

A Brief History of Lawn Games

People have always loved to play and watch games and sports. Sports with balls and sticks in particular!

As the use of planned and managed lawns in the landscape developed in Europe from the middle ages onward, people began inventing games that required a short mown lawn for play, such as bowls, cricket, and golf.

Other sports which had existed far longer, such as polo, found a field of closely-mown turf an advantage to the development of the game.

The list of sports and games traditionally played on lawns and turf continues to grow. Here we give a brief history of lawn games most well-known to Americans.



James Tissot - Croquet. Source: http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:James_Tissot_-_Croquet.jpg

Golf

Most historians consider golf to have originated in Scotland, where the first game was documented in 1457 — in a Scottish act of parliament that banned the game because it was interfering with the practice of archery. The ban did not hold, and eventually Scottish kings brought the game to England in the 1600s. Scotsmen eventually took the game of golf around the world with them as the British Empire spread.

It wasn't until the 19th century that golf became popular in America, but

now it enjoys great popularity here and around the world. For more: [USGA Museum: Golf History](#)



Lawn Bowling

“Bowls” was another early lawn sport. This English game became a popular sixteenth century pastime. It required closely cut grass and led to the development of better turf varieties. (Huxley, *The Illustrated History of Gardening*, p. 279).

Cricket

Cricket dates to the early 17th century, and while different origins are speculated, it most likely evolved from the game of bowls. A cricket field is called a “pitch,” and it is very flat and covered by grass mown very short.

Cricket remains a popular sport throughout the world. For more information on the sport today: [International Cricket Council](#)

Tennis

Tennis has its roots in the French game *jeu de paume*, which was played — possibly as early as the 11th century — on indoor courts.

The English game of field tennis dates to the late 18th century. It required smooth lawns for play, and was seen by some as a threat to the game of cricket.

In 1874, rules and equipment for a slightly different game called “lawn tennis” were created. By the end of the 19th century clay courts were becoming more popular, so eventually the sport became known simply as “tennis.” For more on the history of tennis: [Tennis History Museum](#)

Croquet

Croquet was first formally described in 1856. Its origins seem to be in the game *paille maille* or pall mall, played in England in the 17th and 18th centuries. An earlier game known as ground billiards existed even earlier, in the 14th century. The croquet field is called a “lawn” and is closely mown.

For a description of the history of croquet in America: [United States Croquet Association](#)

Polo

Polo has deep roots, dating back at least 2,000 years to the Persian game *chaugan* (and possibly earlier in Central Asia). The modern game known as *pulu* or polo dates to the 16th and 17th century, in India. It spread from India to England in the mid-19th century, and not long afterward to America.

The polo play surface is called a field, measures 300 yards by 160 yards in area, and is kept closely mown. There is a tradition in polo of spectators taking to the field during half-time to stamp the divots (dislodged by horse hooves) back into the field.

For lots of information on the history of this game: [Museum of Polo and Hall of Fame](#)

Soccer



The game Americans call “soccer” is known in the rest of the world as “football” or “association football.” The rules were established in England in the mid-1800s, and this game has grown to be one of the world’s most popular sports.

A soccer field is known as a “pitch” or a “field.” Closely mown grass is the normal surface of play.

For more on the history of soccer: [FIFA: Classic Football History](#)

Baseball

It is usually assumed that baseball has its roots in the earlier games of cricket and rounders because of similarities between these three games. However, the first documentation of the game we know as “America’s pastime” was Alexander Cartwright’s 1845 publication



THE AMERICAN NATIONAL GAME OF BASE BALL
GRAND MATCH FOR THE CHAMPIONSHIP AT THE ELYSIAN FIELDS, HOBOKEN, N. J.

of rules of the game for the New York Knickerbockers “base ball” club.

Baseball 1866. “Early baseball game played at Elysian Fields, Hoboken (Currier & Ives lithograph).” Source: Wikimedia Commons. (Published in the US before 1923 and public domain in the US.)

of rules of the game for the New York Knickerbockers “base ball” club.

Because of the requirement for soft ground, the Knickerbockers played on the Elysian Fields in Hoboken, which is the first documented baseball field in America.

For more on baseball history: [The History of Baseball in the United States](#).

Football

Most assume American football originated directly from the British game rugby, but it may have earlier roots in a game known as “[mob football](#).” In Medieval England, this game was played only once a year, and pitted rival groups or towns against each other, often resulted in mayhem.

American football rules were established between 1873 and 1882, with innovations that clearly distinguished it from rugby: a line of scrimmage, the “snap” and five-yard advancement within three “downs.” Initially played at colleges and by amateur athletic clubs, the first professional league, the American Professional Football Association, was established in 1920. Today, Football is one of the most popular sports in America.

For more on the history of American football: [National Football League](#)