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IT'S DEFINITELY NOT CRICKET!

BY
ROBERT TYRELL

Few visitors to Switzerland have ever seen the astonishing game called "Hornussen". Although the sport has flourished for three-and-a-half centuries it is virtually confined to the beautiful, cheese-producing Emmental, situated between Berne and Lucerne.

To classify the sport as a cross between golf and cricket is an over-simplification but the comparison will suffice until we can take a closer look. The first recorded mention of Hornussen in Swiss archives strikes a sad note; an official document dated 22nd April, 1625 reports a fatal accident. Strangely enough, for the next 200 years even the Swiss themselves have been unable to find any illuminating reference to the game; it seems to have become a closely guarded secret within the farming communities where it was played.

There were some reasons for this although not always good ones. During the 18th century the sport acquired a rather doubtful reputation as people began to play matches for wagers or other gain; the proceedings were by no means teetotal and arguments over points and fouls sometimes led to brawls on the field. At one time the Berne Church Synod declared that Hornussen must not be played on Sundays as it "profaned the Sabbath".

But in 1840 the well-known Swiss writer on country life, Jeremias Gotthelf (1797-1845) described a typical game with great charm in one of his books, "Uli the Peasant". Gotthelf actively encouraged the game with the proviso that, on Sundays, all the players should first attend church and in his writing he helped to restore the somewhat muddled image.

From the 1850s onward the sport became less of a "closed shop" for people travelled further afield to play more opponents and it developed into more of a social occasion with the womenfolk being invited along, too. Then, on 30th June 1902 in Burgdorf, the centre of the Emmental cheese industry, the official Swiss Hornussen Society was formed during a general meeting of all the local clubs. Standard rules were agreed on which were to be rigidly enforced by an "Obmann" or umpire whose decision on any doubtful matters are absolutely final.

A year later a compulsory insurance fund was established as injuries to players do occur and sometimes third parties such as walkers or farm animals get too near the proceedings without realising the danger. Youths under 17 are still not permitted to play but there is a special section of the Society for younger members to learn the skills.

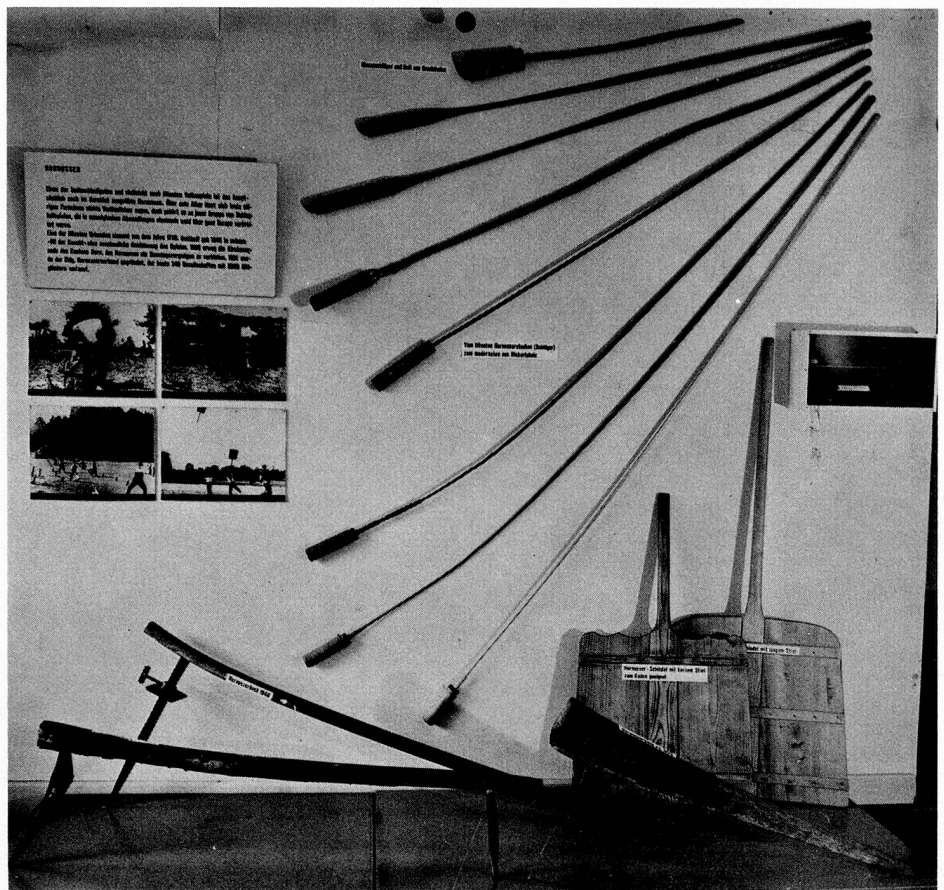
Briefly, ignoring the finer points, Hornussen is played as follows:

There are two teams of 18 men; one side bats whilst the other fields. The object of the batsman or striker is to hit the "hornuss" or ball as far and as high as he can towards the boundary without its being intercepted by the wooden boards held up or thrown aloft by the fielders. Every boundary shot is a point to the batting team while each one stopped in mid-air is marked up to the opponents.

The game's origin is unknown but its name comes from the hornuss which in flight makes a noise like a hornet; this, in Swiss-German, is "hornisse". The hornuss itself is a circular slice rounded on both sides. Originally, it was carved from the roots of beech, blackthorn or wild rose and weighed about two ounces. But today's standard model is made of very hard synthetic rubber; it measures three inches in diameter by one inch thick and weighs about three ounces. The hornuss is carefully placed edgewise on the tip of the metal "bock" and secured with a small lump of clay.

Next comes the "stecken" or club, a lethal-looking weapon about nine feet long with a head on the end. Formerly it was made of pine and in one piece but nowadays the favourite materials are Swiss ash and North American hickory with a variety of hardwood heads. The modern stecken is very slender and so whippy that it bends almost double on the back-swing thus imparting tremendous velocity to the hornuss perched on its bock. Drives of over 350 yards are commonplace and spectators do well to stand behind the striker at a safe distance.

Following the trajectory of the hornuss we come to the fielders who stand at prescribed intervals along the 300 yard-long pitch, holding their large wooden boards, called "schindels" or "schaufels". Again, these have changed during the centuries. In the old days the smaller, shorthanded type were favoured as they were lighter and easier to throw into the air and make an interception in this way, but latterly the larger,



This array of equipment in The Swiss Museum of Sport in Basle depicts the history and development of Hornussen a peasant sport of antiquity. Photo by courtesy of SNTD.

long-handled pattern has been used so that the hornuss can be stopped by raising the board as high as possible without letting go. But there is no rule and all types are still in use. The schindels weigh from four to eight pounds and they vary in size from 16 by 15 inches to 27 by 23; all are made of light hardwoods. Many of them are works of craft with dates and designs carved or painted on them and they are handed down as family heirlooms.

This is not a quiet game. As soon as the striker is about to hit, the whole field will yell, "Einer!" (One's coming!). Then, as soon as the little black rubber is seen in the sky, various fielders shout, "Here it comes!" or "There it goes!" or, "It's mine!" or "It's yours!" according to where it seems likely to land. There is no mistake about an interception for when the hornuss and a schindel meet there is a resounding "clonk".

Nowadays events generally begin at mid-day and end before sunset. However, once, in 1851, at the village of Sumiswald, the two teams got so engrossed in a needle-match that they carried on until 11 o'clock at night. This was achieved by tying a burning sponge, soaked in paraffin, to the hornuss. It must have been a night to remember!

This esoteric exercise is more alive today than ever and, from 24 clubs with 600 members in 1902 (when official records were first kept) it has grown to embrace over 270 with a total membership of some 8,000 men and youths.

Some people might think that Hornussen is merely a rather dangerous game for rude peasants, which has unpredictably survived into the so-called "civilised" twentieth century. Conversation with the Swiss themselves reveals a completely different attitude of mind. This sport has the same officially recognised status as the other traditional ones, wrestling, mountaineering, ski-ing, hunting and shooting. Members of Parliament and other distinguished citizens often hold the office of President, Secretary or Treasurer to the local clubs.

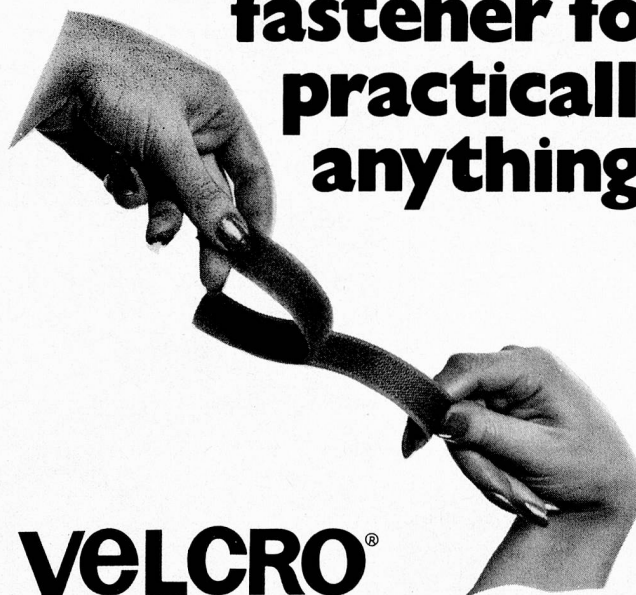
ROCK CRYSTAL MUSEUM AT GUTTANNEN

Travellers from the Grimsel Pass to Meiringen (or vice-versa) should make a point of calling at the new rock crystal museum in the holiday village of Guttannen. There, crystal hunter and mountain guide Ernst Rufibach has put his fine collection, formed over 20 years, on view to the public. In the 38 glass cabinets can be seen rock crystals, smoky quartzes, pink fluorites and various other minerals.



Hornussen is recognized in Switzerland as a national game. Here the Hornuss is sent down the field using a long willow-handled mallet. Picture by courtesy of SNT0.

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