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Breaking in New Sport, Dutch Sweat Small Stuff

By JOHN TAGLIABUE
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AMSTERDAM — People of this free-spirited Dutch city, known for its legal prostitution and easy [marijuana](#), have found another pastime that flirts with convention and the law: picking locks.

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Herman Wouters for The New York Times

The Open Organization of Lockpickers first attracted police attention, but now 100 members compete in Olympic-style contests.

On a recent Wednesday evening, Jos Meyers sat hunched over a magnifying glass studying the contours of a key that was taking shape as he filed away at it. Across the table, Jos Meyer sat picking at a standard front-door lock with a set of tools that looked for all the world like a collection of slender dental instruments, painted black.

Mr. Meyers, 39, is among 100 or so members of a club in the Netherlands called [Toool](#), for The Open Organization of Lockpickers, that is dedicated to picking locks for fun.

The movement has been growing over the last five years, with a chapter now in Eindhoven, in the east of the country, and [foreign branches](#) in several places, including Germany and the United States.

About 15 of the members, including Mr. Meyers, met recently around a long rectangular table piled high with boxes of locks in an artists' cooperative on the east side of Amsterdam. Ms. Meyer (Jos is a unisex name in Dutch) is not a member, but her friend Marco Zuiderveld has been for the last six years, and she accompanies him occasionally to the club's meetings.

"It took a lot of time, one hour and a half," said Ms. Meyer, a diminutive woman who runs a flower market in nearby Aalsmeer, after conquering her lock. She looked decidedly unamused when she added, "But it was an easy lock, they said."

The club is not some Dutch version of [the Beagle Boys](#), those industrious if clumsy burglars in the Disney cartoons. Its members see lock picking as a sport and organize annual competitions, a sort of Olympics of lock picking, at which entrants compete in various categories — padlocks, mechanical locks and freestyle, in which contestants confront a variety of locks with any tools they choose, as long as they do not damage the lock. The next tournament will be held in May in Istanbul.

Initially, the Dutch police were deeply skeptical about all this lock picking. "Their reaction was, at first, are they criminals?" said Han Fey, 46, a security expert and club member.

Now, the authorities are more philosophical. "There's been no increase in break-ins," said Arnout Aben, a spokesman for the Amsterdam police, when asked how they viewed the club.

"Since the invention of the lock, there have always been people trying to pick the lock," he added with a laugh. "So there's nothing new here."

Mr. Meyers, asked what drove club members to this odd exercise, replied, "It's the puzzle; to open things not meant to be opened." He reflected, then added, "It's analog hacking."

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And indeed, lock picking for sport, which sprang up over the last decade in the Netherlands and northern Germany, grew out of computer hacking. Most lock pickers attribute the beginning to Steffen Wernéry, a founding member of a notorious German hacker group, [the Chaos Computer Club](#), which gained notoriety in the late 1980s when it [broke into an international computer network](#) of [NASA](#).

Over time, Mr. Wernéry, now 47, branched out into lock picking, and in 1997 founded the Sports Enthusiasts of Lock Picking, a club based in Hamburg. "I gave lock-picking courses at Chaos gatherings," he said in a telephone interview. "So, we thought, out of this experience let's form an organization, purely sporting, just as a sports club."

He said the Sports Enthusiasts occasionally worked with forensic experts from the police. "They study locks that we've opened, to see what tools we used," said Mr. Wernéry, who was arrested in 1988 in France for hacking into computers of the Philips electronics company. "What we don't do is give help to lock makers."

That is one point on which the German and Dutch clubs differ. "We are talking with almost all the manufacturers," said Barry Wels, 41, who founded Toool in 1999 and is its current president. Danny Janssen, secretary of the Netherlands Key and Lock Specialists Guild, said the club's work certainly helped lock makers. "People spend a lot of money to secure their homes," he said. "Technology is not standing still."

"They have quite a technical mastery," he said.

Mr. Wels, who when not picking locks is an executive at CryptoPhone, a maker of secure phone systems, said he, too, came to lock picking from the hacker scene. He was among the co-founders of Hack-Tic, a leading Dutch hacker magazine, but began early on giving courses to hackers in lock picking. "For me it's all simply thinking outside the box," he said, explaining the parallels between hacking and lock picking. "Using technology so it's beneficial for you, and not for the manufacturer."

Mr. Wels admits that the club's meetings have occasionally attracted unwanted visitors. But unlike burglars, who drill into or otherwise damage locks, the club's members follow a cardinal rule that locks may not be damaged in any way. "They will ask, 'What drill are you using?'" said Mr. Wels, describing such visitors as "people we don't feel comfortable with."

"It's a no-go," he said, adding that such visitors rarely come a second time. "There's a group dynamic," he said. "It's not what we're here for."

Mr. Fey, who runs a company called Lock Technologies when not picking locks, boasts that he has at his home a collection of 3,000 different locks, which he says represents probably 70 percent of the world's locks. "We have a big data bank of locks," he said. "It's the backbone of the organization, to show that we are solid and professional."

Mr. Weyers, who said he began picking locks with "bike stuff in high school," says he keeps a Workmate bench in the middle of his living room to fiddle with locks while watching television. His girlfriend, who shares the apartment, knows how to pick locks, too, yet does not share the passion.

But it has a practical side as well. "I make my own spare keys," he said.

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