



The History of Bocce

In Egypt carvings exist dating back to 5200 B.C. showing players playing a primitive form of bocce ball. It is widely believed that the Egyptians were the first to play this game. While bocce today looks quite different from its early predecessors, the unbroken thread of bocce's lineage is the consistently common objective of trying to come as close to a fixed target as possible. From Egypt the game made its way to Greece around 800 B.C. The Romans learned the game from the Greeks, then introduced it throughout the empire.

The early Romans used coconuts brought back from Africa and later used hard olive wood to carve out bocce balls. Bocce, as we know it today, was played between battles during Rome's Punic Wars against Carthage, which started in 264 B.C. Soldiers selected a small stone called a "leader" and threw it first. Then larger stones would be thrown at the "leader" and the stone coming closest to it would score. From this early objective, the basic rules of bocce were born.

The game provided exercise and relaxation for the soldiers.

In 27 B.C., beginning with Emperor Augustus, bocce became the sport of statesman and rulers. From the early Greek physician Hippocrates to the great Italian Renaissance man Galileo, the early participants of bocce have noted that the game's athleticism and spirit of competition rejuvenates the body.

Through succeeding centuries, the Romans spread the popularity of the game throughout the empire, which during this period encompassed vast areas of Europe, Asia and North Africa. However, with the fall of the Roman Empire and the onset of the Middle Ages, direct evidence of the game is again obscured for several centuries.

The Roman influence on bocce is preserved in the game's name. The common speech of the ancient Romans was called Vulgar Latin and is the ancestor of the Romance languages. The Vulgar Latin word "bottia" - meaning ball - is the root of the Italian word boccia or Bocce, as the game came to be known. Similarly in Classic Latin - that which prevailed during the days of Caesar - the word "boulles" - which again means ball - is the root for another very similar form of the game - "bowls" - which later emerged in the British Isles, today known as England. Here the game was refined from that of simply tossing the ball to include rolling it on the lawn or green. Thus, the term "bowling on the green" or simply "bowls". Bocce developed into its present form in Italy (where it is called bocce, the plural of the Italian word boccia which means "bowl") .

From the first days of the game's popularity in England it was the sport of nobility and peasants alike, but kings frowned upon it as it was likely to seduce their subjects away from archery practice and other military exercises- deemed of greater importance to the safety of England. Some found bocce ball simply a disruptive activity. Others thought that bocce ball led to gambling. The game continued to be played throughout Europe until 1319 when Holy Roman Emperor Charles IV ordered its discontinuance as he thought that it would interfere with sports of a more military nature. Richard II of England prohibited the game. The ban was renewed, but for commoners only, during the reigns of Henry IV and Edward IV. Kings Carlos IV and V of Spain also prohibited the playing of bocce. In 1576, the Republic of Venice publicly condemned the sport, punishing those who played with fines and imprisonment. And perhaps most grave was the condemnation by the Catholic Church which deterred the laity and officially prohibited clergyman from playing the game by proclaiming bocce a means of gambling. Years later the prohibitions were lifted when the Medical Faculty at Montepelier, France, declared that Bocce was the best exercise to prevent rheumatism.

Contrary to the rest of Europe, the great game of balls thrived in Great Britain. Such nobility as Queen Elizabeth I and Sir Francis Drake were avid fans. According to legend, Sir Frances Drake refused to set out to defend England against the Spanish Armada until he finished a game. He proclaimed, "First we finish the game, then we'll deal with the Armada!"

The sport first came to America in the English version called bowls from the French boule meaning ball. In accord with how the game was played in Britain, American players threw the ball not on stone dust (as is done today in bocce) but on close cropped grass which some say is the origin of the modern lawn. It has been noted that one early American playing field was Bowling Green at the southern tip of Manhattan and that George Washington built a court at Mount Vernon in the 1780s.

Much of the modern resurgence of the sport comes due to Italian soldier Guiseppe Garibaldi an avid player of the game who did much to popularize the sport in the 19th century and saw it as a hallmark of Italian culture. In 1896 the game was included at the first Olympiad in Athens, Greece.

In modern times, the first bocce clubs were organized in Italy. Notably the first Italian League was formed in 1947 by fifteen teams in and around the town of Rivoli (Torino). 1947 also marks the beginning of the yearly Bocce World Championships.

Thanks to many Italian immigrants at the turn of the century, bocce has come to flourish in the United States. During its beginnings in the U.S. there were as many versions of the game as there were towns the immigrants had left. Bringing some order to the game is the Collegium Cosmicum ad Buxeas, the preeminent bocce organization headquartered in Rome, Italy.