

A Short History of Petanque

by

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— Stephen R. Ferg, (Tucson, Arizona, USA), June 5 2022

Special thanks for several photographs go to Jac Verheul and his Facebook group *La Fabuleuse Histoire de la Pétanque - Les premières années* (<https://www.facebook.com/groups/918844481613574/>)

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Ball games in ancient times

Petanque enthusiasts like to believe that the game's evolutionary tree can be traced back to the ancient Egyptians, Greeks, and Romans. We do know that the people of ancient Egypt, Greece, and Rome all used ball-shaped objects to play a variety of games. In surviving paintings, carved bas reliefs, and mosaics we see men and women playing games that appear to be similar to lacrosse, volleyball, soccer, and rugby. Sometimes, it appears, they enjoyed simply tossing a ball back and forth. In these old illustrations of ancients playing games, they seem very much like us.

We must be wary, however, of viewing depictions of ancient life through modern eyes. This bas relief on the right, for example, is from a sarcophagus for a Roman child. The child in the foreground looks exactly like a bocce player. In fact, however, the children are playing a game that involves gathering and throwing nuts or perhaps pine cones. Note how the child is holding his gathered-up toga. He's been collecting nuts and he's carrying them in the folds of his robe. This is exactly the same way my grandmother used to carry garden vegetables in her apron.



As a case study in caution, consider this photograph that appears on many bocce and petanque websites. The caption (which is copied over and over on the Web) is— *A Roman sepulcher in Florence shows people playing this game, stooping down to measure the points.*



The caption comes to us (via the Wikipedia article on "boules") from a book called *Pétanque - Technique, Tactique, Entraînement*, written by Marco Foyot, Alain Dupuy, and Louis Dalmas, and published in 1984. That book says that the sculpture is from a sarcophagus in the Campana collection, in Florence, and that it shows adolescents playing boules. "*The resemblance to modern attitudes is striking,*" the book says. "*One player is even shown, one knee on the ground, in the process of measuring a point.*"

But the Campana collection is not now, and never has been, in Florence. It was assembled in the mid-1800s by an Italian collector named Giampietro Campana who worked in the Vatican and lived in Rome. Around 1863 a substantial portion of Campana's collection was purchased by the Louvre and moved to Paris, where it still resides.

Clearly, the authors of the book had never seen the Campana collection in person. All they'd ever seen was a photograph, like the one below. The word "Florence" on the plaque probably indicates the place where the sarcophagus was discovered and collected.



In ancient Rome, children happily playing children's games was a typical motif for the decorations of the sarcophagus of a child. In the image we see a group of boys on the left and a group of girls on the right. (This was typical of Roman culture — boys and girls did not play together.)

The boys are playing a game that involves some kind of stick and possibly several balls. The boy on the left looks like he might be playing field hockey, which we know was played in ancient times. The player on his left (our right) is watching him closely and playing one-on-one defense. The animated body language of the third player conveys a sense of readiness for fast action. The boy on the right, kneeling, appears to be doing something with three or four balls on the ground. He is clearly part of the group, playing the same game, but it is difficult to see what he's doing. But he does not appear to be measuring for the point.

Looking at the girls, and especially the girl at the far right, at first glance we seem to recognize petanque's distinctive palm-down throwing technique. But if we look again, the girls seem to be playing something like handball or volleyball, throwing or hitting the ball against the wall that is clearly depicted on the right side of the carving.

The bottom line is that when we look at ancient sculptures, paintings, and mosaics, we can sometimes identify familiar sports, as in this 500 BC depiction of a form of field hockey. But often we simply can't. And there is no ancient artefact that I'm aware of that clearly depicts a boules game.



Boules in the Middle Ages

The earliest convincing evidence that I have seen for bowling-type games dates to the Middle Ages in Europe.

The balls in these games were made of wood, and different European regions and cultures developed their own distinct types of bowling game. The English played *lawn bowls*. The world's oldest surviving bowling green, located in Southampton, England, dates to 1299. William Shakespeare was a member of the Falcon Bowling Club in Pairswick; in his play *Cymbeline* (circa 1610) a character named Cloten complains, "Was there ever man had such luck! When I kissed the jack, upon an up-cast to be hit away." This must be first written record of The Pointer's Lament.

In Italy, Italians played *bocce*. In France, different regions evolved different regional bowling games— *la Rafle*, *la Boule Lyonnaise*, *le jeu provençal*, and others.



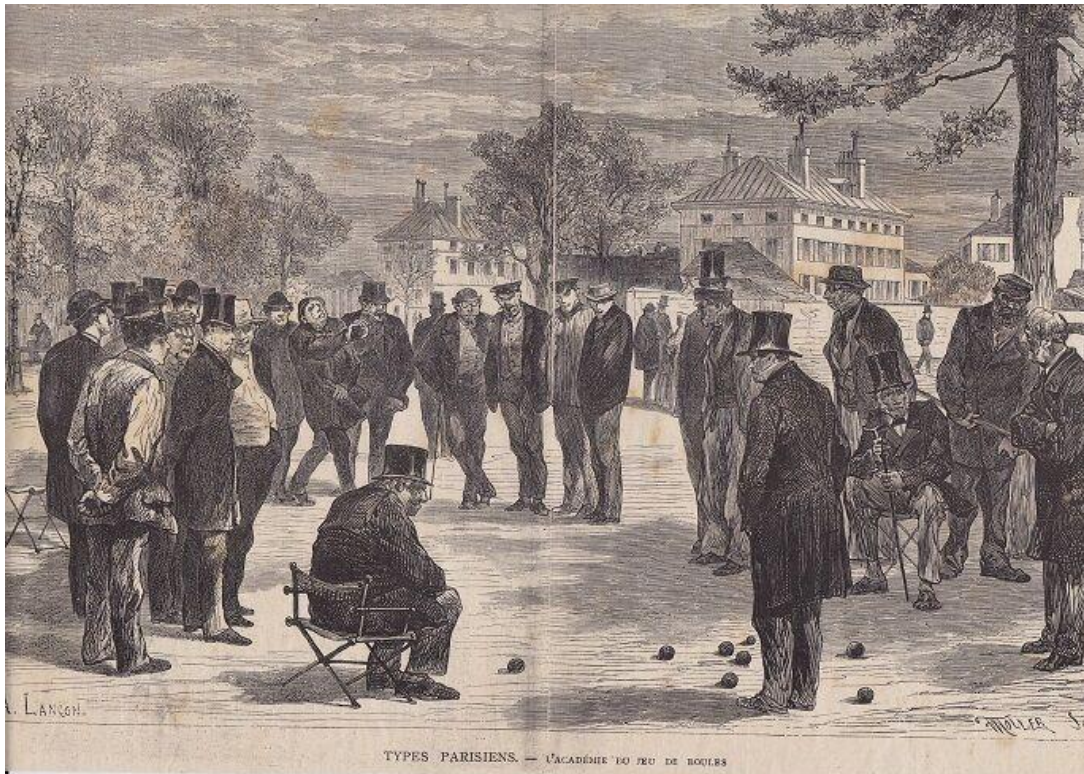
The invention of petanque

Petanque was invented, or evolved, in 1910 in a small port town called La Ciotat. La Ciotat is located in the south of France, in Provence, on the Mediterranean coast between Marseilles and Toulon. At that time La Ciotat was a major ship-building hub. Thousands of workers were employed in the La Ciotat shipyards and a favorite entertainment of those workers was to go to a boulodrome on Sunday and play *le jeu provençal* (or *boule lyonnaise*: Lyons-style boules), a traditional regional bowling game.

In *le jeu provençal* the two ends of a long terrain are marked off by lines. As in American bowling, a player launches his boule without stepping across the line. The goal of the game is to get your boule as close as possible to the small target ball, and to knock opposing boules away from the target ball. The game was also known as *la longue* because the terrain was so long (up to 20 meters), and as *le trois pas* (three steps) because players took a three-step run-up before launching a boule in a shooting attempt.



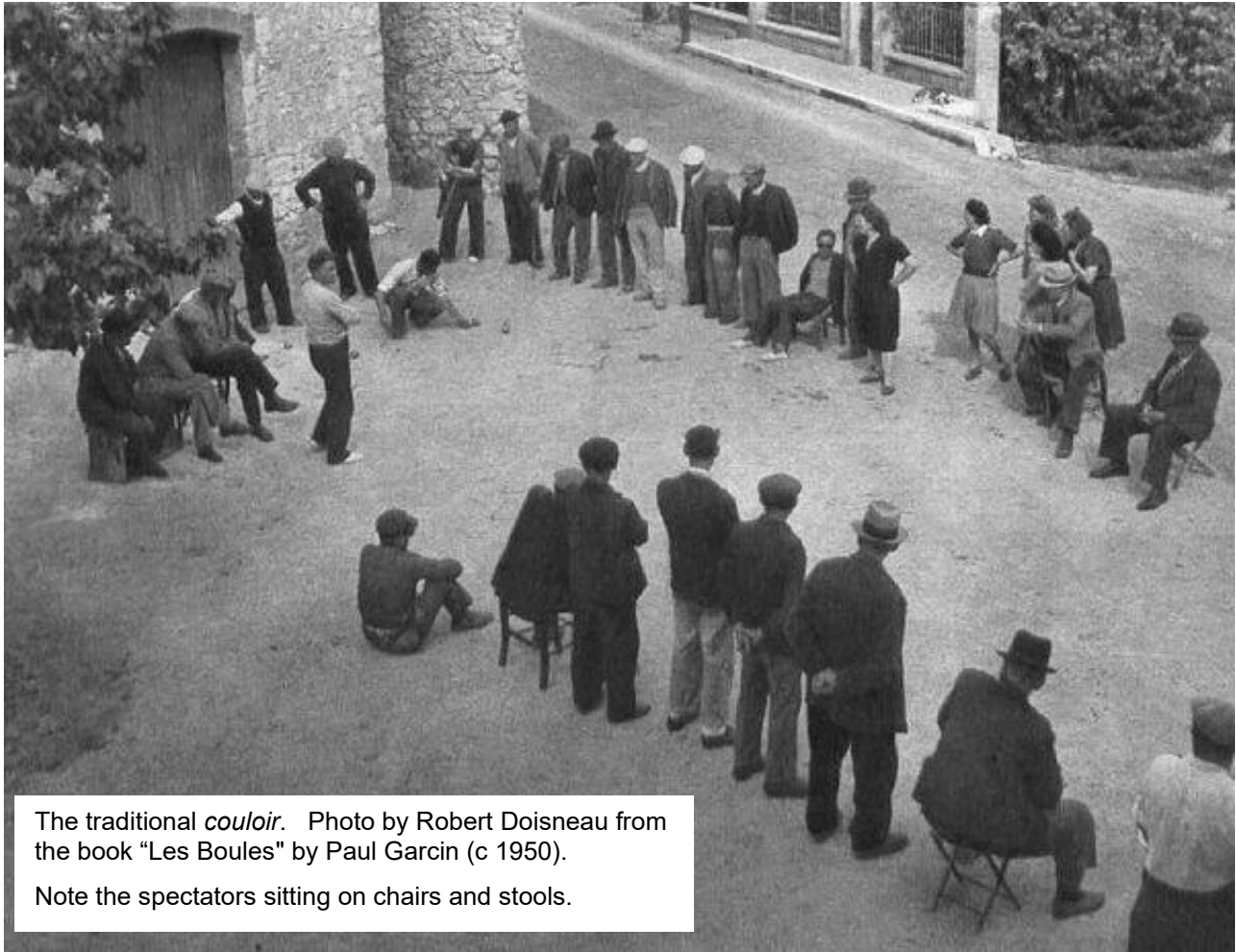
Playing boules in Paris, 1884.



There were several bouledromes in La Ciotat and it is said that they were always full. The largest bouledrome was the *Béraud*, located near the Sainte-Croix cemetery. Close to the bouledrome was *La Boule Etoilée*, a café run by two brothers, Ernest and Joseph Pitiot. According to Ernest Pitiot, every day the best players of the region would meet— and play for money— with the shopkeepers of the town. The games attracted onlookers and for a while the Pitiot brothers made a little money by renting chairs for 5 centimes to spectators who would sit, relax, watch, and bet on the play. It might have looked something like this bouledrome in Vichy in 1910.



But the sitting spectators caused problems. Sometimes a boule would be knocked into the crowd of onlookers. When that happened, spectators who were sitting on chairs couldn't get up and out of the way quickly enough to avoid interfering with the boule. The players (who, remember, were playing for money and took the games seriously) were unhappy. So the Pitiot brothers decided to stop renting chairs to spectators.



The traditional *couloir*. Photo by Robert Doisneau from the book "Les Boules" by Paul Garcin (c 1950).
Note the spectators sitting on chairs and stools.

One of the regular seated spectators was a local shopkeeper (*commerçant*) named Jules Hugues, known to history by his nickname: Jules le Noir (or Lenoir) — "Blackie" — perhaps because of his hair color.

At one time Lenoir had been a champion among the local players, but by 1910 he had become so crippled by *rheumatisme* (arthritis?) that he could barely stand. Lenoir was a good friend of Ernest Pitiot, so because of his disability the brothers allowed him to keep his chair. But there was a stipulation — Jules had to sit in a spot where he would be out of the way. The players customarily drew a circle on the ground to indicate a spot where they would leave their boules while waiting to play. Ernest Pitiot specified that Lenoir must sit near that circle. As he later wrote —

And from there, our Jules who could no longer participate in any game, used to amuse himself shooting at 1.5 or 2 meters with the boules left in the circle. "I'm practicing," he used to say to me. One day, certain of pleasing him, I offered to play with him, without moving, "feet planted" [pieds tanqués]...

The legend is that, for that first-ever game of *pieds tanqués*, Lenoir played while sitting in his chair. But Martine Pilate, Ernest's grand-daughter, says that Lenoir insisted that "Boules is a game you play standing up." Lenoir stood up and played, and Pitiot threw while standing in the circle.

We started again the next day, and the following days. The old players, who numbered quite a few, watched how we played, well enough that my brother [Joseph Pitiot] organized a competition for the following Saturday. There were 8 teams of 2 players with a first prize of 10 francs.

Interest in the new variation of the game spread quickly. This isn't surprising, because the new rules made a better game. Discarding the running throw before shooting made the game easier. Players no longer needed to "call the shot" before shooting, or mark the locations of the boules so that they could be re-spotted if the player called the shot incorrectly. The size of the terrain was reduced by half. Basically, the new game was cheaper, simpler, and less physically demanding to play. It was also fun.

Ernest Pitiot originally described the new game as "game of boules with feet planted" — *jeu de boules pieds tanqués*. Players quickly shortened that to *pieds tanqués*. In the 1930s newspapers were referring to it as *pied-tanque*, and by the 1940s it had become *pétanque*.



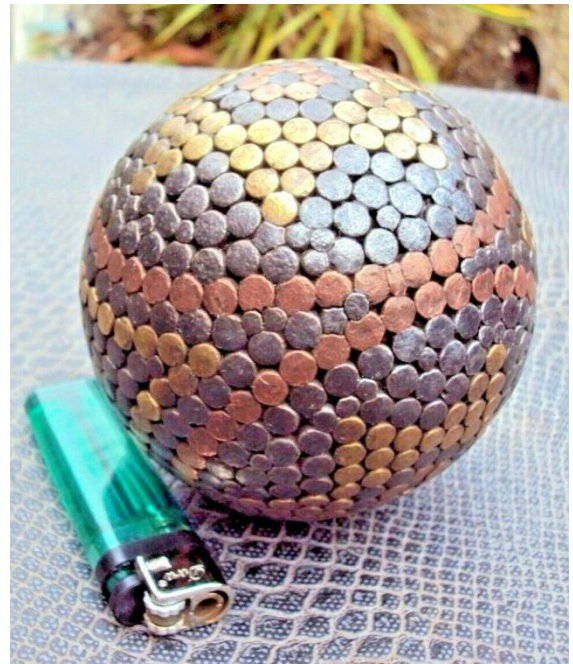
Development of the all-metal boule

Two innovations created the game of petanque as we know it today. The first, as we've just seen, was for players to stand in the circle. The second was a new kind of boule, one made entirely of metal.

During the 1800's French boules were made of boxwood root (*buis*). Boxwood grew naturally in the hills of Provence, where the sun, heat, and harsh conditions produced stunted boxwood plants with very hard roots. When a boxwood gatherer found a bush of the right size, he would dig up the root, carry it back to his village, and allow it to dry for three years. He would then trim it with an axe to a roughly spherical shape, and a wood turner would turn it on a lathe to give it a proper spherical shape.

Starting in the late 1800s, technology was developed for the mass production of heavy-headed hobnails (*clous caboches*) for the boots of farmers and soldiers. Boule manufacturers began adding these nails to the surface of their wooden boules, creating the *boule cloutée* (nailed ball). The nails provided some protection for the surface of the boules, but their primary purpose was to add weight to the boules.

As time went on, boule makers covered their *boules cloutées* with more and more nails. Eventually the surfaces of these balls were entirely covered with nails — the nailed boule had in effect become a wooden core supporting a metal shell of thick nail-heads. Nails of different metals and colors (iron, brass, copper) were used to create a wide variety of designs and patterns. Some of these old *boules cloutées* are genuine works of art — today they are highly-valued collector's items.



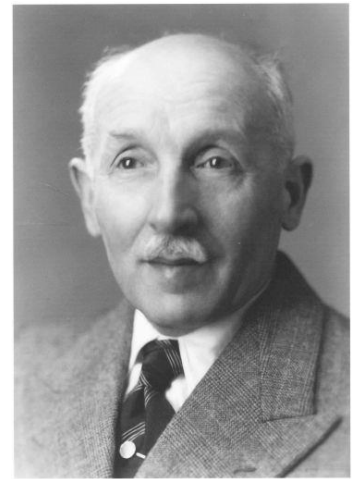
In understanding what came next, it is important to realize that the *boules cloutées* absolutely had to be made of boxwood roots — no other kind of wood would do. Normal wood, wood from a tree trunk, has a grain and will split along the grain if you try to nail it heavily. But boxwood root is a root. Unlike wood from the trunk of a tree, it doesn't have a grain. It has a heavy, tangled, fibrous structure that won't split when nailed. It was boxwood root that made it possible to create the *boules cloutées*.

Through the late 1800s the number of boules players in France grew steadily, so that by the early 1900s boules manufacturers started seeing a serious shortage of boxwood roots. In fact, wild boxwood plants in southern France had been harvested almost to extinction. This was an ecological disaster for the industry.

Around 1920, a young man named Paul Courtieu, along with a friend and co-worker named Vincent Mille, hit on the idea of manufacturing a ball made entirely of metal. They did it by using technology developed during World War I for making artillery shells and hollow metal bombs. Rejecting steel as too hard and rust-prone, they developed a "bronze" alloy of copper, aluminum, and other metals. In 1924, they filed a patent for a hollow metal ball to be manufactured by casting in one piece. They called it *La Boule Intégrale*.

In 1925 the *Union Nationale des Fédérations de Boules* approved the *Intégrale* for use in official competitions. Courtieu later wrote that the development of the all-metal boule was a watershed moment in the history of petanque.

Thanks to La Boule Intégrale, an extraordinary enthusiasm for petanque took root, and ... in very little time a multitude of new petanque players (pétanqueurs) appeared. Many new companies were formed. The game quickly spread out from Provence and Marseille until it had conquered all of France.



Paul COURTIEU 1890 - 1972

Possibly inspired by the acceptance of the *Intégrale*, Jean Blanc, a locksmith, and his friend and neighbor Louis Tarchier, a gunsmith, developed a process in which steel blanks (*lopins*) were stamped into flat disks and then stamped again into hollow hemispheres (*coquilles*). The steel hemispheres were then welded together to create a hollow boule. This is the process that is still used today for manufacturing petanque boules.

**une vraie boule de pétanque
c'est fait comme cela !...**

... avec en plus de nombreux contrôles et un certain savoir faire !...

lopin découpé dans une barre d'acier.

disque et coquille obtenus par forgeage.

2 coquilles assemblées et soudées.

la boule soudée est tournée...

puis striée, marquée, trempée, polie et éventuellement chromée.

OBUT
PREMIER EN PETANQUE

Nous sommes bien placés pour vous en parler car nous fabriquons plus de 4.000.000 de boules par an et équipons les plus grands champions.

Creation of the FIPJP

With the development of the steel boule, petanque began a steady rise in popularity. At the same time, *boulistes* of all persuasions began to coalesce into local, regional, and even (aspirational) national organizations competing for recognition by the *Comité National des Sports*. In 1922, when the creation of the *Union des Fédérations Françaises des jeux de boules* in Paris triggered the creation of the much larger rival *Union des Fédérations Françaises des Sociétés de Joueurs de boules* in Lyon, there were between 100,000 and 150,000 *boulistes* in France— almost all of them in the South and Southeast (“from Dijon to Nice”), with a few dozen in Paris.

During the 1920s, 1930s, and early 1940s, petanque was governed by the *Union Nationale des Fédérations de Boules* and then by its successor, the *Fédération Française de Boules* (FFB). The FFB was dominated by players of traditional *boule lyonnaise* who had little respect for *pétanque*. In 1943, in a planning meeting for a big tournament to be held in Montpellier, Ernest Pitiot proposed that the competition also include *pétanque*. The FFB tournament organizers laughed him out of the meeting, calling petanque “*un jeu de petite fille*” — a game for little girls. Furious, Pitiot left, announcing that he would form his own federation for *pétanque* players. The regional Languedoc-Roussillon league that he organized grew quickly to more than a thousand members. Leagues were organized in other regions, and in 1945 representatives from several regions gathered in the O’Central bar in Marseille and founded the *Fédération Française Bouliste du « Jeu Provençal et Pétanque »*, the FFBJPP.

By the end of 1945 the FFBJPP had 10,000 members. It held its first championship tournament in 1946, barely a year after the end of World War II. A few years later petanque had clearly overtaken *jeu provençal* in popularity and the FFBJPP was renamed the *Fédération Française de Pétanque et de Jeu Provençal* (FFPJP). With the adoption of the new name, petanque finally got “first billing” in the name of a French national federation.

In late 1957, at an international tournament at Spa, players from Belgium, France, Monaco, Morocco, Switzerland, Tunisia, and Spain agreed to create an international petanque federation. The *Fédération Internationale de Pétanque et Jeu Provençal*, the FIPJP, was born in Marseille on March 8th, 1958.

The FIPJP had a rocky start. Between 1959 and 1966, it managed to organize six world championship tournaments, but there were serious managerial and organizational problems. The first president resigned in 1961. The French national federation was having its own problems and withdrew from the FIPJP in 1964. No world championship was organized for 1967, and at the end of 1967 the FIPJP's second president resigned. By 1968, the international federation was comatose if not dead, and the French national federation was sickly.

Fortunately, the French federation (FFPJP) was able to pull itself back from the brink. It elected a new leadership committee in 1969, and the next year, at a meeting in Marseille, it rallied the other national federations. At that meeting the President of the FFPJP was elected President of the FIPJP, and the General Secretary of the FFPJP was elected General Secretary of the FIPJP. A world championship tournament was held in 1971 in Nice. In 1977 the President retired and the General Secretary, Henri Bernard, was elected as President of the FIPJP, a post he occupied for over 30 years. There have been FIPJP world championships regularly since 1971.



The FFPJP adopted a new logo in 2017. The rooster (*le coq gaulois*) is an unofficial national symbol of France. Its association with France dates back to the Middle Ages and is due to a pun (in Latin) on *Gallus* (an inhabitant of Gaul) and *gallus* (a rooster or cockerel).



Petanque in the USA

After World War II, petanque gradually began to spread to Anglophone countries— the United States, Canada (well, only to francophone Quebec), the UK, Australia, and New Zealand.

Starting in the early 1950s, Jean Raffa in Montréal and Jean Fuschino in Québec City began to popularize petanque in French-speaking Canada. Players from Montréal and Québec City got together to create the *Federation Canadienne Bouliste Inc.*, which held its first competition on July 15, 1956 at Parc Lafontaine in Montréal.

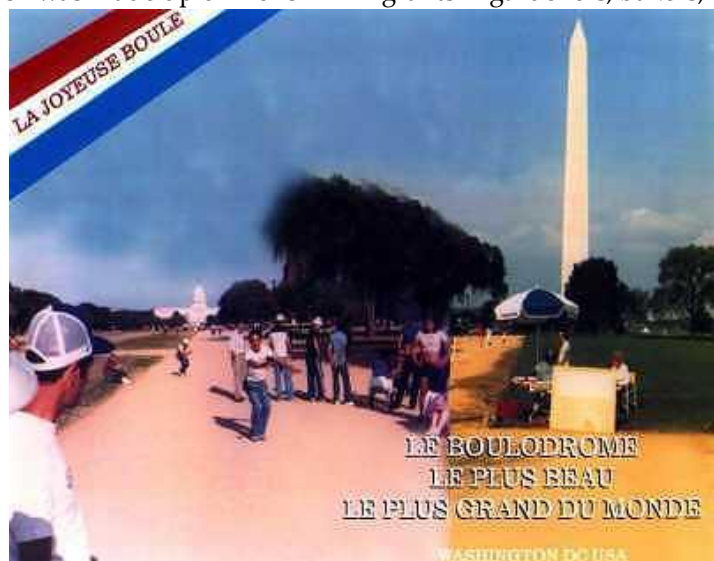
About the same time, petanque slowly began to grow in England. The first club organized in the UK was founded in the mid-60s. In the early 1970's other clubs were founded in counties close to ports on the English Channel. The British Petanque Association (BPA) was founded in 1974. In 1984 Garth Freeman (*Petanque: the French Game of Boules*) wrote that "In the last ten years or so, the game of Petanque has not only crossed the Channel, but become well established in this country." In 2007 the BPA split into Welsh, Scottish, and English national federations.

The oldest petanque club in the United States— *Le Mistral Club de Pétanque*— was founded in 1958 in Worcester, Massachusetts and eventually evolved into the Boston Petanque Club. The founding members were French expatriates who had emigrated from the Armenian community in Marseilles. (The club was named after the famous cold winter wind, *le mistral*, that blows down the Rhone valley and through Marseilles.) Armenian members of *Le Mistral* dominated FPUSA teams to the World Championships between 1975 and 1987. Marcel Babayan (who was president of the club for 40 years and a major factor in its success) represented the USA at three world championships; Albert Kallanian did it seven times.

La Boule d'Or in San Francisco is almost as old as *Le Mistral*. Its courts in Golden Gate Park were dedicated in 1959. The early members were mostly French expatriates— Jean Krauer, Jean Bontemps, André Martin, Armand Squitieri, Charles Nicolas. In October 1960 they had their first international tournament, and in 1962 the North American Championship (which later evolved into *le Coupe des Amériques*) was held in San Francisco. In the mid-1960s Jean Bontemps moved from San Francisco to Washington DC, where he and Jacques Biaggini founded two clubs, *La Joyeuse Boule* and *Les Pétanqueurs de la Maison Blanche*. Joe Acciardi and *La Joyeuse Boule* still play in Maryland, but *Les Pétanqueurs* later faded from the scene, to be replaced later by the National Capital Club de Petanque (NCCdP) founded by Bob Morrison. It was probably while playing at one of the two DC clubs that Bontemps met and influenced Alfred Levitt, who later went on to found *La Boule New Yorkaise* in 1968.

Following the foundation of *La Boule d'Or* in San Francisco, a number of other clubs were established on the west coast, including *La Boule Joyeuse* sometime in the 1970s, and *La Pétanque Marinière* in 1972. *La Pétanque Marinière* got its start from a French club in Marin County which was made up of French immigrants— gardeners, bakers, painters, mechanics, waiters, consulate employees, etc. In 1979 Freddy Canesse immigrated to the USA from Calais. He later moved to Florida where he, his brother Gilles, and members of the local Alliance Française organized the Sarasota Club de Pétanque in 1993.

In the 1970s there were two separate attempts to create a national petanque federation in the USA. Alfred Levitt founded the *Federation of Petanque USA* (FPUSA) in New York City in 1973. Levitt was a notoriously autocratic and difficult personality, which probably explains why Jean Bontemps founded a rival national federation, the *American Petanque Association* (APA) in Washington, DC in 1976.



Somewhat surprisingly, members of the FPUSA and the APA occasionally were able to work well together. In 1982 a national championship was held on the Mall in Washington, DC, hosted by Washington's *La Joyeuse Boule* club. Alfred Levitt reportedly worked closely with Louis Toulon to make it happen. This was the first national petanque championship held in the USA. Members of both the APA and FPUSA participated in the tournament, making it a truly national championship.

1983 saw the founding of one of the strongest clubs in the United States — the Los Angeles Petanque Club.

In 1985 Alfred Levitt was finally forced into retirement as president of the FPUSA. When the dust had settled, Bob Morrison of the APA and Hans Jepson, the new president of the FPUSA, got together and easily negotiated a merger of the two organizations. At that time the APA was probably the larger and healthier organization, but in order to inherit the FPUSA's affiliation with the FIPJP, the new organization was called the FPUSA. Jepson served as the interim president until a new president, Joseph Ardagna, was elected by all of the clubs in the new federation. After the two organizations merged, Bob Morrison and Joe Acciardi worked on organizing the USA's first international tournament — the *Championnat International de Petanque U.S.A.*, which took place on the weekend before Bastille Day, 1987, on the National Mall in Washington D.C.

The FPUSA's center of gravity began to shift from the East Coast to the West Coast, and 1996 marks the completion of that shift. Louis Toulon and Mike Norton, of the Valley of the Moon Petanque Club, were elected FPUSA president and vice-president, respectively. The other officers were already from the West Coast, which meant that in 1996 for the first time all five FPUSA officers were from the West Coast.

In 1991 Philippe Boets, a Belgian, founded *Petanque America*, the first vendor of competition boules in the USA. At that time the company was located in North Carolina. As Boets tells it, the little company struggled until...

The internet saved us. There's no other word for it. Especially because the US was way ahead with internet at the time. I think we in the US — the smallest market on the planet as far as boules were concerned — were the first to put a boules catalog online, shortly followed by an online store.

In 2003 Petanque America sponsored the first annual Petanque America Open. In 2009 Petanque America (and the Open) moved from North Carolina to Amelia Island, Florida. Eventually, responsibility for the Open was assumed by the Amelia Island Tourist Bureau; it is now the *Petanque Amelia Island Open* and still going strong. It is the major annual petanque event in the United States.

As I write (July 2019) it is difficult to determine whether or not petanque is experiencing significant growth in the USA. Many players in the United States are not FPUSA members and many groups are not affiliated with the FPUSA, so FPUSA membership statistics aren't really helpful. Bits of anecdotal evidence seem to indicate a process of slow growth.

- Florida has many thriving clubs, including the remarkable Amelia Island/Fernandina Beach Boules Club, which was established in 2010 and has rapidly grown into the largest club in the US.
- In March 2006, Tim Channell moved to Fresno, California and organized the Fresno Petanque Club. The FPC is remarkable for the speed with which it has grown and the way that it has attracted members (and excellent players) from among Fresno's large expatriate Hmong community.
- The Zanesfield Petanque Club was established in 2010 in the tiny town of Zanesfield, Ohio. Supported by truly remarkable community participation, it has grown at an astonishing rate and it is now one of the largest and most visible clubs in the country.