A BRIEF HISTORY OF BOCCÉLISM

The mystery of the origins of boccélism is one that will never be solved until the wizards of modernity succeed in achieving H. G Wells' vision of a Time Machine. Only then will the historians of sport be able to trace the tenuous line of development that goes all the way back, perhaps, to some unlikely australopithecine; one might imagine this pre-human ancestor stooped by the edge of a watering hole to drink, when a smooth, shiny stone catches its eye.

Our inquisitive antecedent picks up the pretty rock for a moment before quickly losing interest and flipping the oversized pebble away. Then, whether by the strange chances of the world, or the will of Divine Providence (depending on one's philosophical bent), the surprised primate follows the trajectory of the stone as it crashes into the skull of some other now-extinct creature in a Primordial Blast, sending bone fragments flying in all directions, and igniting the joy of spectacle and idle destruction in the amazed ape, which is subsequently passed on to its descendants, including ourselves.

Moving ahead several million years past that speculative scene to the early civilizations of the Fertile Crescent takes us to the first tantalizing hints of evidence of a nascent sport. Archaeologists have been hard-pressed to explain the peculiar discovery in one Sumerian city of small, malformed pottery jars, each containing a single, hand-tooled sphere of basalt. Surrounding each jar was a multitude of potsherds and fragments; the bland hypothesis that this was the result of some heretofore unknown "ritual behavior" is supremely unsatisfying.

Could it be that the mistakes of the potters became the objects (dare we say "targets"?) of some friendly tosses by the artisans and their apprentices? The experts scoff at such notions, but can offer no better explanation - and what of Stonehenge? The purpose behind the chalk balls found in the Aubrey holes at the prehistoric English site goes unexplained, Gerald Hawkins' theory from the 1960s and 70s about an eclipse calculator having been largely discredited; could the Early Bronze Age peoples of Britain have learned to toss independently from their distant Mesopotamian kin?

More definite are the writings of Classical historians that make mention of the vulgar recreations of the common folk. Herodotus describes a barbarian general who erected a stelae on the site of each of his conquests, inscribed with his name and a list of his deeds of prowess; and if the subdued populace did not accept his challenge of a game of "Quaeron", he would add to the stelae a depiction of female genitals. What quaeron was, exactly, is unknown, although it has been thought to involve making sport using the heads of casualties from the defeated soldiers (which might explain the reluctance of the locals to participate); some have gone so far as to suggest that the term "quarry" derives from this mysterious game.

Recent translations of certain texts indicate that Archimedes had a fondness for a tossing game that involved either earthenware pots or, intriguingly, wooden buckets as targets. Archimedes was slain, against the commanding general's orders, by an invading Roman soldier during the conquest of Syracuse, and legend has it that the soldier became enraged after the elderly mathematician took umbrage at the soldier's stepping on his geometric drawings in the sand. In light of the new translations, boccélism enthusiasts have suggested that perhaps instead the unnamed soldier drew the ire of Archimedes by arrogantly kicking away a target in mid-toss. The truth of the matter is lost to time, but boccélism fans everywhere could well understand the old man's indignation at the interference.

The conquering Romans enjoyed spectacles for their entertainment, to be sure, but on a larger and generally bloodier scale than that of a humble game of what Cicero

derisively referred to as "that. . .game bucket ball: a pastime fit only for drunkards, idlers, and fools."[1] The rise of Christianity in the West did little to improve the climate for gaming of all sorts, particularly anything that might be associated with pagan revelry.

Thus for the long period between the ascendance of the Roman Empire and the Reformation the game slept in hibernation, a seed waiting for more favorable conditions to sprout, the knowledge and traditions of the game carried on mostly by those living on the shadowy margins of society. Not for nothing has it been said that the taverns of Europe during the Middle Ages were for primitive boccélism what the monasteries were for the preservation of the wisdom of the ancients. Even Chaucer dared not include mention of the game in his "Canterbury Tales", though there are some clues to suggest he was fond of the occasional toss himself.

The prosperity and relative freedom of 17th-century Holland provided a more conducive environment for the growth in popularity for all types of bowling, including boccélism.[2] Among lore-masters of the game it is said that the first case of boccélism played in the Americas took place in New Amsterdam, with none other than Peter Stuyvesant, governor of the colony, presiding as judge, although there is no evidence to prove the claim (with the explosion in popularity of boccélism in recent years, there has been speculation from certain regional boosters that the ball courts of pre-Columbian Mexico were home to the New World's first tossing, an attractive idea which sadly has no facts to stand behind it).

From New Amsterdam the sport spread quickly all over Colonial America, with an abundance of different rules and traditions springing up wherever it was played. Although the game was played across the continent, the Dutch communities were always the most active hotbeds; indeed, when Washington Irving penned his "Sketchbook", he very nearly chose boccélism over nine-pins as the game of the Little People of the Catskills that helped lure poor Rip Van Winkle to his twenty-year nap. By the first half of the 19th-century, when Irving wrote his classic, the cities and towns of the Northeast had become veritable tinderboxes, in need of only the proper spark to ignite the conflagration of fanaticism that warms the hearts of boccélism players and spectators to this very day. That spark fired from the imagination of F. T. Frelinghuysen, the Father of Modern Boccélism.

Of Frelinghuysen's life and accomplishments entire volumes have been written: the impeccably-dressed diplomat who capped a career of public service by employing his skills of subtlety as Secretary of State for President Chester A. Arthur. Yet if fans of the world of sport claim that his deeds in that realm stand at least as tall, who shall gainsay them? For out of chaos he created order, with an elegant simplicity that laid the foundation for a world-wide phenomenon.

September 29th, 1845 dawned bringing the delightful warmth of Indian Summer to Schenectady, New York, and young F. T. Frelinghuysen took that as a sign that the time was ripe to make trial of his designs. He had spent the better part of the summer observing groups of men gathering to toss, and, taking note of the squabbles that invariably arose, he purposed to create a formal set of rules governing play which he perhaps over-grandly titled "The Boccie-Lism Code of Laws". Frelinghuysen set out mid-morning to the Commons

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[1] *Lismae vicae ingenuus nullus dubitat, et iste ludus pilae et situlae est: oblectamentum aptus ad tantum potator, cessator, stultus*. "None doubt the nobility of the village Lismus, and yet there is that one, the game of ball and bucket, a suitable pastime only for the sot, the idler, the fool." Cicero's use of the pronoun *iste* is remarkable, as the term is almost exclusively used in speeches in reference to an adversary, generally with contempt.

[2] The Dutch word, unprintable here, for all the varieties of the game was considered crude and inappropriate in polite society, as it was a double entendre with graphic sexual overtones. The innocuous "Boccé-Lisma", or Lisma-ball, referring to the Italian town renowned for its ardor for the game, came to be used instead; the vowel at the end was dropped when the word was Anglicized.

with his sheaf of notes and diagrams and carrying four new, oaken buckets nested one within the other.

Before long he had gathered several of the more open-minded souls to his area of the pitch, and they commenced tossing according to Frelinghuysen's regulations, over time making those small amendments and additions made necessary when practice overruled theory. As autumn progressed, Frelinghuysen and his disciples set out on the more seasonable days, refining the sport and drawing new adherents. One impressed spectator was none other than Alexander Cartwright, who took heed of Frelinghuysen's achievement, and the following year put his own considerable talents to work codifying his personal passion, the fledgling sport of base-ball.

The popularity of Frelinghuysen's innovations can perhaps best be judged by the curious citation that appeared in the Schenectady newspaper in the spring of 1846: "Mr. G. W. Wilkerson, lately arrived from Ithaca, thought it Proper to bring to our attention the disturbing behaviour of a Mr. F. T. Frelinghuysen. For some months now, it seems, Mr. Frelinghuysen, together with several other individuals of dubious character, has been seen on the Commons engaged in the unwholesome activity of Botchie-Lism[sic]. Mr. Wilkerson reports that Friday evening last, Mr. Frelinghuysen and his mob, not content to mar the daylight hours with their infernal clatter, continued their gaming on through Twilight with the aid of lanterns, well past the time decent folk ought be home in their beds. Modesty forbade Mr. Wilkerson from saying so in as many words, but it was he himself that roused the constabulary to action; the Constables straightway bade Mr. Frelinghuysen and his anonymous companions to hasten to depart under threat of gaol for Violating the Peace. All who aspire to keep our fair town safe from Ruin should praise Mr. Wilkerson's heroic deed, and be thankful that Providence has, none too soon, bestowed upon us one so vigilant as a member of our citizenry."

Clearly this Mr. Wilkerson and the town fathers held the sport and its practitioners in little better regard than Cicero had in his time; the feelings, one suspects, were mutual: to this day in many quarters, a busybody neighbor that comes out to complain about a friendly game of boccélism is called, with some disparagement, a "Wilkerson".

Only fragments of Frelinghuysen's original notes remain, but he can be credited for fixing the distance between targets at 36 feet, specifying the sizes of the buckets and balls to be used, and perhaps most importantly, enshrining the unassailable authority of the judge. Previously, in the event of a tightly contested quarry the players might appeal to a trustworthy spectator, but it was not uncommon for vocal partisans to attempt to sway the decision, even resorting to threats or actual violence. Certainly those early judges did not receive immediate and universal acceptance and obedience, but over time most players were won over, not the least because of the veneer of respectability the game acquired through the rule of law.

Frelinghuysen also set down objective scoring rules, with any hit counting as a score; in many places it had been the practice that grazing or lightly touching the targets was not considered sufficient, with inevitable arguments resulting over whether a given hit was worthy. He also introduced the concept of the bonus point, giving extra credit for the "botbotfly" (now just botfly); others would later embellish his invention by adding a multitude of bonus categories.

Although he greatly enjoyed the sport, Frelinghuysen soon left control of the Commons to his lieutenants and moved on, learning to use his abilities in a loftier arena to persuade unlike minds to reach a consensus. Even so, his contributions have never been forgotten, and every year the champions of the American Boccélism Association's National Invitational Tournament are awarded the Frelinghuysen Trophy in recognition of their achievement, and in honor of his.

The Civil War slowed the spread of Frelinghuysen's Code, and after the War the Code still met with resistance in the South, where it was viewed as another form of Yankee oppression. Boccélism's association with lovers of drink also brought it into conflict with the Temperance movement, as preachers and Prohibitionists loudly declared the game sinful. One Midwestern group of vehement Prohibitionists tried even to blame the Chicago Fire of 1871 on an errant toss knocking over a lantern. Fortunately for later generations of boccélism players, the rumor did not spread, and Mrs. O'Leary's cow instead went into legend as the responsible party.

Despite the obstacles, the popularity of the organized version of the game gradually increased, with enthusiasts forming local clubs and associations, particularly in the Northeast. By the 1890s boccélism had largely lost most of the stigma of its humble origins, appealing to the elites as a less stodgy recreation than other yard entertainments, such as croquet. The leaders of the most prominent clubs, recognizing a need for a larger organizational structure, met in New York City on September 29th, 1900, and agreed that the advent of the new century should also be the advent of the American Boccé-lism Association (though in fact only representatives from Massachusetts, Connecticut, and New York State attended that first meeting).

Ever since, the ABA has continued to nurture and regulate the development of the sport; even the strains of the transition from wood to metal as the preferred target-making material did not cause the Association to split, as some thought possible. ABA representatives were instrumental in the 1949 meeting in Paris which resulted in the creation of the Federatíon Internatíonal de Boccélism (FIB), leading to greater interest in the sport around the globe, especially in Africa and Asia, where the game had been largely unknown. The next chapter in the history of boccélism shall be written by those devoteés whose actions and achievements will undoubtedly lead boccélism to ever-greater heights of popularity.