members. A growth of just 16 clubs and 12000 golfers in thirty years. All of them private clubs practically all with "ballotage".

Then, again twenty years later in 2003 this had grown into 129 courses with a total of 218500 members. The majority open to the general public. So between 1983 when the above mentioned effects of a changed society were materialising, and 2003 when the full effect had taken place, the number of courses had more than quadrupled and participation had increased by fourteen times the number of 1983. Although Germany and France do not show figures of a likely explosive nature, the growth of golf in either country is of a comparable impressive nature. (see statistics 1985 – 2007 below)

It stands to reason that such spectacular numbers could not be achieved within the old criteria for founding a golf club. Presently there is more than one reason to begin a golf facility, the least of which is the privately owned exclusive ballotaged club. A renewed look at the use of once farming land and renewed considerations by the environmental organisations make a golf course a welcome addition in the general landscaping. At the same time golf course exploitation as a business initiative is taking up quite a position. Globally, golf has become a major factor in the economy. Professional golfers have taken a place in society within en without the golf world itself, that makes them important public figures.

Conclusion,

The introduction and development of golf took a decidedly different course when compared between

Great Britain and the Continent. The main reasons being that in Great Britain for various reasons sport in general was actively promoted during the second half of the nineteenth century and the participants came from the upper classes of society as well as from the working classes. They played together on equal footing regardless of social status, be it that that remained true only insofar this was restricted to the game itself. Outside the games little or no social contact existed and "professionals" were not allowed in a clubhouse. The cost of golf, earlier prohibitive for the general public, came within general reach when after 1850 golf balls could be manufactured in numbers for just a few cents. The existence of so called "societies" that took a liking to golf gave a decided boost to the construction of golf facilities. Many existing golf clubs in Britain descend from a society.

This situation could not be copied in the countries of Continental Europe. The social pattern developed over centuries and still lively present in especially Germany, did not allow for a comparable development. In France and the Netherlands where social statuses were less strictly divided, the fact that golf involved ownership of land, still let it be a prerogative of the more wealthy. In general, a mixing of the classes, just was not on. Although often argued that it was the cost of the game that kept the less wealthy out, this was not the case. Membership, golf lessons and the paraphernalia as shown in club records, indicate that golf was not a very expensive sport. Definitely within reach of a larger public that actually existed up to the 1980's. It may therefore be argued that the fundamental changes of social and economic circumstances provided a general climate through all strata of society within which little was regarded as not feasible on grounds of a more modest public status. As a final indicator that golf has indeed become an everyday activity for just anyone, may serve, that regularly golf equipment is being officered in popular supermarkets. Golfclubs offer membership at a monthly contribution without entry fee or participation down payment. The ongoing increase in membership within and without a national organisation, recently published to be at a figure of 15% annually, indicate that golf has become a general, or popular, sport altogether. A change of this order could not have taken place without a fundamental change in the Continental societies.

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September 2008

<sup>1</sup> D.Hamilton.*Golf, Scotland's Game*. (Kilmacolm 1998) p.52

<sup>2</sup> One of the best known regulations to suppress a violent sport like boxing, were the "Queensbury rules as they exist till today. They demanded a.o. that thick gloves were to be worn and a match be played in time limited rounds.

<sup>3</sup> Sometimes even that limited space was not available which made some football clubs "Roving" to play on elsewhere available fields. Clubnames like "Blackburn Rovers" and "Bolton Wanderers" reflect those days.

<sup>4</sup> A socialist minister, a dedicated republican, when asked why he did not vote for reinstatement of the republic, reacted with: What's the sense, the people would vote for the queen as president anyway.

<sup>5</sup> Ballotage, from "the ballot box" by which member proposals would be judged. Members would drop either a white or a black ball in the "ballot box". One black ball would already serve to deny membership. Hence the expression "being blackballed" for being excluded from society in general.

<sup>6</sup> Source EGA statistics.

The above article is an abstract from the doctoral thesis which was presented June this year.

#### **Development of golf participation in selected countries 1985 – 2007 <sup>6</sup>**

Country	1985		2007	
	Courses	Members	Courses	Members
Germany Pop. 82.2	190	67.332	677	527.388
France Pop. 63.7	150	63.724	559	378.275
Netherlands Pop. 16.5	32	16.055	154	282.000
Belgium Pop. 10.4	18	10.000	78	48.000
United Kingdom Pop. 60.4	1859	826.650	2948	1.416.665
Ireland Pop. 4.1	257	125.000	409	287.000
Denmark Pop. 5.4	51	25.000	170	145.310
Sweden Pop. 5.4	181	107.000	462	532.944