

BEFORE THE BEGINNING: THE ROOTS OF PRO FOOTBALL

By Bob Braunwart and Bob Carroll

There is no widespread agreement concerning the date of origin or the methods of play of the ancestor of today's seven major football codes. What is generally agreed is that all seven – American, Association (soccer) , Australian, Canadian, Gaelic, Rugby League and Rugby Union – are descended from a common source which probably resembled rugby somewhat more than it did the other modern versions. The purpose of this article is to describe briefly what is known of the early history of football.

Roman legionaires played a game, based on an even earlier Greek game, surprisingly similar to modern soccer. The game, known as harpastum, was played on an open field, with each team trying to drive the ball over a goal line defended by the other side. Little else is known of harpastum – in particular, it is not known whether the ball could be kicked.

Some accounts have suggested that Roman legions introduced this game into Britain, the traditional date being given as 217 A.D. On Shrove Tuesday (the English equivalent of Mardi Gras, the last day before Lent) of that year, so the story goes, a team of locals beat a team of Romans in Derby. It was from this game that soccer and rugby, and later American and Canadian football, were supposed to have developed. Nevertheless, the historical evidence for this game is inconclusive (to say the least).

Another account of the earliest English, game suggests that it was actually played centuries later, when the jubilant local population of Chester celebrated a victory over the invading Danes by kicking around the severed head of a defeated enemy. A related and slightly less grisly version claims that the first “football” was not a Danish head, but rather a disinterred Danish skull. There is no adequate historical evidence for this account either.

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Whatever its ancient origins, the game became a popular, though rough, annual event in many villages in Britain and Ireland, as well as across the channel in Normandy and Brittany. Intervillage matches on Shrove Tuesday were common by the eleventh century. For the benefit of weak stomachs and tender toes, more available and more resilient animal bladders stuffed with hair or straw replaced the traditional Dane skulls, but the game was still not for the fainthearted. An old football ditty runs “Hoose agin hoose, toon agin toon, and if you meet a man, knock him doon.”

The object of these contests was to force the ball into a neighboring village, perhaps several miles away. There were no inhibiting rules to spoil initiative, and the result was less game and more riot. Each town fielded as many healthy bodies – sometimes several hundred – as could be recruited for the event. Kicks, punches and gouges were delivered to opponents with more will and regularity than to the ball. The mayham continued until a goal was scored or until sundown, whichever came first.

In Derby, for example, All Saints Parish traditionally defended a waterwheel at a local mill while attacking a prominent gate within the neighboring St. Peter's Parish. A similar game is still played annually in Ashbourne.

By the second half of the twelfth century football – hitherto exclusively a rural sport – had established itself at London. By 1175 an annual competition between students and apprentices in the capital was popular among players and spectators alike. The development of the urban game for the next forty years is obscure, but it must have retained many of the elements of a free-for-all. There are several accounts of players dying of knife wounds sustained during play.

By 1314 Edward II had found football so distasteful that it was banned outright in London. This ban was extended in 1349 by his son, Edward III, ostensibly on the ground that it interfered with his subjects' archery practice. Archery was essential to the defense of the realm; football wasn't.

The ban was continued by Edward's successors, Richard II and Henry IV, and similar prohibitions were enacted in France by Philippe V early in the fourteenth century and in Scotland by James I one hundred years later. The game remained illegal in parts of Britain for approximately three hundred years; in 1609 it was banned by the city of Manchester.

By the seventeenth century, Shakespeare had written his histories of various dead kings and a live one, James I, was still trying to rid the realm of a livelier game. He outlawed it from his court because it was "meeter for lameing than making able the user thereof." In other words, the game was more likely to break bodies than to build them. What is most significant about this pronouncement is that James wanted it out of his court. Apparently, football had not only survived three hundred years of bannings, but had progressed from an exclusively lower class activity to one with devotees among the nobility.

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The next important period in the development of football began about 1800 and involved neither nobles nor English workingmen, but well-to-do schoolboys in England's public schools.

In 1717 an unattractive ten-foot-high brick wall was built at Eton School, and by the beginning of the nineteenth century one of the most bizarre of all the forms of football was being played along one side. In the Eton wall game, still played ritualistically today against the original wall, the "field" is 110 yards long – the length of the wall – by only seven yards wide! Teams vary from eleven to twenty a side, and the ball is put into play in a "bully," similar to a rugby scrum. Because of the peculiar dimensions of the field and the presence of the wall along one side, the game is very slow-moving, with no open-field running, dribbling, or passing. Players attempt to move the ball into the opponent's goal area, where a "shy" may be scored by the offensive team by lifting the ball with the foot and touching it to the wall.

Once a shy has been scored, the ball may be thrown at the appropriate goal (a small garden gate at one end, an elm tree at the other, each about twenty-five yards from the ends of the wall). A goal may also be scored by a kick without a shy, but the opportunities for such kicks are extremely rare. In scoring, one goal is valued higher than any number of shies, but according to Nicholas Mason in his book Football!, goals are scored only about once every twenty-five years. The relationship between the shy

and the shot on goal which follows it is reminiscent (not coincidentally, one would expect) of the conversion of a try in rugby or of a touchdown in American or Canadian football.

About the same time, other public schools were developing their own football rules and traditions. At Harrow by 1815 a game resembling a composite of soccer and rugby was played, and by 1830 the rules had been written down. Although no copy survives, we know that a goal was scored whenever the ball was kicked at any height between two vertical goal posts. The ball could not be handled, except that it might be caught from a kick. The catcher had then to return the kick or drop the ball to the ground and begin dribbling it. All offensive players were required to remain behind the ball.

Until 1823 (and for some time thereafter, until the new version finally caught on), the rules followed at Rugby were similar to those observed at Harrow. But in that year William Webb Ellis, frustrated at not being able to advance the ball, reportedly picked it up and ran with it. As a consequence, Ellis's name will live forever in all histories of early football. Today at Rugby School there is a plaque dedicated to "William Webb Ellis, who with a fine disregard for the rules of football as played in his time, first took the ball in his arms and ran with it, thus originating the distinctive feature of the Rugby game."

As there were no written rules at Rugby in 1823, the "running in" of the ball and "touching it down" in the goal area were not strictly illegal, but both remained bad form until about 1841, by which time they seem to have become established as legitimate parts of the game. The oldest surviving written code for football (of any variety) dates from Rugby in 1846, and running in – provided that the ball was caught on the fly or first bounce – was certainly a part of the game at that date.

There were many other localized versions of the game before 1840 also. This was not a problem so long as football remained a purely intramural school sport. However, by the 1840's the game had become sufficiently popular among its young players that attempts to standardize the rules were being made so that public school graduates could continue play in the universities. A standardized set of compromise rules was also necessary if schools were to play each other without constant disagreements over what sort of play was to be allowed.

In 1848 a committee was established at Cambridge University charged with the task of devising a football code acceptable to as many public school graduates as possible. The original Cambridge rules no longer survive, but a revised version from the mid-1850's does. It describes a game very similar to modern soccer. Holding, tripping and pushing of opponents were prohibited. A player could use his hands only to stop the ball or to catch and then immediately kick it. The goal consisted of two flagposts with a horizontal string stretched between them. And, perhaps most importantly, a new offside rule was established. In most earlier versions of football no player who was ahead of the ball on attack could interfere with the play in any way. The new rule allowed a player to receive a kicked "forward pass" and even try a kick himself, as long as there were at least three opponents between himself and the goal.

These rules were again revised and reissued in 1863, but by then football had ceased to be the exclusive domain of school and university players. The Cambridge rules, however, formed the basis for those later adopted by the Football Association and the football clubs which were beginning to spring up around the country.

The Sheffield Football Club, originally associated with the Sheffield Cricket Club and sharing their grounds, was founded in 1855. At about the same time football clubs of public school “old boys” (alumni) were being established in and around London. Sheffield played by rules very similar to those adopted at Cambridge, but the London clubs used codes based on those of the particular schools they represented. This made it more difficult than need be for a club to find suitable opposition nearby.

On October 26, 1863 in the Freemason’s Tavern in Great Queen Street, representatives of London-area football clubs met to adopt standardized rules of play. Delegates from Cambridge and the public schools were not invited, nor were representatives from Sheffield or other provincial centers of football interest. The meeting was to be restricted to upper-class, greater-London-area amateur clubs.

The majority was in favor of the “dribbling game” as already adopted at both Cambridge and Sheffield. However, a vocal minority supported the “carrying game” as played at Rugby. The meeting developed into a vociferous squabble over whether or not a player catching a kicked ball should be allowed to advance it by running, and whether or not holding, tripping and hacking should be allowed. “Hacking,” supported by the rugby element on the grounds that it was a fitting test of a player’s masculinity, meant kicking the ball carrier in the shins in the hope that he would then drop the ball.

The outcome of this meeting and of several others which followed shortly thereafter was the formation of the Football Association – the first ever football organization above the club level – but the rugby advocates, having lost all the important votes, angrily withdrew. Thus the primary goal of the organizational meeting – to find a set of rules which all football players could agree on – was not met. The origins of both association and rugby football as separate games, rather than just two among the limitless varieties of the same game, can be dated from this series of meetings in late 1863. The split was fundamental, and ever since the two games have diverged in their conceptions of football play.

By the time of the founding of the Football Association, the public schools and universities had lost their early influence over the formation of the English game, and they were never again to exercise any significant control over the rules. There still remained, however, the similar though not identical rules played at London and at Sheffield and elsewhere in northern England. This disparity was finally removed in 1876, when Sheffield adopted the rules of the Association.

In 1868 the offsidess rule, which (as in most earlier versions of football, including rugby) had provided that no offensive player could proceed the ball downfield, was relaxed. The new rule allowed a player to be in advance of the ball as long as there were at least three defenders (reduced to two in 1925) between him and the goal. This was the Cambridge offsidess rule, which had been rejected in 1863 in an unsuccessful attempt to compromise with the supporters of the carrying game. Another very important change in the rules took place two years later, when handling the ball in any way, except by the goalkeeper, was forbidden.

The rules having by 1870 become fairly stable (this game was very similar to the soccer we know today) and uniform (excluding, of course, the rugby dissidents, who were to

develop a different game in isolation), the groundwork had been laid for expansion, both in the number of clubs and in the numbers of their spectators.

In Glasgow, one of the earliest and most famous of all Scottish clubs – Queen’s Park – was founded in 1867. By 1872 the first English-Scottish international match was held in Scotland, and resulted in a scoreless tie.

Meanwhile, the Football Association had established its Challenge Cup in London. This is a single-elimination tournament open to all F.A. member clubs. In March 1872 it was won for the first time by The Wanderers.

With paid attendance at soccer games steadily increasing and with players now being drawn from the working class (particularly in the north) as well as the leisured classes, by the mid-1870’s the first vestiges of professionalism were beginning to creep into the game. In the north of England star players were lured from other towns or from across the Scottish border by the promise of a job and perhaps a little extra cash under the table. The first known paid player was J.J. Wise, a Scot who played for Sheffield Wednesday in 1876. The game was still technically restricted to amateurs (it was still regarded as a “gentleman’s game,” for players with no need to earn their own livings), but by the middle 1880’s fairly flagrant violations of amateurism were by no means uncommon.

Finally, in 1885 the Football Association took action. Rules, based on those already in force in professional cricket, were drawn up and passed, requiring professional players to register as such with the Association and to reside within six miles of the club for which they played. There was also a provision prohibiting transfer from one club to another during the course of a season.

These requirements were not particularly advantageous to the professional player, giving him little bargaining power vis-a-vis the club executive concerning pay scales, etc. Indeed, he could no longer even quit in order to find more remunerative employment with another team, unless the season had ended. Nevertheless, professional football had arrived, for the first time anywhere, and players could at least accept payment for their services openly and without fear of banishment from organized soccer if they were discovered.

Beginning in the late 1870’s the game took on an international scope as Englishmen propagated it abroad. In Argentina the Buenos Aires Football Club (composed of Englishmen) was founded in 1876. Within a few years other clubs had been established in Denmark, Germany, France, Rumania, Spain, Russia, Italy, Uruguay and Brazil. Soccer became an Olympic event in 1900 and today it is played in virtually every country on earth. The quadrennial World Cup, a sixteen-team tournament pitting qualifying national all-star teams from around the world against each other, attracts tremendous crowds and is televised worldwide.

Today professional matches in England and Wales are under the jurisdiction of the Football League, with ninety-two teams organized into four divisions. Promotion of teams to higher divisions and reversion of teams to lower ones occur each year, based on the standings at the end of the season. Attendance in League games is about thirty million annually. Similar leagues exist in Scotland and Northern Ireland.

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With the split of 1863, rugby football was established on its own rather rocky course of development. The major disagreements that had led to the rupture involved running with the ball and hacking. Rugby, of course, has retained the former to the present day, but within a few years hacking had become illegal everywhere but in Rugby School. Apparently the players found that bruished shins were less fun than they had anticipated.

Rugby at this point still had twenty men a side. There was only one way to score – a goal. This could be a goal from the field, kicked during open play, or a goal converting a try. After the try (touching down of the ball in the end zone), the ball was punted back on the field from the spot where it had been touched down to a teammate who would then attempt the goal conversion) while being rushed by the defending team. The try set up a relatively easy goal attempt, but it had no intrinsic scoring value.

Rugby was being played in Scotland and Ireland, as well as England, as early as 1851, but it was not until 1871 that there was any national organization for the game. In that year the [English] Rugby Football Union was formed in London by delegates of twenty rugby clubs. Almost immediately a challenge was received from Scotland, and on March 27, 1871 the first international football match (any code) was played in Edinburgh. Scotland won, one goal to nothing, but not without heated protests from the English. The goal, it seems, would have been illegal under English rules.

Sometime in the 1860's rugby had been introduced into Wales, where it took the country by storm. Ever since, it has been the most played variety of football in Wales, surpassing even soccer in popularity. From the start, Welsh rugby attracted all classes – miners and industrial workers as well as the upper classes and the public school old boys. As a consequence of its popularity at all levels, many of rugby's finest players have since been Welshmen. A prime example is forward James Sullivan, perhaps the most famous kicker ever to play the game. A native of Cardiff, he eventually scored a record 6,192 points on 2,955 goals and 94 tries between 1921 and his retirement in 1946. He played his entire career with Wigan, in the Rugby League.

Rugby was also spreading to other areas of the British Empire. By 1880 it was popular in Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, and Canada. It was also during this period that the game was exported across the channel to France. Soon national all-star teams were competing with each other on long tours, and international rugby was firmly established.

While the game was rapidly gaining converts abroad, important changes in rules and tactics were also being made in Britain – changes which almost invariably brought the game closer to its later descendent, North American football. In fact, the development of football in Canada and the United States was basically nothing more than an acceleration of tendencies which had begun in Britain almost before rugby had reached American shores, and certainly before it was well established on this side of the Atlantic.

In 1875 there was a general reduction in the size of rugby teams from twenty to fifteen a side. Less crowding on the field resulted in a faster and more open game, with a higher premium than previously on dribbling and passing the ball. Also in 1875, the try became a scoring play for the first time; however, tries were counted only in the event that the

goals were equal for both sides. The “down” rule, requiring the ball carrier to release the ball immediately after being tackled, was also introduced at about this time.

Rugby was still being regulated from London by men of independent means – men who did not have to sacrifice a portion of their livelihoods to train or to journey to out-of-town matches. The situation was very different in Lancashire and Yorkshire, where rugby was now growing in popularity. Soccer was still the predominant game in the north, but rucker was not unrepresented, and by 1880 both games were beginning to attract northern industrial workers. Amateurism was much harder to impose on this population, and by 1885 the Football Association had seen fit to legalize professionalism, though with major restrictions. The Rugby Union had not.

A clash within the Rugby Union was inevitable, and in 1893 it began. Of immediate concern to the players in the north was payment for “broken time,” that is, reimbursement for wages lost because of rugby participation. Probably this practice had been common for a number of years, but it had been carried on covertly. When it came time to vote on the proposal, the southern faction won easily, and in the following two years it insisted on even stricter enforcement of the ban against professional ballplayers.

In 1895 twenty-one northern rugby clubs met in Huddersfield, Yorkshire and voted to resign from the Rugby Football Union. They also voted to establish the Northern Union, which was to allow payments for broken time (six shillings a day for work lost) .The Rugby Union responded immediately by prohibiting any of its affiliates from engaging in interunion competition.

The Northern Union was immediately successful in attracting spectators. One of the innovations it introduced was a union schedule: no longer would club secretaries have to schedule matches with any team available for an open date. In its second season it established its Challenge Cup, a single-elimination tournament open to all comers and patterned after that of the Football Association. Both innovations were popular with the public, and attendance continued to increase.

The first two seasons of the Northern Union had seen no rules changes, but thereafter the newfound independence from the Rugby Union in London began to be expressed by a steadily increasing divergence in the rules. All goals, whether conversions, penalty goals or goals from the field, were reduced in value from three to two points. A try by now had been assigned a numerical value of four points in both unions. Also changed was the Rugby Union’s down rule (requiring the player tackled to release the ball immediately), and a team was allowed to retain possession after a tackle.

In 1898 the Northern Union went one step further toward the full legalization of professionalism. Star players had begun to demand more for their services than the six shillings per day allowed for broken time and were frequently receiving considerably more, often without pretense to the contrary. In order to retain some control over this development, the union drew up a set of regulations to govern professional players.

These regulations provided that all professionals had to register with the union and that every player had to have legitimate employment outside of football. Thus, although it was possible to earn money by playing the game, it was still impossible to earn one’s living doing so. This, of course, was fine for the clubs, who could not (or claimed they

could not) pay all their professionals a living wage. Nevertheless, an occasional star player could earn as much as four pounds a week for his skill. This was a far cry from broken time money and the northern clubs began to attract good amateur players from the south and particularly from Wales. This did not endear the Northern Union to the amateur clubs who were being raided.

The 1906-07 season saw more innovations in the north. Teams in the Northern Union were further reduced in size from fifteen to thirteen a side. This change resulted in a much more open and higher-scoring game, and the spectators loved it. Also popular with the fans was the introduction of a postseason tournament among the four highest finishers in the Union.

The Northern Rugby Union and the Rugby Union both suspended play during World War I, but started up again in 1919. In 1922 the Northern Rugby Union became the Rugby League, and both organizations are still very popular in England. The breach between the two has never been healed, however, and Rugby Union teams are still exclusively amateur, with fifteen players a side. There are other differences in rules as well, and the more conservative Union has a different scoring system which values goals relatively more highly than they are valued in the League.

Both versions have spread abroad. Rugby Union is the predominant form in southern England, Wales, Scotland, South Africa, and Northern Ireland, and is also played in Italy, Rumania, Japan, Canada and Argentina. Rugby League is more popular in northern England. Both forms of the game are played in Australia, New Zealand and France.

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The two collateral relatives of football – Gaelic and Australian – need not be discussed at any length here, but some mention should be made of their peculiarities.

Irish football before the nineteenth century was very similar to the English village game, with no set number of players, no designated field size, and no very restrictive rules for advancing the ball. In 1884 the Gaelic Athletic Association was formed and charged with adopting standardized rules for Gaelic football and for hurling, another indigenous Irish sport. The G.A.A. has been the governing body for both activities ever since.

The G.A.A. after its founding was not only an athletic organization, but also a militant nationalist one. By 1904 it had instituted “The Ban” – a prohibition against any football or hurling player playing, watching, or otherwise supporting “foreign” games – rugby, soccer, hockey, or cricket. In addition, all British soldiers, sailors, policemen and militiamen were banned from G.A.A. participation. The Ban was not formally lifted until 1971.

Gaelic football teams consist of fifteen men each, playing on a 160 x 100 yard field. Goal posts are seven yards apart on the goal line, with a crossbar eight feet high. A ball kicked or punched under the crossbar and into the net scores three points. Above the crossbar but between the verticals scores one point. Gaelic football is common nowhere but in the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland, although it is played occasionally by teams of Irish immigrants in the United States, Canada and Australia.

Irish immigrants to Victoria, Australia, in fact, were prominent in the development of Australian football as well. In the 1850's Irish miners and soldiers were playing the as yet uncodified Gaelic game. In 1858 the rules were established locally by two men, Tom Wills and Henry Harrison, and major revisions were made in 1866.

The game is now played with eighteen a side on an oval playing field with maximum dimensions of 200 x 170 yards. The ball may be kicked or carried, but carrying is generally considered to be too slow. There are four goal posts at each end of the field, seven yards apart, but without crossbars. Six points are awarded for a "goal" (ball kicked between the two center posts), one for a "behind" (ball between a side and a center post). Scores frequently reach 100 points a team. The game is played in most Australian states, but is particularly popular in Victoria, South Australia and Western Australia. Because of the general similarity of the games, Gaelic and Australian teams occasionally tour the other country, playing international matches under compromise rules with local teams.

Australian football is played by both semi-professionals and amateurs, although no player makes his living exclusively from the sport. G.A.A. football is played exclusively by semi-professionals, who are paid for what amounts to broken time only.

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Both American and Canadian football are traditionally dated from two games played May 14 and 15, 1874 in Cambridge, Massachusetts between Harvard and McGill Universities. Actually rugby had been played in Montreal as early as 1865 and U.S. collegiate soccer dates from at least 1869.

By 1874, both Harvard and McGill were playing under modified rugby rules, and both allowed holding the ball and running with it. (Most other North American football teams of the period played what was essentially soccer.) Nevertheless, there were some differences in the two sets of rules, and the May 14 game was played under the Boston rules. Harvard won 3-0. The following day a second game was played, this time under McGill rules, and it resulted in a scoreless tie. Nevertheless, Harvard was so impressed with the Canadian game that they adopted it in its entirety – oval ball, drop kick, free kick and all.

The Harvard-McGill series continued intermittently until 1882, but by then the rules in the two countries had diverged to such an extent that it had to be discontinued. Thereafter the differences became even more marked, as American football entered a period of rapid change. The explanation for the divergence was simple: Walter Camp was an American, and his influence was not to be felt north of the border for many years.

During this interval Canadian football was a more conservative game, changing only slowly and bearing more resemblance to English rugby than to contemporary North American football. After Harvard and McGill dropped their series, the two games developed virtually in isolation until Frank "Shag" Shaughnessy, an American, began to introduce American innovations as coach of McGill in 1912. Shaughnessy was the first paid football coach in Canadian history, and McGill was once again at the forefront of the development of the Canadian game.

League organization developed much more rapidly in Canada than it did in the United States. The Quebec and Ontario Rugby Football Unions were founded in 1883, but it was not until 1920 that a formal organization of city teams (the N.F.L.) was established in the United States.

In the development of professionalism, however, Americans were much more precocious than their Canadian cousins. Men had played for pay at least as early as 1892, and by World War I professionalism was well established. At that time in Canada football players were still being disciplined for having played hockey against professionals. It was not until 1950 that professionalism was fully legalized in Canada.

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