

Balls

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Men seem to be very preoccupied with balls. Interest begins at an early age (see Marbles, below) and continues throughout adulthood, often until death (see Lawn Bowls, below).

Participation peaks during young adulthood and early middle age; however, balls are such an integral part of a man's life that spectating (watching other men play with balls) excites men of all ages.

Marbles: This is perhaps the first instance in a man's life of organized group behaviour focusing on balls. The ball comes in two sizes, but both are quite small: approximately 1/2 inch and 3/4 inch in diameter. (Generally speaking, men play with bigger balls than boys do. However, further claims, inferred from this one, are usually false.) In one version, the big balls knock the little balls out of a circle. In another version, the object is to get the ball into a hole. (This is the beginning of a persistent confusion concerning the relation between balls, holes, and sticks.) The winner gets everyone's balls, so you lose your balls if you're not very good at it. Usually the boy has a special bag for carrying his little balls – he does so quite proudly, often bragging to others about the quantity in his possession.

Golf: This game is somewhat related to marbles in that the men try to get a little ball (the ball is larger than a marble but smaller than anything yet to be described) into a hole that they have dug in the ground (the hole, on the other hand, is now a bit smaller and deeper, so the fit is tighter). One major difference, however, is that they try to get it into not just one hole now, but many – eighteen, in fact. Another difference is that they now use a long stiff stick. (As in most other cases, their sticks are matters of great concern, and much attention is given to their care. Furthermore, men will endlessly discuss their equipment, comparing advantages and specific uses of certain types/designs.) The winner is the man who uses the quickest, most direct route, or the fewest strokes. Also, unlike marbles, each of the men uses only one ball, but since they often lose their balls, they carry extras along with them. This method of playing with balls is considered more important than marbles – men even pay to belong to clubs that will allow them to do it this way.

Billiards: This is a curious hybrid of marbles and golf. On the one hand, it regresses back to using many balls (and, like marbles, multicolored ones), but it also uses many holes (like golf, but six not eighteen). The balls are a bit larger, and again, a long stiff stick is used (even longer than the one used in golf). The tip of the stick is often rubbed with chalk to improve performance.

Basketball: This version features a larger ball still, but the ball is merely pumped full of air.

(Most big balls are inflated.) A variation on getting the ball into a hole, this game employs a suspended net that creates the hole to aim for. If a man succeeds in getting the ball 'in', it's called 'scoring'. While he tries to score as often as possible, he also tries to prevent other men from doing the same.

Soccer: In this version, the ball is manoeuvred with the feet instead of with the hands. And though, like basketball, the hole is now a net, unlike basketball, the net is guarded – that is, there is one man on each side whose sole job is to 'protect the net' or stop the competitors' balls from getting in.

Polo: With an element to add variety, this hit-ball-with-stick-into-hole/net game includes horses.

Water Polo: Some men find it more exciting to play with balls in the water. (But no horses in this one.)

Bowling: The balls used in this instance of play have special holes in them; the men put their fingers into the holes. (Though perhaps generally true, in this particular case, the balls are very important to the men: if you take their balls away, they will be *very* upset.) The ball is thrown at an array of objects in order to knock over as many as possible. (The objects are inanimate.)

Tennis: In this one, the ball is hit back and forth between two men. An odd quirk is that they are expected to wear white while doing this. And, though scoring is still the intent, the focus is

not on hitting the ball into a hole; rather, the men try very hard to display strength, strategy, and endurance.

Volleyball: This is an expanded version of tennis – the ball is hit back and forth between two teams, and the game proceeds in such a way that the 'set up' is very instrumental in scoring.

Squash: This is also much like tennis, but it is done in a small room, with fewer people watching.

Shotput: The man throws or 'puts' a very heavy ball forward. No one really knows why.

Medicine Ball: Though not a game *per se*, this is an example of the extreme size balls can become in men's sport – the medicine ball is 18 inches in diameter.

Lawn Bowls: After the men have lost their fascination with hard sticks and tight holes, they retire and roll their very large (and somewhat misshapen) balls gingerly over the grass, trying to get their balls as close as possible to a small ball. Should their big ball come up and press ever so gently on this little ball, there are sighs of appreciation all round.