



# Game of life

Boules and its provençal cousin pétanque are synonymous with France. **Jon Bryant** saunters out to find the nearest village square and discover the history of an iconic game

**T**he cracking of two boules together is one of the great sounds of France. Five men staring at the gravelly ground of a village square while a friend tosses another steel ball into the shaded mêlée is a scene that paces out afternoon life. It also creates a feeling of closeness in communities that like a spot of competition when neighbours come for a visit.

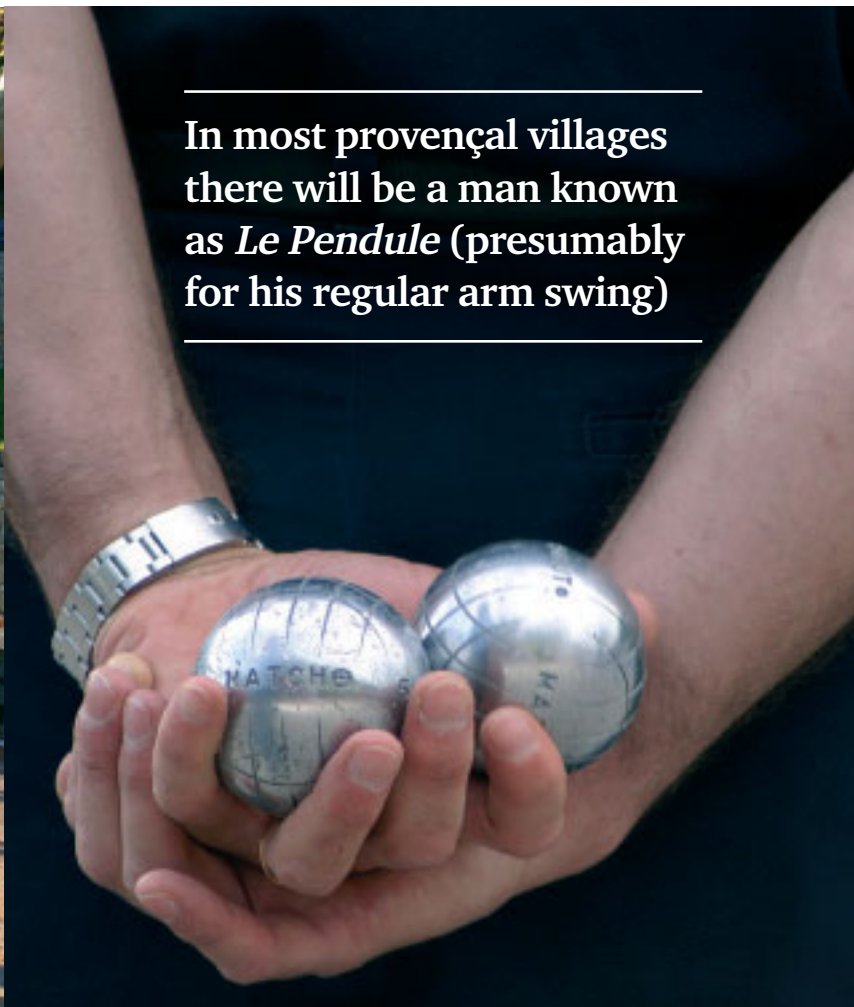
Boules has become a national sport in Thailand, Taiwan and Madagascar. Japanese executives use it to relax and Germans play it in miniature on carpets. Yet in France it is something you are brought up with, it is in your Gallic soul.

In the south of the country there are two variations: pétanque and *jeu provençal*. The metal boules are the same but in pétanque the feet don't move (from *pèd tanco* – 'feet fixed' in provençal) and the court is ten to 12 metres long, while in *jeu provençal* (or *longue* as it's known in the French

Midi), the court can be anything up to 25 metres in length (a school swimming pool) and you can take three giant steps to generate a more fulsome launch of the boule.

The rules are easy; the object is to finish with your balls closer to the jack – or *cochonnet* (piglet in French) – than your opponent's. Players *pointe* – put a boule closer to the jack – or *tire* – hit the opponent's boule away from the jack (also known as *le bouchon*, the cork). The first to 13 points is the winner.

The most prestigious tournament of the year by far is the Mondial la Marseillaise which, besides the finals that are held in a specially constructed court alongside the Old Port, all takes place in the city's enormous Parc Borély. For five days it is full of dogs, pushchairs and men and women walking around in *triplettes* (teams of three) clasp their boules satchels, bottles of water and pastis – all enquiring about the location of a distant court and hoping that



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it's in the shade. Among the 4,592 *triplettes* registered for the tournament was a team from England made up of Sofiane Lachani, Jérôme Rousseau and Hervé Bavazano. They may not sound very English but as they explained, teams from 'abroad' are often made up of ex-pats.

"The main problems about playing in England are the courts and, of course, the weather. We often practice in pubs," says Jérôme, who is based in Rugby and has played at the Mondial 11 times. "We've been playing together in England for 12 years and play in all the North Sea tournaments... you have to be dedicated. I've just built a practice court in my garden!"

"The Mondial is like the Wimbledon of boules. It's the place to be and a great social event too," says Sofiane, England's main *tireur*, who actually met his wife playing pétanque. "Yes, we're based in England and we can't play every day as they do in France but a few weeks ago we thrashed the current world champion at a competition in Ibiza!" Sofiane held up his balls to show me his weapons and the three, dressed in their white polo shirts with the cross of St George on their breasts, headed off for round two in the park.

I didn't ask if the English team had nicknames but it used to be a big thing in boules. In most provençal villages, there will be a man known as *Le Pendule* (presumably for his regular arm swing) or *Le Vieux*

(presumably as he's been playing longer than anyone can remember) who was undefeated for over a decade and is still talked about by the locals.

Armand Vidal, who has written a dictionary of boules terms, laments the loss of the nickname. He writes that in the final of the Provençal tournament in 1909, all six men carried an official nickname, there was *Le Blond*, *Petit Paul*, *Parpelet*, *Le Mecanicien*. By 1931, only three of the six finalists had a recognisable sobriquet and by 1976, only one finalist – so-called *Bambi* – was so distinguished. Is the game getting more serious? Is too much money involved? Has the pace of life changed so much that there's no impetus to label someone as anything but their own surname?

## Learn the lingo

Nicknames may be disappearing but there's a still a vibrant vocabulary surrounding the game and pocket dictionaries can help the amateur when a shrug and a grimace are not enough. A *gratton* is any tiny obstacle, stone, fragment of wood which forces the boule off-course. A *lunette* is made when two balls are touching each other – to form a pair of glasses. A *pate* is the piece of cloth, usually kept in a back pocket, that all boules players carry to wipe the boule or their forehead and there's even a verb used to celebrate a boules victory too enthusiastically – *cacalejer*.

**FAR LEFT: *Partie de Boule* in Seillans, one of France's Plus Beaux Villages**  
**ABOVE: A set of boules can cost up to €200**



**ABOVE: Whiling away the day at Place des Lices in Saint-Tropez. Many regular players have nicknames**

However, of all the phrases associated with boules, the best known by far is *La Fanny*. It's an expression that defies grammar, it can be: '*C'est La Fanny!*', '*Il a fait fanny*' or '*Nous sommes Fanny*' or '*Faites le baiser à Fanny*' and it comes in to play – or is demanded – when a team loses a game without scoring a single point – usually 13-0.

Just after World War I, so the story goes, a waitress in a café in the town of Le Grand-Lemps would allow customers who had lost a game of boules without scoring a single point to give her a kiss as a consolation. One day however, the village mayor lost but when he approached Fanny to collect his 'prize', she offered him her bare buttocks instead which he proceeded to kiss – twice.

*La Fanny* happens frequently and not just in provençal villages. The French B team beat Estonia 13-0 in the quarter finals of this year's European Nations Cup so in the absence of a waitress called Fanny who is willing to remove her pants, a moulded, naked bottom is always made available in tournaments, usually hanging on the wall of the bouldrome clubhouse.

Modern boules has its origins in ancient games where soldiers (when not practising hopscotch) would throw rounded rocks at a target. Banned and reinstated over the centuries by royal and papal edicts, the game evolved across Europe to use

wooden, clay and then metal balls and diverged into bowls in England and a throwing game in southern Europe where the French covered their wooden balls with nails and the Italians painted theirs with varnish.

The coastal town of La Ciotat near Marseille claims to be the birthplace of the current form of pétanque because a player of *boule Lyonnaise* (a variation of the game) named Jules Le Noir said his rheumatism prevented him from running with the boule so he would, from that moment on, just throw it from a standing position. It was 1907 and there's a commemorative plaque in La Ciotat to prove it. The first official pétanque tournament was held in the same place three years later.

In 2009 the French team of Suchaud, Lacroix and La Boursicaud won the European Nations Cup in Nice, having had already won the World Championship earlier in the year. At the Mondial la Marseillaise, an event sponsored, of course, by Ricard (every boule player traditionally has a glass of pastis somewhere near the circle), it was Quintais, Pécoul and Suchaud who won. All named Philippe, they won 13-3 against another fancied French team in exactly an hour, and in the ladies' final, Foyot, Scuderi and Chapus beat another French team 13-12 and the game lasted two and a quarter hours.

In *boule Lyonnaise*, the boules are much larger

and are thrown from a five step run-up, or there's the lazy version, *pétanque assise*, where competitors throw their boules while sitting in a chair.

Boules last a long time but most boules players at some point in their lives will have purchased a set from La Boule Bleue, Marseille's most celebrated manufacturer. Professional sets can cost up to €200 but the firm also makes two sizes of bas-relief Fanny as well as a *kit bisou* which has a magnet on the end of a string to grip the boule so you don't have to bend down to pick it up.

## Out of the blue

La Boule Bleue started back in 1904 when an Alsatian sailor named Félix Rofritsch, decided to stay in Marseille instead of returning to his homeland, occupied since 1871 by the Germans. He opened a shop in the centre and began to make wooden boules, hand-studding them with nails. He only made two pairs a day, but as the game took off, so did his boules. In 1937, his two sons, Fortuné and Marcel joined the company and ten years later developed the first carbon-tempered steel boules. The heat treatment gave them a bluish hue, hence the name La Boule Bleue.

Hervé Rofritsch, the fourth generation, is now head of the company and continues to manufacture blue boules (as well as plain-coloured steel ones). "The boule starts off from a cylindrical stump of steel which is then heat forged to form a metal plate," he explains. The plate is then shaped into a hemispherical shell and two such shells are welded together before being machined, balanced and weighed."

Boules are then engraved and grooved and fired in a furnace for half an hour before being cooled in a cold salt bath. "The process takes just under a week," says Rofritsch. The rest of the manufacturing is a family secret although the company admits that


the bright blue colour of some of its boules does wear off in the end. It offers around 30 different engravings from a simple transglobal line to a complex grooved tartan of spheres and squares. You can even have your initials stamped on them.

One of the great things about boules is that anyone can play at any age. Mondial competitor Jérôme Rousseau played with his first set of boules when he was seven and his first partner was aged 84. One *triple* team at this year's Mondial la Marseillaise had a combined age of 231 and for another, it was just 33.

Boules is even starting to be played where the terrain is not flat. A new tournament was inaugurated this year in the village of Ansouis in the Luberon called Extreme Boules. Organised by local resident Jamie Ivey in the grounds of Château Saint Estève-de-Néri, teams played pétanque through the vineyards, down steep slopes (relying mainly on *grattons* to stop the boules) and across the stony driveways of the estate. The Swedish national boules champion was there but the tournament was, of course, won by a local team, more used to gazing down at their boules from a relatively low centre of gravity and under the shade of a beret.

Ricard even sponsored a London boules tournament last July in Battersea Park to mark Bastille Day and there were thousands of people there, including men dressed as musketeers to make sure the scoring was correct and no one drank too much pastis or *cacalejé-d* too excessively.

In 1792, 38 people did actually die in Marseille when a game was held in a convent where kegs of gunpowder were being stored and the soldiers used cannon balls as boules.

Anyone who has seen grown men and women arguing about the findings of a telescopic measuring stick will know the game can be explosive. Yet generally pétanque has a calmness about it which means you can smoke and talk and argue and laugh and drink and play at the same time. You can be world champion at 18 or 80. You can play with a monk in a seminary or against your grandmother on the beach. Best though if you can play in a shady square in Provence. As Marcel Pagnol wrote in his autobiography: "*La preuve que Dieu est ami des joueurs de boules, c'est que les feuilles des platanes sont proportionnées à la force du soleil.*" ("The proof that God is the boules players' friend is that the leaves of plane tree spread forth to match the power of the sun.") 

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