

1923 football rules revisited

By Joe Plack

When the 1923 football guide was published, Walter Camp himself must have been astounded when he compared it with the first number which he edited 30 years earlier.

The 1923 Spalding's Guide contained all the regulation articles concerning the game in the college and school arena, including pictures, records and data of current interest. Parke H. Davis gave an update of his interesting records of special plays, while the listing of scheduled games was the largest that had ever been published. Probably the best indication of the growth in football from 1893 to 1923 is the great number of high school contests listed, which shows the extent to which football had been organized in the minor arena.

Professional and semipro football used the changes in the football rules, although they were written primarily for the college game. As published in the guide, the 1923 modifications can be divided into two groups: changes in rules and changes in wording.

Changes in rules

In Rule 3, Section 2, which relates to substitution, there was a slight expansion in the wording to make the intent of the rule less likely to misinterpretation.

In Rule 4, Section 1, a paragraph was added to provide for a penalty against a team that deliberately delays the start of a game. The wording of Section 4 was altered to make it clear that after a fair catch at the expiration of a period the kick is allowed, and also the subsequent play resulting from that kick, until the ball is declared dead by the referee, and also that the try-for-point is allowed if a touchdown is made just as time has expired.

In Rule 7, Section 2, relating to a kickoff crossing the goal line and then going out of bounds, the approved ruling that the ball is still in play, and a touchdown possible, was incorporated.

Changes in wording

In Rule 9, Section 1, third paragraph, the position of players on and behind the line of scrimmage was more thoroughly amplified, and the same is true in Section 5 of the same rule relating to players in motion.

Rule 14, Section 1, was slightly altered to make it clear that neither side may try to extend the privileges of "time out" – in other words, a penalty for delay of game.

In Rule 17, Sections 1 and 3, the word "hand" was inserted with a view to making clear the fact that a ball handed to a player ahead of the holder is a forward pass. It is also made clear that the penalty for an illegal forward pass may be declined, but that the penalty for an incomplete forward pass may not be declined.

In Rule 18 an important alteration was made to eliminate the last vestige of the "onside" kick. No player of the kicker's side, even if he was behind the kicker, may recover the ball until it touches an opponent, except in case the ball did not cross the scrimmage line.

Reading the rules of football from days gone by is not only interesting, but adds to our historical understanding of how the game has changed over the years.