

Dribble, Hack and Split

The Origins of Soccer and Rugby

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A glance at a map of the Mediterranean shows the boot of Italy in the process of kicking a field goal. Sicily is the ball and far downfield the Pillars of Hercules serve as goal posts. Tunisia, Sardinia, and Corsica try ineffectually to block the kick.

The Italians should have invented football.

As a matter of fact, they almost did. By the 16th Century, elegant Florentines were being entertained in the spacious Piazza Santa Croce by *calcio*, a descendent of the Roman legions' games.

Unfortunately, contemporary descriptions indicate the event resembled more a pageant dominated by gorgeous costumes than a sport dominated by competition. Rather than an ancestor of football, we should perhaps think of *calcio* as the beginning of the halftime show.

Nevertheless, the Italian game serves to underscore an important fact. Kicking a defenseless ball takes no great smarts and only one healthy foot. The idea of a kicking game may well have occurred to many different peoples in sundry parts of the world. What counts, as Madame du Barry illustrated, is what you do with what you've got.

Football Among the Upper Classes

During the 17th and 18th Centuries, the English did more with the kicking game than anyone else. They were to football what Henry Ford was to the automobile.

By the mid-1600's, football began to take on the trappings of a national game. It even had rules. Healthy, young Englishmen were playing it everywhere. According to one account, eight men tried to have a match on the frozen surface of the River Trent during the winter of 1638. When the ice broke, all eight were drowned, an example of doing and dying unmatched by even dear old Rutgers.

As soon as football became legal, the wealthy classes began playing it as though they'd thought of it all by themselves. The game had grown more civilized than the old village wars, and it quickly found favor at great and exclusive schools such as Eton, Harrow, and Rugby. Even Oliver Cromwell, a puritan if there ever was one, played.

Many of the famous names of English literature wrote of their schooldays' football experiences. William Cowper played at Westminster, and John Dryden performed at Charterhouse. Joseph Addison was another Charterhouse player, but as he grew older he gained a sense of proportion. When he wrote in *The Spectator* about a game he saw at a county fair, he admitted: "Having played

many a match myself, I could have looked longer at the sport had I not observed a country girl."

For their own perverse reasons, the English insisted on calling their private schools "public schools". But that wasn't nearly as confusing as the many different ways they found to play football. Each school developed its own version of the sport. Football at Harrow was a very different game from football at Westminster. Charterhouse played somewhat differently than either, and so on. The sons of aristocratic families, cooped up together for long periods and no longer able to follow solitary sports such as fishing, hunting, shooting, riding or wenching, thought up innumerable variations on the team sports that had long entertained England's working class.

Some of the activities, that passed for football were curious, to say the least.

In 1717, an unattractive, twelve-foot-high brick wall was built at Eton School, and by the early 1800's one of the most bizarre of all the forms of football was being played along one side. In the Eton wall game, which is still played ritualistically today against the original wall, the "field" is 120 yards long -- the length of the wall -- by only six yards wide! Teams vary from eleven to eighteen or even twenty on a side, and the ball is tossed into play in a "bully", similar to a rugby scrum. Because of the peculiar dimensions of the field and the presence of the wall on one side, play is very slow. Open-field running is out of the question and forward passing isn't allowed. Each side tries to move the ball downfield. A game looks like a stocking being stuffed with apples from both ends at once, although not so exciting. If one side gets the ball into the other's goal area, it can score a "shy". This is done by a player lifting the ball with his foot and touching it to the wall.

At this point, the game reaches its most exciting moment. The player scoring a shy can now try for a "goal". In scoring, one goal is worth any number of shies. To get one, the player must kick the ball at the appropriate target: a small garden gate at one end, a tree trunk at the other, both some distance from the ends of the wall. The suspense would be absolutely chilling if it were not for the fact that a successful kick is made only about once every twenty-five years!

The relationship between the shy and the shot on goal which follows is reminiscent, perhaps not coincidentally, of the conversion of a try in rugby or the extra point in American football.

Those at Eton who didn't want to go to the wall could instead play the Eton field game which was closer to the other versions of football being developed at the other public schools by the

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beginning of the 19th Century. Each game resembled the others while retaining its own idiosyncrasies.

At Rugby School, they followed somewhat the same rules as Harrow, passed on orally from class to class, or, to use the British term for grade levels, from form to form. At any rate, one form used the same form as the other forms at Rugby and the form was similar to the form used by the forms at Harrow. Got that?

It doesn't really matter now anyway because in 1823 something supposedly happened that changed the form of football and the meaning of "rugby" forever. At least, that's the way they tell it at Rugby School.

Although the football rules had not yet been written down at Rugby, the school itself had an ironclad rule affecting all games: they had to cease with the tolling of the five o'clock bell. One day in 1823, a kicking game was in progress when the bell began to ring. At that moment, a young man named William Webb Ellis caught the ball. Perhaps he'd been waiting all along for just this moment; perhaps he wasn't quite up on the unwritten rules; perhaps he just panicked. Whatever his reason, instead of marking the ball like a good fellow for one last free kick, the young gentleman took off like a frightened rabbit and, to the horror of all, RAN lickety-split across the goal! Some of his teammates said later they thought he was stealing the ball.

Of course there was much clicking of British tongues and wagging of British fingers. Cries of "Bad form!" and "For shame!" rang out louder than the five o'clock bell. For awhile, Billy Ellis was as popular as hair on a sandwich.

But slowly attitudes changed. Some of his fellow students and more of those who came after him began to think that maybe that chap Ellis didn't have such a deucedly rotten idea at that. They tried it, and by Jove! They liked it. Eventually, they found themselves running all over the place.

And what happened to Ellis? Did his early brush with cheating cause him to sink deeper and deeper into more sordid degradations? Did he go from cheating to pocket picking to worse? Did he end his days dangling from a rope at Newgate Prison?

Not at all.

Instead, he became a highly respected London clergyman and rector of St. Clement Dane's in the Strand. Today his name is immortalized at Rugby School by 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."
Who said cheaters never win?

Well, sports researchers for one. They always seem to have the last laugh -- at least until another researcher comes along. Recently, they've begun to look at William Webb Ellis with a somewhat jaundiced eye.

In the first place, the whole story seems to have stemmed from a vivid memoir circulated by one Bloxam, a gentleman who left the school five years BEFORE the purported event. Although Bloxam's

tale was accepted as gospel by the Old Rugbeian Society in 1895, no earlier rugby writer had ever mentioned Ellis -- or Bloxam, for that matter. The closest thing to confirmation was a memoir of one of Ellis' classmates that remembered him as one who was "inclined to take unfair advantages in football." Ellis himself never took credit for inventing the game. Finally, there is evidence that the practice of running with the ball was first popularized at the school by a fast, brawny lad named Mackie in 1838, but first appeared before Ellis' day.

Altogether, the circumstances are reminiscent of those that got Abner Doubleday mislabeled as baseball's inventor on this side of the Atlantic.

At any rate, when they wrote the rules at Rugby School in 1846, the oldest surviving written code for any variety of football, "running in" with the ball and "touching it down" had become established as legitimate. They only hedged slightly by restricting the runner to balls that he caught on the fly or on the first bounce.

The many localized versions of the game -- Eton's, Harrow's, Rugby's, and so forth -- each different in one or dozens of rules from all the others -- presented no problem so long as football remained a purely intramural public school sport. However, a set of standardized rules was necessary if schools were to play each other without constant wrangling over what sort of play was to be allowed. Additionally, public school grads wanted to continue playing in their universities where their classmates might be used to a totally different game. We can imagine an Eton grad wandering around Cambridge in search of a suitable wall like an anxious puppy in search of a tree. Finally, there was the question of the amateur football clubs. Many of them had rules that none of the public schools would have recognized.

In 1848, a committee met at Cambridge University to make some sense out of the chaos and establish a football code acceptable to as many different groups of public school grads as possible. A letter written by N.C. Malden of Godalming, one of the men present at the meeting, recalled the occasion:

I went up to Trinity College, Cambridge. In the following year an attempt was made to get up some football in preference to the hockey then in vogue. I remember how the Eton men howled at the Rugby men for handling the ball. So it was agreed that two men should be chosen to represent each of the Public Schools, and two who were not Public School men, for the 'varsity. I wish I could remember the others.

We were 14 in all, I believe, Harrow, Eton, Rugby, Winchester and Shrewsbury were represented. We met in my rooms after Hall, which in those days was 4 p.m., anticipating a long meeting. I cleared the tables and provided pens, ink and paper. Several asked me on coming in whether an exam was on! Every man brought a copy of his school rules, or knew them by heart, and our progress in framing new rules was slow.

On several occasions Salt and I, being unprejudiced, carried or struck out a rule when voting was equal. We broke up five minutes before midnight.

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The new rule was printed as "Cambridge Rules", copies were distributed and pasted up on Parker's Piece, and very satisfactorily they worked, for it is right to add that they were loyally kept and I never heard of any Public School man who gave up playing from not liking the rules.

The original Cambridge code no longer survives, but a revised version from the mid-1850's does. It describes a game very similar to modern soccer. Holding, tripping, and pushing opposing players were all prohibited. A player could use his hands only to stop the ball or to catch it and immediately kick it. The goal consisted of two flag posts with a horizontal string stretched between them. And, perhaps most important, 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 such a player to receive a kicked "forward pass" and even try a kick himself, so long as there were at least three opponents between himself and the goal.

The 1848 Cambridge rules and their subsequent revisions opened the door to interscholastic play. However, the English took their good sweet time about it. Charterhouse and Westminster finally played the first interscholastic match in 1863. Not to be stampeded, Cambridge and Oxford waited until 1872 for the first British intercollegiate game.

By that time, the schools had lost their football leadership to the amateur clubs.

Most of these clubs were made up of "old boys" -- alumni of the public schools -- who wished to continue playing football after graduation. Usually the old boys of each club came from the same school and naturally played by whatever rules it used. One of the best known was the Sheffield Football Club, founded in 1855 and associated with the Sheffield Cricket Club and sharing their grounds. Sheffield's players were mostly old boys from Harrow, which strictly forbade handling the ball. They found a clever way to enforce that rule whenever they played a team unused to the Harrow style. Each member of the opponent team -- often a rugged crew of villagers -- was presented with a pair of white gloves and a silver florin which they were made to hold tightly. Merely touching the ball with their hands would leave a telltale smudge, and any attempt to catch it necessitated dropping the coin.

Few clubs were as ingenious as Sheffield in convincing opponents to play by their rules, and, in spite of the Cambridge meeting, most old boys insisted on staying with the tried and true versions of football they'd learned in school. Needless to say, scheduling games and deciding on what rules to would be in force was almost as simple as untying the Gordian knot.

On October 26, 1863, representatives of the London football clubs met to adopt standardized rules at the Freemason's Tavern in Great Queen Street. 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 restricted to upper class, greater London area amateur clubs.

Despite their similarities, the representatives couldn't reach agreement on several points. For example, the majority favored the "dribbling game" earlier adopted at the Cambridge meeting.

However, a vocal minority supported the "carrying game" played at Rugby School. Soon the meeting degenerated into a loud, angry squabble over whether to allow players to run after catching the ball. Upper class young Londoners screamed "Dribble!" and "Carry!" at the tops of their upper class young lungs. The Dribblers had the votes, but the Carriers remained unconvinced.

Another argument developed over whether to allow holding. Still another over tripping.

An unresolvable disagreement exploded over the subject of "hacking". Hacking meant kicking an opponent in the shins in order to convince him to drop the ball. It was supported by the Rugby element as a fitting test of a player's masculinity. A few crass souls suggested that a misdirected hack might settle that issue for once and all.

The outcome of this meeting and several others that followed close on its heels was the formation of the first ever football organization above the club level -- the wittily named Football Association. But, despite this positive step, all was far from sweetness and light. The primary reason for the organizational meeting, to find a set of rules that all football players could agree on, went out the window. Having lost every important vote, the Rugby faction stomped away like so many headstrong children determined to carry the ball and kick each other in the shins.

The split was fundamental. The origin of association and rugby football as separate and specific games, rather than just two among a limitless variety of versions, dates from this series of meetings in late 1863. From that moment, each game would go its own way, each with its own rules, history, and fans.

Rugby Goes Its Own Way

Rugby underwent some changes after establishing itself as a separate game. Although they'd made a big fuss about it, rugby rulemakers soon discarded hacking. Shin-kicking turned out to be less fun than anticipated. They also jiggled around with field size, scoring, and the number of players on a side. Through it all, the game retained the key feature of running with the ball.

There are two versions played today: rugby union and rugby league. The two have slight variations in scoring and field dimensions, but the main difference is that rugby union is an amateur game played by 15-man teams and rugby league is played by 13-man professional teams.

A game starts with a kickoff, like American football. In fact, an American flipping his TV dial might for a moment think he'd tuned in an American game if rugby came up on the screen. The ball, while not so pointed as the U.S. type, is oval-shaped rather than spherical. Although the field is lined differently, the characteristic goal posts stand sentinel at each end. An American viewer would see running, tackling, kicking and lateral passing -- lots of lateral passing. However, after only a brief confusion, he would see enough differences to know he wasn't watching an American game. Even so, he might be enough intrigued to stay tuned.

Probably the most curious feature to Americans happens when the ball goes out of bounds and is put back into play with a "scrum". Most of the players gather into an open-ended huddle that looks

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like nothing so much as a crowd of tavern drunks standing around a juke box. Arms flung over shoulders, heads together, all bent forward as though reading selections, they even sway slightly as though to unheard music. It's all done to push and shove into position to get the ball. When it is tossed into the center of the mob, each team tries to gain control by heeling or kicking it back to its own men.

Once the ball is in play, rugby becomes a fast action game. Players spread out across the field. Everyone runs and tackles like crazy. As soon as the carrier is downed, the ball is heeled back and the action begins again. Forward passing is illegal, but lateral passes and handoffs are so frequent that at times a game appears to be a contest played by butterfingers with a very hot loaf of bread.

Turnovers are nearly continuous, and the game ranges up and down the field virtually without pause for two 45-minute halves. Americans are usually shocked to see that players wear almost no protection. That's a point of pride with rugby men who scoff at U.S. pads and helmets much as the proud redcoats scoffed at the Yankee trenches on Bunker Hill.

The rugby equivalent of a touchdown is called a "try" and counts three points. A team scores by touching the ball down in the opponent's end zone. The oval can be run in, of course, but it can also be punted into the end zone and recovered. The name is very handy because whether a player scores or just misses, his teammates can thump him on the back and shout, "Nice try!"

After making a try a team can try -- that is, attempt -- a conversion which looks like an extra point except no one makes an effort to block the kick. The tough part about the conversion is that it must be kicked from a point straight out into the field from where the try was scored. If that occurred near the center of the goal line, a conversion is no big deal, but on a try made near one end of the goal line, the kicker must choose between a miserable angle or moving so far downfield that he needs a rocket to get the ball to the goal posts. Since the try counts only when the ball is touched down, a player may sometimes cross into the end zone near the corner and then race toward the posts until he is surrounded, only then touching the ball to the turf. A conversion counts two points, almost as much as the try itself, so the extra effort is well worthwhile.

"Goals" can be dropkicked or placekicked and count three points in the amateur rugby union and two in the professional rugby league. A goal from the field is almost always dropkicked on the run and is truly a spectacular play. A penalty goal is a free kick from the field after an opponent has done some no-no.

Although rugby is played all over the world today, its popular center has remained the British Isles. It is likely to stay that way. Americans and Canadians for the most part regard it as primitive football. Much of the rest of the world thinks of it as mutant soccer.

Soccer Spreads

Soccer is, of course, what most of us call association football, the kicking branch of the 1863 split. The popular name developed out of laziness or frugality. Newspapers took to abbreviating "association football" as "assoc". That soon went to "soc" and then

grew back to "soccer". One hesitates to speculate what the name might have become had newspapers chosen a slightly shorter abbreviation.

Aside from its name, association football has seen few changes of any consequence since 1863, remaining the same simple kicking game that endeared it to so many high-spirited, young Englishmen during Victoria's time. Indeed, it would be hard to imagine a team game any simpler. Players can hit the round ball with feet, knees, heads, shoulders, hips, or naughty bits, but never with the hands. One might think of it as a game designed to be played by schmoos. No matter how the ball is propelled, it must go through the goal -- two posts with a crossbar -- to score. This is guarded by a goalkeeper who is given an advantage in that he is the only player on his team who is permitted to catch the ball or bat it with his hands. If the ball gets past the goalkeeper, between the posts, and under the crossbar, one point is scored and everything starts over. Despite its simplicity on the field, association football has had its share of off-field wrangles. In the late 1870's, professionalism began to creep into the game. J.J. Lang, a Scotsman, joined the Sheffield Wednesday team and admitted he was being paid to do it. Soon, others were demanding the same deal. Although many criticized Lang for changing the gentlemanly nature of the game, three factors made professionalism inevitable.

In the first place, paid attendance at games steadily increased. In 1872, a crowd of 2,000 watched the first championship match. By the 1890's, ten times that would have made a disappointing turnout for the final. Ordinary games often drew five figure crowds. This made victory profitable as well as honorable because games involving the most successful teams were best attended. The temptation to improve one's team by adding an extraordinary player or two became irresistible to many.

Secondly, betting on games also increased, making defeat for one's team less appetizing when coupled with a corresponding drop in one's bank account. Had the wagers been confined to fans alone, unhappy losers would still have exerted significant pressure to upgrade teams. However, all the money wasn't risked in the grandstand. Players and managers also bet on their team's chances, sometimes for goodly amounts. One superior player added to a squad at the last moment could tip the balance at favorable odds in a close game, providing a bountiful harvest for lucky backers. Superior players were seldom blind or deaf and usually not dumb either. They recognized their value in good old pound sterling and began demanding compensation in kind.

And that brings us to the third leg of the professional tripod. Association football was no longer a game played almost exclusively by the leisured classes. Particularly in the north, good players were being drawn from working backgrounds. Naturally, they saw nothing shameful in turning a profit from their prowess. Star players were soon being lured from one town to another or across the Scottish border by promises of good jobs and perhaps a little extra cash under the table. J.J. Lang was surely not the first.

Professionalism, then, was the logical culmination of sport's A B C's: attendance, betting, and class. It was a formula that would be repeated with other games in other lands. By the 1880's, soccer was still technically restricted to amateurs and regarded as a

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"gentleman's game" for players with no need to earn their own livings, but flagrant violations of the amateur ideal were common.

The Football Association fumed and fussed. Finally, in 1885 they took action. Despairing of ever eliminating professionalism altogether, they decided at least to restrict it, an application of the old dictum, "if you can't beat 'em, bug 'em!" They passed rules based on those already in force in professional cricket. A pro player had to register as such with the Association, and he had to reside within six miles of the club he played for. Another provision prohibited a player from transferring from one club to another during the season.

These rules gave the pro player little bargaining power with a club concerning his pay. Indeed, he couldn't even threaten to quit to join another team unless the season had ended. Nevertheless, professionalism had arrived for the first time in any kind of football. Players could now accept payment for their services openly and without fear of banishment from the sport if they were discovered.

Meanwhile, association football had been expanding both in the number of clubs playing and the number of spectators watching. Scotland took to the game wholeheartedly, and the first English-Scottish international match was held there in 1872. Fortunately for everybody's egos, the result was a scoreless draw. During the same year, the Football Association established the Challenge Cup as a single-elimination tournament open to all member clubs. In March, the Wanderers became the first to win the cup with a 7-0 victory over the Royal Engineers.

However, unlike rugby, association football was not to remain a primarily English sport. It had happened along at the best of all possible times, for these were the days when the sun never set on the British Empire. Englishmen could be found keeping their upper lips stiff in virtually every corner of the world. No matter how remote

the locale, a couple of old boys would get together and whip up a soccer match. The Buenos Aires Football Club, composed of Englishmen, was founded in 1876. Within a few years clubs were alive and kicking in Denmark, Germany, France, Rumania, Spain, Russia, Italy, Uruguay, and Brazil.

When the natives saw the British whooping and hollering and dribbling all over, there was no holding them back. Pretty soon some of the natives could dribble rings around the wheezing old boys.

Today, soccer is undeniably the world's most popular team sport. It's played in nearly every country on earth, and has been an Olympic event since 1900. Soccer's "World Series" is quite literally just that. The quadrennial World Cup, a sixteen-team tournament pitting qualifying national all-star squads from different nations, attracts tremendous crowds and is televised around the globe.

America has its own soccer enthusiasts. Indeed, the game has grown enormously in the past few years with the establishment of a thriving indoor league. Although an outdoor league has had shaky going, some fans confidently call it the "sport of the future", predicting its appeal will eventually top that of baseball, basketball, and football with Americans. They reason the U.S. sports buffs are not all that different from those in the rest of the world and will finally succumb to soccer's charms.

Perhaps. But, as Henry Luce once cracked, "Time will tell."

American gridiron fans can take solace in the thought that at one time in this country soccer had the field all to itself, so to speak. But Americans were not satisfied with the mix. They tinkered and tuned the game, adjusted it here and there, added this and took away that, and -- lo and behold -- invented American football.