

# PELOTA

## THE NATIONAL GAME OF THE BASQUES.

By HERBERT VIVIAN.\*

NEVER in the history of peoples has any race given itself up to any game with such entire enthusiasm as the Basques devote to their national game of Pelota. There is scarcely a wall with anything of a courtyard in the remotest of their villages or the most dismal of their slums which is not seized upon at all hours for a "knock-up." Even at the entrance to Burgos Cathedral I found it had been necessary to put up a notice, in letters a foot long, forbidding the game against the sacred edifice. There is no village boy with the least claim to gumption but cherishes the dream that some day he may star it as a famous *pelotar*. Wherever the game has taken hold—at Madrid, San Sebastian, Barcelona, Buenos Ayres, Bilbao—its champion players are earning fortunes which rival those of the great matadors. They are more admired than the tenor in the latest comic opera or even a victorious general. It is the one career which may bring riches and glory to the humblest Basque, and his only pass-

port to it lies in a quick eye and a strong arm. What wonder, then, that the enthusiasm should be so keen and so universal?

A superficial observer may seek to dismiss Pelota as a mere form—or shall we say dialect?—of real tennis. But tennis has

always remained an aristocratic game, whilst Pelota must always appeal to the masses also. The origin of both games is lost in antiquity. An expression of them was popular in ancient Greece, and a Basque will tell you that Adam and Eve played Pelota with the apple in Paradise! The modern game differs considerably from the older versions, which held their own well into the middle of last century. They were played more for honour and glory than anything else, by village against village and district against district, or, on grand occasions,

nation against nation—that is, of course, between French and Spanish Basques. The ball was then struck with the hand, as in fives, but the modern game depends upon an instrument called a *cesta*, which may be described as a cross between a glove and a racket. You put your hand in and fasten the *cesta* as though it were a glove, but it is

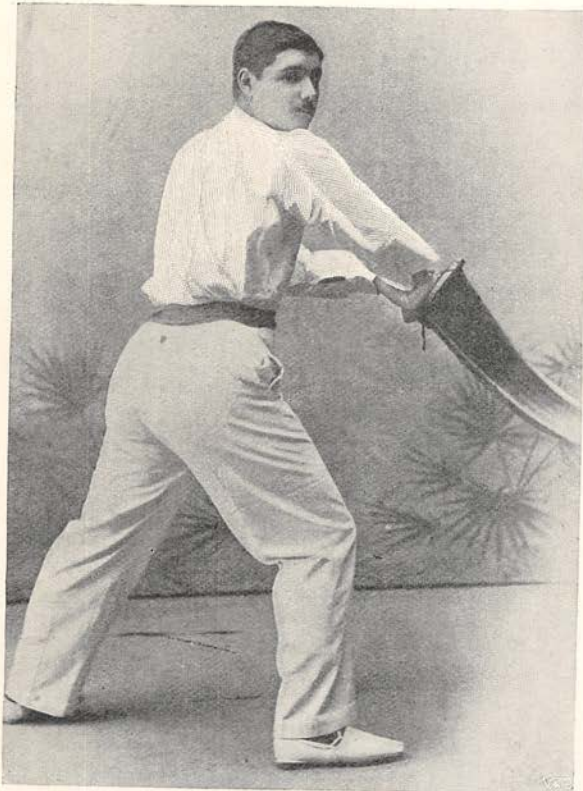


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[A. Esplugas, Barcelona.

CHIQUITO DE ABANDO TAKING A BACKHANDER.

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of strong basket-work, nearly three feet long, and it enables you to sling your *pelota* (ball) an enormous distance with the velocity of a bullet. All the best *cestas* are made by a man named Lacarra, at Ascaïn, and cost from £1 to £2 each. Another man, Sainz of Pamplona, has a similar corner in *pelotas*, which weigh over four ounces, and cost from thirty shillings upward. Ten balls are the usual quota for a game of fifty up.

I shall convey a better impression of Pelota by relating my experience of the first game I ever witnessed. It was at the Euskal Jai\* at Madrid, one of the most famous covered courts in existence. As I entered, I seemed to encounter a regular pandemonium. Some twenty bookmakers were walking about at the edge of the court, and yelling with a vigour worthy of the silver ring at Newmarket; and every sound was reverberated a hundredfold. They were clad in the Basque *boina*—a blue tam-o'-shanter. Each held in his hand a kind of bloated cheque-book, and on each cheque were a number of blue and red bars, upon which a bet was inscribed according as it was for the Blues or the Reds. In old days you might back a village or a nation; now such distinctions are forgotten, and you are reduced to giving your support to a colour.

At the end of the court was a telegraph-board, on the same principle as those well known on cricket-fields. It contained two compartments, the one to the right for the insertion of a red number, and that to the left for a blue number. The game was four-handed—two Reds against two Blues. They were playing fifty up, and the game as I came in stood at "32 all." I was not expecting to be much interested, as I am always wearied when I have to watch a tennis or racket match. But I had not been in the Euskal Jai many minutes before my enthusiasm was vehemently aroused. The rallies were wonderful and interminable. It seemed as if those strange curved baskets could never miss the ball. Generally they would catch it on the volley, keep it poised in the hollow for a second, while they swept back to give a mighty cast, and then batter it against the great black wall in front. Often it would return the full seventy-eight yards to the back wall like a flash and defy further capture except by a miracle. But this miracle would be repeated so often and with

such a sublime absence of effort that at last my amazement gave way under the strain of familiarity, and I began to fancy that it must be impossible to miss.

The Blues seemed to be the better players, but the Reds were the more fortunate, and the score crept up in their favour to "37-34." The bookmakers were now running about



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[A. Esplugas, Barcelona.

CHIQUITO DE ABANDO ABOUT TO SERVE.

like caged beasts, and shouted themselves hoarse. "Two to one on Red! I'll lay forty to twenty! A hundred to fifty, I'm giving—giving—giving!"

The rallies grew longer and longer, the excitement of the audience more and more intense. When a player missed a ball, he appeared to be overwhelmed by his fault,

\* *Euskal Jai* (meaning Basque Festival) and *Jai Alai* (Joyful Festival) are the Basque names by which Pelota-courts are generally known.

and would totter off to the side wall to hide his face against it. On one occasion, immense hilarity was caused when a player did this with such vehemence that he banged his nose very severely against the wall, and was forced to keep rubbing it during the next few rallies. The strain was now evidently telling upon all the players. Between each rally, chairs and tumblers of coloured liquid were brought to them by smart pages in uniform. Somehow, there was an impression of a prize-fight in the air—particularly when the combatants were solemnly fanned with towels.

When "48 all" was put up, the sensation was tremendous. I seemed to feel the pulses of the whole audience—four thousand pulses—beating in unison with one fierce throb. There was an intense hush of expectancy as the Blue server stepped forward to choose a fresh ball from the basket, which was held by a small boy wearing a scarlet *boina*. He tested it more carefully than usual against the ground, knowing how much was at stake. Then he tossed it to his forward adversary, who bounced it once or twice as a matter of form before returning it. The server took the usual run of about twelve yards, threw down the ball, and swept it up against the wall with his *cesta*. The Red forward caught it at the volley, swung back his arm, and gave a sweeping stroke which made the ball rebound right away to the back wall. It must be a difficult stroke for Blue, as it had landed almost in the angle of the wall and pavement, spurting out at him in the most unexpected manner. Ah-h! we all held our breath with one accord. Heigho! he had missed it. No, by Jove! What genius! He just contrived to rescue it as it was about to touch the ground a second time, and we could see it fairly on its way to the front wall.

A shout of horror went up. The ball had struck forward Blue in the head, and he fell at once like a ninepin! A dozen people were round him in a trice, and for some long moments he lay there an inert mass. Presently, however, we saw him being carried out pick-a-back, but he was as white as a sheet, and it was obvious that he would not play again that day.

The scorer marked up "49 to Red," and there was a buzz of wonder as to the fate of the bets. Red were still one short of the game, but on the other hand, Blue were unable to come up to time. Presently an official was seen proceeding across the court. He began to write in large letters on the

side wall with a piece of chalk: "Owing to the indisposition of Brau, the game is suspended." Then followed the enigmatical legend "a 50%," which turned out to mean that the backers of Blue only lost half their stakes. It was a sad ending to a stirring exhibition of sport, this ominous writing on the wall; but the dramatic finish must have served to make the match ever memorable to many.

It must not be supposed that Pelota is really a very dangerous game. Certainly casualties are not infrequent, and the force with which the ball is struck sometimes makes them serious; but for the players it is certainly not more perilous than football, whatever it may be for the spectators. The chief danger, however, is not in being shot by a *pelota*, but in the effects of such violent exercise, and I am told that all but cast-iron constitutions run grave risk of lung diseases. However, the Basques are a race of athletes, and readily put up with a good deal in the interests of sport.

Another charge against the game is that, now it has become a regular profession, betting dominates everything, and players lose on purpose. But this is the common complaint of every enemy of sport all the world over, and I am convinced that it has been much exaggerated.

The importance of the game began early last century. So zealous were the Basques about it then that fourteen of them deserted from the army of the Rhine to hurry home for a match, and after winning it, contrived to rejoin their regiment in time to take part in the victory of Austerlitz. In the old days, before Pelota had become a profession, when none thought of anything but the honour and glory of the game, the clergy were frequent performers, and often attained to special distinction. The French clergy were ordered by their bishops to change their cassocks for blouses or jerkins, but in Spain they always played in their ordinary attire, merely tucking up their sleeves. The sight of their cassocks and shovel hats amid the white shirts and red or blue *boinas* added wonderful variety to the scene. Among the reverend *pelotaris* the most famous was the Curé Laba, who played at Bilbao in August, 1878, against the yet more renowned Chiquito de Eibar. It was a tremendous contest, which will never be forgotten in the annals of Pelota. The Curé was a huge, stout man with a short neck. Chiquito was just turned sixteen—a dainty pink and white boy with a girlish

expression. In the end David beat Goliath, but only after a titanic struggle, when both collapsed on the floor of the court, mere inert masses, gasping for breath. As frequently happens at Pelota, their right hands had swollen up so badly that two men had to stamp upon them with their whole weight. This is the usual remedy, and although extremely painful, produces no evil effects. At the sound of the Angelus the players stopped and doffed their *boinas* to say a prayer, neglecting the ball with one accord, even although in the middle of a tempting stroke. It was to the victor in that great struggle (Chiquito) that Pelota

feet. Being naturally delicate, however, he could not long endure the strain, and in August, 1886, just eight years after his great victory over the Curé Laba, he was beaten at San Sebastian by El Manco (the one-armed) after a contest almost as memorable as the former one.

El Manco presented a strange appearance and possessed a strange history. He was born in the utmost penury, and at the age of four fell downstairs, injuring his right arm so badly that it had to be amputated. When he grew up, his highest ideal was to make two *reals* (fivepence) a day; but this seemed far beyond his capacity, and he was

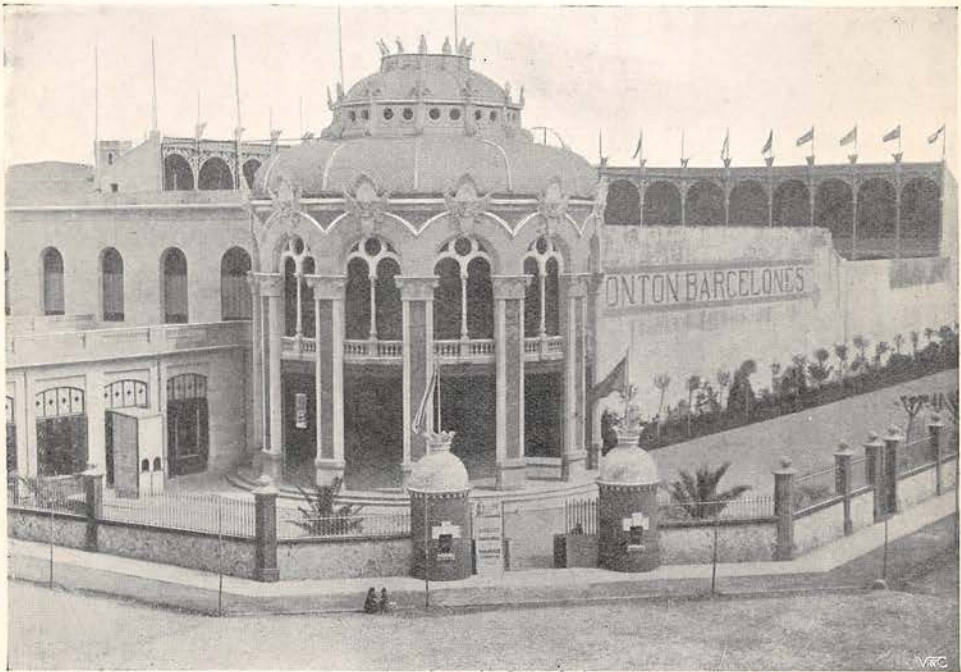


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OUTSIDE OF THE UNCOVERED PELOTA-COURT AT BARCELONA.

[A. Esplugas, Barcelona.

owed the great rush of popularity which it now enjoys. The charm of his play lay in his indescribable versatility. At the beginning of a game he would generally occupy himself merely with studying his adversary's methods and thinking out a plan of attack, quite regardless of how far he might be left behind. Then, whenever he chose, he would set to work and win the game straight off. Never, surely, was any sportsman made the object of so much hero-worship. Wherever Chiquito went he was idolised, his name was on all men's—and, still more, on all women's—lips. His portrait was in every window, and with his fame great riches were at his

constantly on the brink of starvation. Again and again he attempted suicide, but he was no more successful in this than in anything else. At last he secured his fivepence a day as a carter, and devoted his leisure moments, like everybody else, to Pelota. He soon found that his left-handed stroke baffled everybody. Good luck had at last set in, and he reached its very apex by defeating the invincible Chiquito de Eibar: but though now rich and famous, El Manco retained his simple ideas.

It would be easy to fill a volume with the exploits of the various heroes of Pelota. I will only mention one or two. Mardura

(Choppy Sea), also called Bad Weather, Storm, Railway, etc., had as many ups and downs in his career as any other player. When a boy, he was addicted to somnambulism, and fell into his courtyard from the second floor, badly injuring his right arm, which afterwards earned him such triumphs. Later on, he took pneumonia, and actually received extreme unction, but recovered. Now he has broken down, after making a fortune. Of the players of the present day, the best known are Irun, Gogorza, and Chiquito de Abando, whose portrait I reproduce.

Many Basques lament the transformation from the old game to the new, but there has been a distinct gain in the way of scientific play; and modern Pelota is certainly more brilliant and better calculated to inspire the unlearned with enthusiasm than its predecessor. Formerly the rallies were short and decisive; now they generally last three or four minutes. Nor must we grudge their triumphs to the players. Like singers, actors, and bull-fighters, they owe their success to their superlative skill, and in a dull age it should be sufficient that they amuse.

## OLD SONGS.

**A** DOWN the years they come to me  
 From out the crypts of time,  
 With half-forgotten melody  
 And faintly failing rhyme;  
 With here and there a broken chord,  
 A missing word or phrase,  
 But sweet as angel whispers are  
 The songs of bygone days.

A snatch of college drinking-song,  
 A verse of cradle-hymn,  
 A bar of tender serenade  
 Sung when the stars were dim;  
 The truant strains they come and go  
 Like sparks of smoky haze—  
 A tangle of sweet memories,  
 The songs of bygone days.

And as the measures float along  
 Like shadows o'er the sea,  
 Across the drifting bloom of years  
 Lost faces smile on me;  
 Eyes dimmed in death's eternal night  
 Meet mine in friendly gaze—  
 I kiss the marble lips that sang  
 Those songs of bygone days.

Old tunes touch hidden chords in hearts  
 Long mute with age or pain,  
 And give us for a fleeting space  
 Lost faith and hope again.  
 Within yon Cloudland's Far-away  
 Where swell the hymns of praise,  
 God grant the angels sometimes sing  
 The songs of bygone days!

SARA BEAUMONT KENNEDY.