

# China's role in football – and golf

## FAITH IN SPORT

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Continuing his look at the history of sport, Fr Vlad Felzmann looks at the origins of some of our most popular pastimes and games

I start this week on a negative note. Over in Egypt, a fragment of papyrus dating back to 267 CE, when translated, was found to be a contract between two teenage wrestlers in Antinopolis, agreeing to fix the match... And we think such crooked pastimes are modern inventions!

Back to the good stuff. First recorded 2,000 years ago, cuju is known as the earliest form of football. In China, the popularity of the sport peaked in the Tang (618-907 CE) and Song dynasties (960-1279 CE).

Eight pieces of leather were stitched together to form a round shell. Inside, an animal bladder was installed and inflated. The goal was a net on bamboo sticks. Cuju differs from modern ball games in that a single goal was located at the middle of the field, and the number of players varied as long as both teams were equally matched.

Players also had competitions on technique – for example, juggling the ball with their feet. One women's team, consisting of 153 members, was recorded as so proficient that, once they started, the ball never touched the ground.

Nobles in the Tang Dynasty loved to hit wooden balls with a stick, on horseback: polo. Of all 19 emperors, 11 were hardcore fans. Two of them even died in polo accidents. Apparently introduced by Persian and Tubo Kingdoms, polo was also actively practised by ancient Chinese women. Sometimes, it was more than recreational.

When Emperor Xizong had trouble choosing between four candidates to be the military official for the Sichuan region, a game of polo was set as the decider. In the end, a low-born, but excellent polo player, got the job.

No one is really sure of the connection between ancient and modern golf, but there are some surprising similarities. Chinese golf was usually set in open country with various landscapes, and according to a depiction of Emperor Mingzong (1300-1329 CE) enjoying the game, there were 10 holes spread across the course with small flags inserted beside them. Whoever struck the wooden ball into the hole with their stick got a point. The game was most popular in the Song (960-1279CE) and Yuan (1279-1368CE) dynasties. From the emperor and nobles to the common folk and children, Chinese golf was the sport of the age.

Luckily many aspects of the sport are recorded and discussed in the book *'Ball Scripture'*, compiled in



The traditional Shrove Tuesday football match is still held every year in Ashbourne

the Yuan Dynasty.

You might not imagine it, but in China ice-skating was once a warriors' art. Manchu men needed to master the skill to be able to skate 350 kilometres in a single day. When the emperors came to power in the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911 CE) and moved from the north to the capital city of Beijing, ice-skating became a traditional sport. Each winter, 200 proficient ice-skaters were selected to perform on the frozen royal lake for the court. Skaters would wear knee pads and secure their shoes with leather. Shoes were fitted with single iron blades for speed or double blades for security.

Competitions for figure skating, ice acrobatics and speed skating were also held for the benefit of the royal family,

#### Roman values

As Christian values percolated and settled down in what had been the Roman Empire, gladiatorial bouts and chariot racing gradually faded away and, well into the Middle Ages were eventually replaced by homes-grown sports such as wrestling, archery, hawking and horse racing as well as the fabled Tournaments with their jousting, mock combats, and melees.

Through the whole of the Middle Ages, there regular Jousting tournaments, the most famous of these took place in north-eastern France between Resson-sur-Matz and Gourley-sur-Aronde, 1160-1240, in which hundreds of knights from all over Europe stayed throughout the 'lore Sajor', the tournament season.

Hawking was the particular

reserve of emperors and kings. This sport would be one of the few continued throughout the Middle Ages. Frederick II may have played a critical role in its persistence as he was an avid hawk who authored the first comprehensive book on falconry. It seems that kings may have followed the example of falconry as to mimic the status of an emperor.

#### English games

In the 12th century, England enjoyed archery, bowls, Caid, horseshoes, jousting and medieval football with masses of players from opposing teams clashing to deliver an inflated pig's bladder from one end of the town to the other. Often very violent, even lethal at times.

To make sure that England could defend itself and its overseas territory, in 1252, the Archery Law required all 15-to-60 year old men to be trained in archery.

In 1346, the French mercenary crossbowmen were routed by the English and Welsh longbow men at the battle of Crecy.

This military prowess was finally recognised as a sport. By the 14th century, there were competitions around the country in which 7- to 60-year-olds could compete.

Wrestling, humanity's oldest and most basic recreational sport – as 15,000-20,000 year-old paintings on south European cave paintings show – was practised at every level of society throughout the Middle Ages.

In 1520, at the Field of the Cloth of Gold, Francis I of France threw Henry VIII in a wrestling match after his own Cornish wrestlers had

soundly beaten Francis's Breton wrestlers.

Medieval tournaments had many characteristics of modern sport. Successful professional knights were popular and famous, perhaps the only medieval equivalent to today's sports stars. Those with political backing and social favour were able to accumulate property and goods to ensure a comfortable life after their competitive days were over. Tournaments were used to celebrated marriages and trade-fairs.

During the Middle Ages, the quality of an owner's horses was not only a status symbol – like cars in our current cultures – but enabled their owners to race and win.

With the waning of the Middle Ages, sports gradually ceased to be seen as primarily warfare training. They became recreational. Ball games became ever more popular.

#### Traditional games

In our west-of-Europe archipelago – whose cars used to carry GB and now UK stickers – for at least 900 years, entire villages competed with each other in rough, and sometimes violent, ballgames. In England, it was Shrovetide football, and in Ireland caid.

Caid (Irish pronunciation: kad, meaning 'stuffed ball' – made of animal skin with a natural bladder inside) is a collective name used in reference to various ancient and traditional Irish mob football games. Nowadays, caid is frequently used by people in Gaeltacht areas of Ireland to refer to modern Gaelic football.

The first recorded mention of football in Ireland was in 1308, when

John McCrocan, a spectator at a football game at Newcastle, County Dublin, was charged with accidentally stabbing a player named William Bernard. Football games are mentioned in the Statute of Galway, 1527, which allowed the playing of football and archery, but banned 'hokie' – the 'hurling of a little ball with sticks or staves', as well as other sports. The Sunday Observance Act of 1695 imposed a fine of one shilling for anyone found playing.

Despite this, the earliest recorded football match in Ireland was one between Louth and Meath, at Slane, County Meath, in 1712.

In comparison, the game of Calcio Fiorentino, in Italy, also known as Calcio Storico, or historical football, is a game that was invented by the Florentines in the 16th century.

It is known as the most violent type of football, or indeed any sport on the planet. It was known as the Giuoco del calcio Fiorentino, which translates as 'Florentine kicking game', and seems to have been one of the most popular games in history.

The Calcio Storico Fiorentino originated in the Piazza Santa Croce, on 17 February 1530. For some, it was about creating a distraction from the Spanish army occupation, and for others, it was about ridiculing the enemy.

In 2007, after a brawl where approximately 50 players were taken to court, the city authorities banned Calcio for a year. Subsequently, the rules were updated to prevent convicted criminals from taking part in the game.

By the high middle ages hunting had been transformed from a source of nutrition to a stylised pastime of the aristocracy, useful training for wars.

Horse racing, a long-time favourite of the upper class in Great Britain, inspired Queen Anne to found the Ascot Racecourse in 1711. Top prize was 'Her Majesty's Plate' – worth one hundred guineas, some £29,000 in modern currency.

Long summer days provided predictable opportunities for free time, when peasants could engage in athletic activities.

Swimming, wrestling, and racing were common among all ages and both genders, while organised ball games of various types can be found in every medieval society and culture.

There have been many attempts to ban football, from the middle ages through to the modern days. The first such law was passed in England in 1314; it was followed by more than 30 in England alone between 1314 and 1667. Football faced armed opposition in the 18th century when used as a cover for violent protest against attempts to enclose common land.

Next week, we look at how society began to see the virtues of sport