

# A Freendly Kinde of Fight

## The Origins of Football to 1633

By PFRA Research

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Taking potshots at any kind of football is an old custom.

"For as concerning football playing, I protest unto you it may rather be called a freendly kinde of fight, then a play or recreation; A bloody and murdering practise, then a felowly sporte or pastime," wrote Englishman Philip Stubbes in 1583 in "The Anatomie of Abuses," a pamphlet listing all the evil customs of the time that he believed needed abolition before they brought on the End of the World. The poor man must have wept bitterly a few years later when Shakespeare was the rage of London, for Stubbes also found stage plays an abomination. Nevertheless, when fiery Philip launched into a graphic description of football playing, his plain puritan prose rivaled the Bard's stirring iambic pentameter: "For dooth not every one lye in waight for his Adversarie, seeking to overthrowe him & to picke him on his nose, though it be upon hard stones? in ditch or dale, in valley or hil, or what place foever it be, hee careth not, fo he have him down. And he that can serve the most of this fashion, he is counted the only felow, and who but he?" Not content with his harrowing picture of a player having his nose "picked" even though it might be on "hard stones," Stubbes continued ad nauseum: "Fo that by this meanes, sometimes their necks are broken, sometimes their backs, sometimes their legs, sometimes their armes; sometimes one part thrust out of ioynt, sometime an other; sometimes the noses gush out with blood, sometimes their eyes start out; and sometimes hurt in one place, sometime in another."

Nor were all the horrors of football reserved for the loser of a scrimmage. "But whosoever scapeth away the best, goeth not scotfree, but is either sore wounded, craised, and bruseed, fo as he dyeth of it, or else scapeth very hardly. and no mervaille, for they have the fleights to meet one betwixt two, to dashe him against the hart with their elbows, to hit him under the short ribbes with their griped fists, and with their knees to catch him upon the hip, and to pick him on his neck, with a hundred such murdering devices: and hereof groweth envie, malice, rancour, cholor, hatred, displeasure, enmitie, and what not els: and sometimes fighting, brawling, contention, quarrel picking, murder, homicide, and great effusion of blood, as experience daily teacheth."

Stubbes, whose condemnation was more consistent than his spelling, concluded his diatribe with this question: "Is this murdering play, now, an exercise for the Sabaoth day?"

If his description contained even a modicum of truth -- and we know it held a jereboam -- we might expect Philip Stubbes' fellow Englishmen to have responded to his question with a resounding "Nay!" We might expect them to have held playing with footballs as palatable as playing with lepers. We might. But, if we did, we'd be

as far off target as the guy who warned Isaac Newton to stay out from under that apple tree. Although sport puritans thundered against it and fussy English kings outlawed it, although it lumbered itself with a bewildering plethora of rules nee customs, and although its wounded veterans limped along hundreds of English boulevards, football -- like Shakespeare's dramas -- survived and prospered because it spoke to Something Basic in Man's Soul. Or, anyway, it was a lot of fun.

### Kicking Way Back

When Philip Stubbes dipped his 16th Century pen in Old Testament vitriol, football in some form had already been around for a long time. Just how long is open to debate.

According to one school of thought, the origin of football and all other ball games stems from ancient fertility rites. There were no Cro-Magnon sportswriters around to chronicle the Primitive League, but anthropologists, archeologists, and other ologists concerned with matters ancient have pieced together an interesting theory from pottery shards, fossilized grain, old ashes, splintered bones, dusty doohickeys, and the customs of primitive people who still exist in the world today. The ologists point out that representations of the sun are used by many primitives in magic ceremonies to fructify soil and all growing things. Often discs are hung on trees or buried in the ground. Sometimes a ball is used. These primitive men believe the success of their crops depends in some way on how they handle the symbolic sun. Many ologists reason that what is true of today's primitives was often true of people living thousands of years ago.

Sometimes the ball-sun, perhaps only a round stone, was tossed back and forth in a kind of ritual. Soon tribes divided into groups or teams. The ritual began to take on the aspect of a contest with the teams competing for final possession of the sun. Victory could mean bountiful crops, healthy children, success in war, relief from hemorrhoids, and a whole raft of cosmic consequences. Often the contest was conducted east to west -- in the direction the sun moved. Not surprisingly, the ball-sun might first be sprinkled with water to insure rain -- and fumbles.

In some cases, a team tried to move the sun toward a goal, such as a tree, which symbolized growing things. If a goal could be hit with the sun, it meant all that grew would be impregnated with the source of warmth and life. Sometimes the object of the game was to bring the sun into contact with the soil by dropping it into a hole in the ground. But even the throwing of the sun back and forth had magical results. Merely handling the symbol of fertility correctly brought virility and fruitfulness to those who needed it. In other

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words, it wasn't whether you won or lost, but how you played the game.

A related theory, but one with less appeal to the fastidious, suggests that the symbolic object used in play was the severed head of an animal that had been sacrificed. The teams fought for possession in order to bury it in their own ground -- a symbolic act and, at the same time, a practical fertilizer. The next time your favorite quarterback fades to pass, imagine if you will that the object he holds cradled in his hands is the head of an ox. It may give you a whole new perspective on the game.

A great deal of significance -- perhaps too much -- is placed on traces of ancient customs that survive into the modern world. For example, peasants in Devon, England, used to make a great ceremony of kicking a ball across a field after they'd planted potatoes on Good Friday. It's been noted that this was the season when the sun was most needed. Ergo, a symbolic sun ceremony! On the other hand, it could have been simply a way of expressing natural exuberance upon finishing a tiresome but necessary job. Now they had time to play!

These speculations on ancient origins hold a certain fascination and, indeed, may contain more than a kernel of truth. And yet, we should remember that jock antiquarians often compete with each other in assigning earlier and still earlier origins to their favorite games. Only a few sports -- basketball is one -- recognize an official date of inception, leaving the search for beginnings wide open to research, speculation, and imagination. One baseball historian struck out Abner Doubleday by an easy four thousand years when he unearthed the fossilized germ of the diamond game in ancient Egypt. According to his hypothesis, baseball began in a curious ceremony by Egyptian priests wherein those worthies attacked some poor fellows with clubs and proceeded to beat them senseless. The historian found a significant parallel between hitting a baseball with a bat and hitting an Egyptian with a club. We must admit that the relationship is not so clear to most baseballers, historians, or Egyptians.

Using the same kind of reasoning for football, we might discover that the game predates birth, for doesn't a baby "kick" while in the womb? Why, by stretching our thesis only a little, we can decide that football is older than Man himself. Undoubtedly the paramecium that evolved into ichthyostega, then cynognathus, and eventually homo sapiens, first kicked himself loose from the slime with the help of his primordial foot. And, undoubtedly, pigs have wings. In our investigation of football's origins, we may occasionally step a bit out of bounds and cavort with our own club-wielding Egyptians, but we'll leave the paramecium to the zoologist.

## Oriental Origins

Regardless of what they did with bats, the Egyptians certainly did play some kinds of ball games as early as 1800 B.C., but no one has yet suggested that kicking was of any particular significance. It's a key point. Some authorities consider virtually anything done with a ball as a legitimate forebear of football, but most prefer a narrower ancestry, limiting football's progenitors to only those games that stressed kicking the ball.

That archetype of ancestor worship, China, apparently produced the first real kicking game. The Chinese had the habit of kicking

around a round ball stuffed with hair as early as 300 B.C. They called their game "Tsu chu." According to *The Oxford Companion to Sports and Games* "Tsu' may be translated as 'to kick the ball with feet' and 'chu' as 'a ball made of leather and stuffed.'" Nothing ever came of it. They discovered football the way Leif Ericson discovered America -- they knew ABOUT it, but they didn't know what to do WITH it. They failed to develop the activity into anything more than a pleasant pastime for working off aggressions. Supposedly, warriors used it for awhile to stay in shape, but they soon found better ways than Tsuing a chu. One joker suggested that the trouble with Chinese football was that a couple hours after a game was over they felt like playing again.

Although it may have been the model for a Japanese sport called "Kemari" played between 75 and 100 A.D., the Chinese kicking game had no influence on any western developments. With no direct line of descent, even the most rabid Sinophiles shy from crediting the Chinese with inventing our game.

The Indochinese have put in a claim as the originator of an ancient kicking activity, but it's difficult to take them seriously. It happens they had a funerary rite for a dead chieftain in which a sacrificial bull's head was kicked over the body of the fallen leader as a tribute to him. Most westerners would not list this as a game at all, preferring to file it under "bull".

## Greeks, Romans and Brits

In the western world, the ancient Greeks are often considered the first footballists. That's not surprising because some people want to lay everything worthwhile at the Grecian doorstep. They give the Athenians or Spartans or Corinthians credit for thinking up everything from astrology to zoology. Whenever someone else broaches a new idea, these types nod sagely and simper, "The Greeks had a word for it." And, with all their triumphs in art, literature, science, theater, medicine, and government, the Greeks certainly used up a lot of "energeia" coining new words. It's a wonder how they found time to DO half the things they TALKED about.

They had a word for football, all right. But, it was the wrong word. "Harpastron," usually cited as the Greek word for football, meant "handball", we are told. The Greeks were the first anatomists and knew their hands from their feet, their heads from their toes, and various other parts from a hole in the ground. Therefore, unless they were possessed of a peculiarly fey wit, when they called a game handball, you can bet your aesculapius that's what they meant.

John Heisman, better known as a football coach and best known as the namesake for the trophy, insisted in a 1930 article that running was the main feature of harpastron. Whether the game stressed running, throwing, or sitting on the ball until it hatched, most scholars today relegate harpastron, "episkyros," and a half dozen other Greek games to the category of ball games, but not kicking games.

H.A. Harris, perhaps the greatest authority on Greek games, observes that there is no instance in extant Greek literature where a ball is mentioned in conjunction with a foot or even a leg. Additionally, he notes that the Greeks played their games in bare feet, and he speculates rather convincingly on the unhappy effect

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to toes brought into sudden and violent contact with the two-pound, hair-filled sphere of the day. All in all, Harris concludes that the Greeks no more played football than chewed bubble gum. They did enjoy a number of informal ball games involving skills other than kicking. However, these rated much lower with the demos than the more popular sports of chariot racing and interhellenic warfare.

Sad to say, the Greeks were even less successful at inventing peace than they were at inventing football. Year after year, the quarrelsome little states fought angry little wars over one thing or another. No one ever won for long, and nothing was ever settled, but they kept right on killing each other as though the answer was right around the next coroner. Finally, the Romans brought peace to Greece by conquering it in 146 B.C.

The Romans were great conquerors, great lawmakers, great builders, and great thieves. They appropriated anything Greek that looked to be an improvement over whatever they already had. Since the Greeks were megameters ahead of the Romans in everything but conquering, a list of things Greek that became things Roman could fill a coliseum. Included among the general loot were most of the Grecian ball games.

The Roman legions took to the games the way a pig takes to mud. When they weren't busy spreading the Roman peace with their nasty little Roman swords, they loved nothing better than rough and tumble sports, the rougher and tumbler the better. But all their kicking seems to have been about long marches and short rations. About the only thing new they brought to harpaston was an Italian accent, calling it "harpastum." Let's face it, the Romans just weren't all that inventive. If they couldn't go out and steal a good idea, they were pretty much up the Tiber without a paddle. Despite its enormous prestige, Rome was usually a way station in the development of things. They'd swipe an idea, tinker with it, and then let some later age do the hard work.

However, except for the Christians who nagged about how they fed their lions, Rome always got a good press. It even got them the second lead in one of the most outlandish yarns ever tacked onto football's history.

According to this fable, the Romans introduced a kicking game to Britain in 217 A.D. To be specific, the day was Shrove Tuesday which, as any schoolboy knows, is the day before Ash Wednesday and the last day before Lent. On that day, the legend says, a team of locals upset a team of Romans in a football game at Derby. Needless to say, it's an English legend. One might ask why the Britons of 217 A.D. should celebrate a holiday related to Lent a full 380 years before Christianity came to the British Isles. But, why quibble? Obviously, the British are talking through their derbies on this one.

An alternate version is more believable. In this one, the Britons and Romans eschewed games and engaged in serious warfare in 217, with the Britons winning the day -- whatever day it was. Then, MANY centuries later, the Englanders decided to play a football game on Shrove Tuesday to celebrate a famous triumph over their conquerors, much as Americans stage bowl games on New Year's Day.

Despite all the English fog, it's safe to assume that ball games were passed to the Britons by the Romans sometime in the earliest A.D.'s. None of the various activities, however, seems to have incorporated kicking as a crucial element. On the other hand, one must ignore human nature to state that the ball was NEVER kicked. Surely someone along the line took a swipe at the ball with his foot, bare toes be damned! After all, creatures even less inventive than the Romans might think of lifting a leg. The distinction made here is between ball games in which kicking played a casual and therefore insignificant part and games in which application of foot to ball was the primary, or at least, a major method of propelling the object from here to there. As yet, no one has prima facie evidence that the latter ever occurred in the ancient western world.

But, when the Romans went home and fell, they left their games behind for the English to do with as they chose.

Apparently they chose to start kicking.

## Kicking in the Dark

No one ever likes to give the Dark Ages credit for anything. Ever since the Renaissance, folks have sneered about "a time when people weren't very bright." Indeed, the Dark Ages have become the Polish joke of history. It's all very unfair, of course. People of the Ninth Century had just as much gray matter as people of the Twentieth; they were ignorant, but not stupid. Their ignorance was forgivable. When a peasant expected a fire-breathing dragon to come bounding over the hill at any instant and turn him and his family into barbecued spare ribs, could he be blamed for not caring a firkin about reading, writing, and nuclear physics?

Yet, with all their problems, it is still likely that some English peasant in that dark and distant time thought up the first western game to involve kicking as a regular feature.

It's only a semi-educated guess, based on subsequent events and with nary a drop of documentation, but it stands to reason. At the end of the first millennium, as Europe began lightening up, we find reference to peasants playing games in which kicking was used. Now, it's a mortal cinch that no peasant woke up one morning and yelped, "So much for the Dark Ages! Let's play football!" Logically, they had been booting the ball around for years.

By 1,000 A.D., give or take a coon's age, we have an English legend in which the jubilant population of Chester celebrated a different victory over a different conqueror -- the Danes -- by kicking the severed head of a defeated enemy over hill and dale. A slightly less gruesome account substitutes a disinterred skull for the severed head, but this may involve some confusion with the origin of bowling.

Almost no one buys the head story as the beginning of football, although it rings more truthful than the unlikely Briton-Roman Bowl on Shrove Tuesday eight hundred years earlier. Mayhaps the English, in high spirits or under the influence of them, actually played a little "Kick-the-Dane's-Head". That certainly doesn't indicate that they were inventing football right then and there. It's far more likely that the game already existed.

Possibly it was no more than a free-wheeling version of harpastum, but kicking had become an acceptable and important part of the

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peasants' game. In countless British and Irish villages, kicking a ball became a popular annual event. Intervillage matches were common by the 11th Century. To the benefit of weak stomachs and tender toes, more available and more resilient animal bladders stuffed with hair or straw were used rather than Dane heads. The most popular time for a game was, of course, Shrove Tuesday.

"Game" is a nicety. One village tried to force the ball into a neighboring village, perhaps several miles away. No silly, inhibiting rules spoiled initiative and the result was less game and more riot. Each town fielded as many healthy bodies as it could recruit -- sometimes several hundred -- and during the festivities many became considerably less healthy. Kicks, punches, and gouges were delivered to opponents with more will and regularity than to the ball. Property losses matched people losses as chimneys were toppled, fences smashed, animals trampled, and flora flattened. The happy mayhem continued until a goal was scored or until sundown or until no one was able to stand, whichever came first.

In Derby, for example, the folk of St. Peter's Parish defended a prominent gate with the zeal of heaven's own St. Peter defending the pearly portals of Paradise. Meanwhile, they attacked the waterwheel at All Saints Parish as though it represented the Antichrist himself. The unsaintly All Saints reciprocated devilishly.

These village contests, to tell the truth, were no more football as we know it than a back alley brawl is a boxing match. But the analogy bears a closer look. Boxing began with no-holds- barred fights. Football began with these lethal village affairs. No matter what else ensued, kicking was a key part of it.

And, some of the kicks were directed at the ball.

## Into the City

As long as the kicking game stayed out among the hamlets, it remained little more than a curiously homicidal rural custom. But, in the second half of the 12th Century, the "sport" established itself in London. By 1175, an annual competition on Shrove-You-Know-What between students and apprentices gained popularity in the capital among players and spectators alike. The development of the new urban game during the next forty years is obscure, but it must have retained many of its former elements of a free-for-all -- there is even one account of a player being knifed to death by an opponent.

The game was not for the squeamish.

In 1314, Edward II found the whole thing so distasteful that he bestirred his royal self to ban it from London, proclaiming: "Forasmuch as there is great noise in the city, caused by hustling over large balls from which many evils might arise which God forbid, we commend and forbid, on behalf of the King, on pain of imprisonment, such game to be used in the city in future." On the other hand, the English found Edward II rather distasteful himself when he assured Scottish independence by losing the Battle of Bannockburn during the same year. As a monarch, Edward II was a botch. Finally, Parliament forced the thoroughly incompetent king to give up his throne to his son in 1327.

If anyone hoped for a better deal for football from Edward III, the son of a botch, they were sadly disappointed. The newest Edward

was nearly as bad a king as his father and an even worse sports fan. He extended the ban in 1349, ostensibly because the game interfered with his subjects' archery practice. Archery was essential for defense of the realm; football wasn't.

Times continued bad for lovers of the game. Richard II was a better poet than a king and Henry IV was a usurper. Alas! neither liked football.

Small wonder that the game was royally disliked. Its origins were as common as gum under a tavern table. At first it didn't even have a name with any distinction. All the royal edicts called it "ball play" or "playing at ball". The term "football" first appeared in a 1486 document, but it didn't mean a game in which a foot came into contact with a ball. Instead, it meant a game played "on foot" rather than on horse, as was royally-approved jousting. The name also showed that football belonged to the commoners; only the nobility could afford to use horses for games!

The mere fact that so many kings felt compelled to outlaw the merrie game proves it retained its popularity with the populace. No king ever had to issue a proclamation banning something no one wanted to do anyway. Therefore, while rulers kept ruling that football was bad for them, the Great Unwashed remained the Great Unconvinced.

The Puritans were an exception. It really galled them to think that there were people around having fun. Most of all, they objected to playing anything on Sunday. Hence, Philip Stubbes' blast of 1583. More than fifty years earlier, another crab named Sir Thomas Elyot spoke of football as "nothing but beastly fury and extreme violence, whereof proceedeth hurte and consequently rancour and malyce to remayne with them that be wounded."

Henry VIII took time out from marrying, divorcing, and beheading to enact still another law against football. Elizabeth I put out two proclamations threatening imprisonment for playing the game. Not surprisingly, the common folk kept right on playing.

References to the game became more and more common in the writings of the time. Even Shakespeare got into the act. In *King Lear* (Act I, Scene 4), Kent taunts Oswald by calling him a "base football player". And in his *Comedy of Errors* (Act II) are lines that should strike home with every halfback who ever fumbled a slippery pigskin:

*And I so round with you, as you with me,  
That like a football you do spurn me thus?*

By the 17th Century, Shakespeare had written his dramas 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. Football had gained devotees among the nobility!

The handwriting was on the wall despite the warnings on the posters. Even clerics began playing the game. The kings had tried, but they'd been trumped. When rebellious Englishmen insisted on

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playing their outlawed game directly in front of posters proclaiming its ban, things had gone about as far as they could go. The bannings ceased, James I did a naked reverse and told everyone that he'd really liked football all along. In 1633, the Church of

England put in its holy twopence and issued formal approval of playing.

At last, the freendly kinde of fight was legal.