

Period Pastimes

by Donna Moran

"I'm bored!" These are the two most dangerous words in the English language. They can cause almost anything to happen; from the world's greatest improvisation to one of the most boring sights in the Faire, nobles sitting around twiddling their thumbs. Everyone gets bored at one time or another out at Faire. You can't always think up a great improv; sometimes you can't even think up a lousy one. And, let's face it, we don't get the big bucks to sit around and twiddle our thumbs. So what can we do?

There are numerous games and diverse pastimes to entertain ourselves with out at Faire. Some of them need various equipment (such as tennis, pall mall, bowls, archery, shuttlecock, chess, draughts, tables, cards, and gambling) and some of them don't (such as hood man's blind, forfeits, tag, dancing, conversing, and causing trouble). Currently you can find a pall mall set (pronounced pell mell), cards a plenty, a chess set, and various gambling toys in or around the glade. Dancing occurs twice a day and you can usually find a card game going on in the morning.

But what if you are still bored? What if you don't dance or don't want to dance? What if you are bored with chess and can't think of an improv to save your life? What do you do then?

Pall Mall

Let's start with the easiest game to play; one that we already have the equipment for and one that is relatively easy to learn: pall mall.

Pall mall is pretty much croquet. You can play the sedate way (but maybe use various customers as the wickets) or you can play the more frenetic version that is more like polo sans pony than anything else. The rules for the slow, sedate version of pall mall do not need to be printed here. Most people already know them and, if you don't, it is easy enough to get someone, even a customer, to help you learn them. Rules to our more lively version are very simple and straightforward. First everyone who is to play needs a mallet. Then you should pick teams with an equal number of people on each side. The normal number of sides is two. Agree on two goals, one for each team. Finally get one ball and go at it. Each team tries to get a goal by hitting their opponents goal post with the ball. Defending the goal is important. Obviously you don't want the opposing team to win. Ladies skirts are always a Godsend because you can hide the ball under them and use the skirts to your advantage while defending the goal. This game can and often does, get a lot of people playing. However, this is not a game to get the customers involved in because there is a danger of getting hurt; but if you can get them cheering and betting...well that's different.

Bowls is a very period game that was enjoyed by all classes and is still played today. The English version has small balls, or bowls, that are weighted in one side so that the path of the tossed bowl is curved. These English bowls are quite expensive. The Italian Boccie Balls are very similar to English bowls; the only real difference is that there is no weight. A set of Boccie Balls includes 2 or 3 sets of colored balls and a white "jack" ball. Each set of balls consists of two balls of the same color. The "jack" is approximately half the size of the regular balls. The "jack" is thrown first and then the bowls are thrown. The idea is to get one of your balls closest to the "jack" by either just being closest or by hitting and moving one of your opponents balls. This is a relatively simple game that is a lot of fun. It is easy to get customers to play this one also.

The area out in front of the glade is perfect for both of these games and, if both games are being played at once, the road in front of the archery booth is also very good for bowls.

Half the fun of these games is the interaction with the customers and, maybe, with people of other guilds. Bowls might be fun to play with members of St. Ives and a rousing game of pall mall with the military might be a wonderful gambling opportunity.

Shuttlecock

Today shuttlecock is called badminton. This is a great game for nobles to play. It is very elegant looking, genteel and easy to play. Shuttlecock can take some skill to master, however, but even the unskilled can play and enjoy the game. The shuttlecock can move rather slowly and the movements of play are not extreme.

The rules for shuttlecock are quite easy; you probably know them already. But I will recap them so that they are all fresh in your minds. Toss a coin or use some other method to see who will serve first. Then hit the shuttlecock, underhand, over the net with the racket. If the players on the other side can't return the thing in the same way you score a point. You can only score while serving and, if you miss getting the bird over the net or miss the bird while in play, the serve goes to the other side. The game is played till one side scores either 15 or 21 points (you pick) but to win you must have two points more than the other guys; so you might have a score of 27 to 25.

How can we play this at Faire? All we need is a rope with some tassels on it, four rackets (made of wood), and some shuttlecocks (made of cork and feathers). An added plus would be a couple of poles to tie the rope net to but other methods could be found if necessary.

Tennis

Tennis could be played also. In the Elizabethan age this game was played indoors and is similar to modern day racquetball. Tennis is mainly played by men and success on the tennis courts usually translated to success in love and on the battlefield. However, these stipulations just won't work at Faire, so some slight changes must be made. Obviously we will have to play outdoors. We can use a tasseled rope (which is period by the way) and wooden rackets. For the ball we can use a stuffed leather ball. This kind of ball won't bounce as much as a regular ball so the rules may have to be modified slightly so that the ball doesn't have to bounce as much as today. Scoring can be the same as now...four points are needed to win. You have to win by two points like in shuttlecock. Scoring is a little weird in tennis; 15 for the first point, 30 for the second, 40 for the third point, and game.

How do we get the audience involved in these games? Tennis is a popular game and it should be easy to get some doubles going. Badminton is rather easy and, due to its inclusion in many school curriculums, most people have some vague idea how to play. Courtiers vs. customers or mixed teams should be easily attainable in both games. Men vs. women, nobles vs. servants or nobles vs. non-guild members would all be entertaining for the customers if something is made of the game; schill the audience or heckle the players. Most of all, have fun. That is the name of the game we are playing. Have fun and entertain the customers.

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