

THE CHAMPAGNE OF FOOTBALL: THE ETON WALL GAME

By R. C. Macnaghten

[Ed. note -- The following article is reprinted from Montague Shearman's book *Football*, rev. ed. London: Longmans, Green, 1899, chap. 3.]

The exact origin of the Eton Wall Game is a matter involved in some obscurity. All that can be known for certain is the somewhat negative fact that the game cannot have existed before the wall from which it takes its name was built. In other words, it must be of comparatively modern origin. This is borne out by the fact that there have not been more than sixty matches between Collegers and Oppidans on St. Andrew's Day, and it is by no means likely that the game existed in anything like its present form much before the institution of those matches, seeing that the vitality and the very existence of the game depend upon that annual contest.

Compared, for instance, with another essentially Etonian game, which has an equally local origin -- namely, the game of fives -- the wall game appears in quite a juvenile aspect. There seems little reason to doubt that when once the College chapel was erected Eton boys must have been irresistibly tempted to 'urge the flying ball' against the walls, which, with ledge and pepperbox complete, were so admirably adapted for the purpose of a game. Hence by gradual improvement there would be finally evolved from the natural architecture of one portion of the chapel a game susceptible of being played with the utmost grace, science, and skill; while by adhering to the general outlines of the original chapel court the game was transplanted, not only to different parts of the neighbouring playing-fields, but also to Oxford, Cambridge, and other places as well, including the rival school of Harrow.

But what makes the wall game unique in the history not only of football but, I should fancy, of all other games, is the fact that it cannot be transplanted. The wall, with its peculiar configuration, is as unlikely to be reproduced in any other part of the kingdom as Windsor Castle itself, and hence it follows that the game is not only essentially Etonian, but essentially restricted to that particular part of Eton which is bounded by the Slough road, where it runs through the middle of the Eton playing-fields. On one side of this road, on the side which is nearest to the river Thames, there runs a lofty wall, and on the river side there is a large meadow or 'playing-field' which runs down to a backwater of the Thames, though it is intersected in one place by a path which runs through the playing-fields parallel to the wall. Now this playing-field is used in winter as a football field, and from time immemorial -- so soon indeed as football was first played at Eton -- it was probably used for this purpose.

The field itself is, as we have said, bounded by this lofty wall (which, as the Slough road has been artificially raised, is several feet higher on the side which faces towards the river), and accordingly it would naturally occur to the players to use the wall itself as the left-hand boundary (looking from the College), as this

THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 10 Annual (1988)

would only necessitate one artificial boundary being provided, namely, on the right-hand side. But it is perfectly obvious that, since on the one side you have instead of an artificial boundary a solid and lofty wall, quite a new element is introduced into the game. On such a side-line, for instance, the ball can never be out of play unless it is actually kicked over the wall. Again, by kicking the ball sideways against the wall and taking it on from the rebound, a player could get past an adversary in a way perfectly impossible on the other side-line; while it would probably frequently happen that an unsuccessful attempt at this man_K_uvre would lead to both players being jammed up against the wall with the ball between them, and if they were each 'backed up' or followed closely by more players of their own side, a regular bully would be formed against the wall, which in itself would lead to a wholly different kind of game.

Such a state of things would in time necessarily be found inconvenient, and seriously interfering with the genius and character of the 'field' game, especially as the tendency would be for both sides to bring the ball towards the wall instead of keeping to the centre of the field, in order to gain the artificial advantage of being derived from passing the ball to the wall and receiving it on the rebound. In fact, not only would the natural course of the game be changed, but its very existence would be seriously threatened.

At the same time, the remedy would be simple and obvious. By cutting a line a few feet from the wall and parallel to it, the wall as a new and disturbing factor in the game would be altogether eliminated, and there would no longer be any tendency to take the ball to one side-line rather than to the other. The old and original game would thus be restored; but at the same time there would be left a space between the new side-line and the wall itself which would be admirably adapted for the practice of those tactics which had proved so attractive but disturbing a feature in the original game. By playing in this new and confined space not only would the original tactics be amplified and improved upon, but new features would gradually be introduced; while in particular so far as scoring was concerned there would not only be opportunity, but absolute necessity for the development of new and original conditions, in whatever direction the fancy or genius of the players might lead, wholly unfettered by any other restriction than the actual situation and conformation of the wall itself.

Under some such conditions the wall game, as distinct from its more commonly played parent game, would spring up, and its development would naturally be guided by the actual features of the locality. Now, one of the most striking of these is a side wall, terminating and running at right angles to the wall itself, this side wall being the lower boundary of a garden attached to one of the masters' houses. To give the occupier means of exit on the playing-fields there is a door situated at about the centre of this shorter wall, and this has accordingly been utilised to form one of the goals. At the other end of the wall proper there is no side wall or anything similar, but, on the other hand, there is an enormous elm-tree, one of the many which add so much to the beauty of the Eton playing-fields. In default of any more convenient object this tree has been utilised for the other goal, by the simple process of chalking off on its lower portion a space in size approximately equivalent to the door already mentioned. Each of the goals is thus some distance outside the narrow arena of actual play.

We have thus arrived at the outlines of a very distinct and definite game. In the first place we have a long and lofty wall, which becomes the centre of a new game by the simple process of cutting a line parallel to it, the long and narrow space (about 120 yards long by 6 yards wide) thus enclosed being the actual

THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 10 Annual (1988)

arena of play. This space is further bounded at one end by a side wall, and at the other by cutting a short line from the wall to the long line which has been made to run parallel with it. The goals have been provided by two natural objects, namely a door, and a tree, each, as we have said, lying outside the actual arena of play; while the centre of the ground, the place where the first 'bully' (or squash) forms down, is indicated by certain marks in the wall itself. The mere number of the players is regulated by the number obtaining in the field game, and we have therefore eleven players on each side; while the ball itself is the same in size and shape as that used in the field game, and differs only in its exceptional strength, which is absolutely necessary from the very severe treatment which it undergoes when being knelt or stood upon in the proximity of the wall.

So far everything is comparatively simple; it is in the subsequent development of the functions of the different players, and in the scientific and highly specialised character of the rules, particularly in regard to 'calx-play' (a term which will in due course be more fully explained, but which may for the present be roughly defined as play in the vicinity of either of the goals), that the genius of the wall game consists.

Perhaps there is no game in the world which gives such varied opportunities to every kind of strength and agility as the wall game.

Thus the 'bully' (or solid body which works actually against the wall) consists on each side of five players, and these five players are again subdivided into 'walls' (three in number) and 'seconds' (two in number).

The first duty of the 'walls' (as the name implies) is to form up against the wall itself. They make, in fact, the centre or nucleus around which the whole 'bully' is concentrated, and hence one of the chief requisites in a 'wall' is great physical strength, combined with height, in order that he may be able, if necessary, to shoulder his adversary away from the wall. Six feet and over is a good working height for an average 'wall,' and though there have undoubtedly been some exceedingly good 'walls' who have not exceeded 5 ft. 10 in. in height, and who have been comparatively small and light, yet as a general rule it may be stated that the bigger, stronger, and heavier the 'wall' can be, the better. For this reason alone the Oppidan 'walls' usually consist of the biggest and heaviest members of the Eton (rowing) eight, and very formidable opponents they prove.

At the same time, though weight combined with physical strength is so great a desideratum in a 'wall,' it is by no means everything. A small but sturdy 'wall' who 'plays with his head' is worth infinitely more to his side than a mere vigorous but unscientific giant.

It is in this respect that the Collegers have an advantage which compensates for the average excess in weight and strength generally possessed by their opponents. A College 'wall,' who has invariably been trained to the game from his first football half, is nothing if not scientific, and obviously the intricacies of calx-play, and even the more regular man_K_uvres in the rest of the game, can be more readily made use of by such a player than by one who has perhaps only played the game for the one term during which he figures as a member of the Oppidan eleven. When, therefore, a College 'wall' possesses, as is not infrequently the case, great weight and strength, and when in addition to his mere scientific knowledge of the game he also 'uses his head,' he becomes an antagonist¹ such as the Oppidans, with their short space for preparation, can hardly match. Indeed, it is owing to this technical advantage in 'walls' and 'seconds' that the College eleven are, on the whole, fairly well able to hold their

THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 10 Annual (1988)

own. So far as the other players are concerned, though the Collegers derive some slight advantage from longer experience and more technical skill, it is far outweighed by the magnificent choice of material which the Oppidans possess for 'outsides' and 'behinds,' from the best members of the school field eleven.

In his playing costume a 'wall' presents an extraordinary spectacle. This is, indeed, necessitated by the roughness of the wall itself, against which it would be impossible to play in ordinary football clothes without receiving serious injuries. The first object which the 'wall' has to protect is his head (including in particular his ears), and accordingly he wears a thickly-padded wall cap, a sort of skull-cap with pendants (also thickly padded) which cover both his ears and meet and are fastened under the chin. Over his ordinary football shirt he wears an enormous and specially elaborated sweater, termed a 'wall-sack,' which is also thickly padded at the points where he is most likely to come into violent contact with the wall. With strong trousers, probably turned in beneath his socks, thick leather gloves on his hands, and a pair of heavy boots, his costume is complete; and the result is a tout ensemble which requires to be seen to be at all realised.

We have now three 'walls' on each side, pushing against each other, and each in direct contact with the wall. Next to these form down on each side the two 'seconds,' who are only removed from the wall itself by the space of one intervening 'wall.' The function of the 'second' is to some extent similar to that of the 'wall' -- namely, to push against the opposing bully; but though great strength is essential, a very different figure is required. The ideal 'second' should probably not be taller than 5 ft. 6 in., but should be a model of sturdy and compact strength, with a neck like a bull, and with legs and back alike capable of long and sustained effort. Whereas the 'wall' maintains a practically erect position from the loins downwards, the 'second's' attitude is more nearly horizontal, and he should be able, if necessary, to force his way through the bully with the ball between his legs. In calx-play he has other particular functions in connection with 'getting' and 'stopping' 'shies;' but in ordinary play the moment the ball comes out of a bully he should be able to use his legs almost as quickly and effectively as a regular 'outside.'

The 'second,' like the 'wall,' wears a 'wall-cap,' but in his case a 'wall-sack' is not necessary, as he is not brought into actual contact with the wall.

With the 'walls' and 'seconds' together the bully is complete, and we now have to consider the 'outsides,' who take by far the most important part in the general game apart from the actual bully.

The three 'outsides' are particularly composed of third, fourth, and line. 'Third' stands just outside the bully (in the same position as 'corner' in the field game); next to and parallel with him is 'fourth;' while the 'line' completes the trio, standing just inside the side-line and parallel to 'third' and 'fourth.'

The general function of all three players is the same -- namely, whenever the ball comes within reach to kick it outside the line in the direction of the enemy's goals; but even in this case the different positions require players of slightly different calibre. The better all three are at the field game the better 'outsides' will they probably be; but 'third,' in particular, should not only be extremely quick and possessed of an unerring eye, but he should also be, if possible, big and sturdy besides. A good batsman who is also a good 'forward' in the field game generally makes a good 'third;' and the Hon. Alfred Lyttelton may be particularly cited as an example of what such a player ought to be.

The 'fourth,' like the 'third,' should be extremely quick and very strong. In one way, indeed, this position may be regarded as more difficult than that of 'third,'

THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 10 Annual (1988)

inasmuch as 'fourth' does not get so uninterrupted a view of what is going on in the bully.

In the 'line' great strength is not so absolutely necessary as lightning swiftness in movement, and in particular the ability to 'kick out' with either foot. The one thing which no 'outside' should under any circumstances do is to give 'a cool runner:' in other words, his first care in kicking the ball must be to kick it outside the line, so as by no possibility to give a free kick (or 'cool runner') to one of the opposing 'behinds.' An 'outside's' duty, in fact, is not to run the ball down by a succession of kicks, but to give one lightning kick which shall send the ball outside the line in the direction of the enemy's goals.

Of the three 'behinds,' the post of 'flying-man' is by far the most onerous; indeed, the position, from a defensive point of view, is the most important of any at the wall game. The 'flying-man' stands a few feet behind the bully, and close to the wall itself, and whenever the ball comes out of a bully towards him it is his duty to kick it in a slanting direction over the bully and 'outsides,' so that it may fall outside the line in the direction of the enemy's goals. On the exceeding difficulty of this position I cannot do better than quote from a letter from Mr. Phillip Bridges,¹ a member of three victorious elevens and an ideal 'second,' with an unrivalled knowledge in regard to every point of the game. He writes: --

As for 'flying-man,' it has always been a subject of admiration to me how good a player here, in a very confined space, with a perfect torrent of humanity rushing upon him, not merely the rush of assailants, but also the rout of his own bully and 'outsides' forced backwards, could make the academically correct kicks, correct both in height and obliquity, which one did see made time after time.

The Hon. E. Lyttelton (now Head-master of Haileybury) and P. J. de Paravicini may be particularly mentioned as unusually brilliant 'flying-men' in their respective years.

The 'long-behind' stands about ten yards behind 'flying-man,' but close to the line itself; while the 'goals' stands at a similar distance behind the 'long-behind,' but close to the wall and in a straight line behind his own 'flying-man.' Their duties are comparatively simple -- namely, to kick the ball as far as they can outside the line in the direction of the enemy's goals. A good eleven by avoiding 'cool runners' should give the enemy's 'long behind' and 'goals' very little to do; and as a matter of fact the few kicks which either get in a match are generally given by an opposing 'wall' or 'second,' who has not been trained so carefully or had so much practice in 'kicking-out' as his 'outsides' or 'behinds.'

The absolute necessity of 'kicking-out' becomes apparent when we come to consider the rules of play, of which the most important is that whenever the ball is kicked out of play the bully is formed not opposite to the place where it goes over the line, but opposite to the place where it subsequently stops (or is touched by one of either side or even by a bystander). Suppose, for instance, that a 'long-behind' is given and avails himself of a 'cool runner.' The actual place at which the ball goes over the side-line may be only three or four feet from him, but if he should succeed in kicking the ball forty or fifty yards outside the line and in the direction of the enemy's goals, the bully will be formed opposite that spot. In three good kicks of this kind the ball might be brought from one end of the field right into the enemy's calx.

THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 10 Annual (1988)

The game, which lasts for an hour, commences with a bully in the middle. The first 'wall' on one side, backed up by his two companions, forms down underneath his opponent, who is similarly supported by his colleagues, and the leading 'second' on that side also forms down underneath his opponent, each being backed up by his supporter. This process is reversed in alternate bullies.

The ball is put into the bully by the umpire, and must go in straight between the two leading 'walls' and touch the wall itself. The moment it has so touched the wall play commences, and if either side think they can force the opposing bully back, they 'hold' the ball (i.e. endeavour to keep it in the bully), in which case their opponents, especially if they be strong in 'outsides,' will endeavour to turn it out.

The moment the ball comes out there is a furious rush of the 'outsides' in whose proximity it has come -- a rush in which the various members of the bully, as soon as they can get disentangled, take a vigorous and eager part; and for a few brief seconds there is an animated succession of lightning kicks and charges, 'walls,' 'seconds,' and 'outsides' mingling in such a joy of battle as few other games can afford.

A good 'loose bully' is indeed the finest sight in the wall game, and largely compensates for the weariness entailed by any lengthened 'holding' of the ball. It is in such a case that an 'outside's' nerve, alertness, and judgment are tried to the uttermost. Thirsting as he is to be on the ball, he must not on the one hand leave his own place, while on the other the moment the ball is within striking distance he must be on it, and if possible deliver, amidst the surging eddy of friends and foes, such a swift and well-placed kick as shall land it far from the turmoil outside the line and well on the way towards the enemy's goals. Mr. W. G. Grace once described Mr. Alfred Lyttelton's batting as 'the champagne of cricket;' could he have seen that gentleman in the middle of a loose bully, he might not less appropriately have termed this feature of the wall game 'the champagne of football.'

With bullies and loose bullies intermingled, the game continues until the ball gets within the neighbourhood of either calx, a term which must now be explained.

At a distance of some thirty feet from either end of the wall a chalk line (calx in Latin: hence the name) is marked on the wall from the summit to the ground, and the small space of the arena at each end included in these limits is called 'in calx.' The moment the ball gets 'in calx' at either end a point can be obtained named a 'shy,' and the simplest method (from a technical point of view) of obtaining such a shy is as follows.

Let us suppose the bully to have been formed a few paces outside calx, so that the defending 'flying-man' is within the calx limit. The bully breaks; a loose bully takes place, from which the ball rolls to the 'flying-man,' who at the same moment is charged, say, by the attacking 'third.' Should that 'third' succeed in getting the ball away from the 'flying-man,' he takes it straight to and against the wall, gets his outside foot underneath it (his face turned towards the enemy's goals), so that the ball is just off the ground, resting simultaneously on his foot and against the wall, and then touching the ball with his hand calls 'Got it.'

The moment he has uttered those words he is free from attack, the umpire hurries up, and if the ball is properly off the ground and touching both foot and wall correctly he calls 'Fair shy.' The player immediately runs to the boundary line and with one hand throws the ball at the goals (door or tree as the case may be). It is, however, exceedingly difficult to get a goal in this manner, because the

THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 10 Annual (1988)

defending eleven are allowed to run out and stop the ball from hitting the goal with their hands or any part of their bodies. Hence for all practical purposes the 'shy' may be said to be the real 'point' which gives victory in the wall game; and probably not more than two goals (A goal at the wall counts more than any number of 'shies.') are obtained in the whole course of an average season. In the whole history of the game there has only been one real 'goal- thrower' -- namely J. J. Mordaunt, the cricketer. He developed a capacity quite unique in this respect, throwing many goals during the course of his Eton career, and one memorable one on St. Andrew's Day. A goal can also be kicked from any part of the arena of play, but this is very seldom done, owing to the smallness of the two objects to be aimed at.

The above is the theoretically simplest way of getting a 'shy;' but as a matter of fact it is very seldom that a player is sufficiently unimpeded to get such a 'run-down shy.' What usually happens is this. Whenever either side succeeds in kicking the ball so far down towards the enemy's goals that the succeeding bully must necessarily be formed within the calx limit, such a bully is termed a 'bully-in-calx,' and the attacking eleven, if they can, after the ball has been put in, succeed in getting it up against the wall in the manner already described, obtain a 'shy.' Under these new conditions the ball may be got up on the outside foot of one of the attacking side, and touched by any other member of that team, provided that they are facing in the proper direction -- i.e. away from their own goals.

The bully, however, is formed differently in calx. In this it is the object of the attacking bully to bring the ball slightly back towards their own goals in order to get a shy; while it is also the object of the defending bully to similarly draw the ball back (in order in 'bad1 calx' to take it behind their own line and touch it, in which case they get a kick-off, and in 'good calx' to send it as a 'cool runner' to their own 'flying-man,' who is stationed for that purpose behind their bully; 'bd calx' is the tree end, and 'good calx' the door end. or two).

The operation is thus described by C. W. Foley:

The side who have forced the ball into the calx have the advantage of forming down under; one of their players, called a 'getter,' forms down with his head to the wall, and has with his foot to raise the ball when placed in the bully against the wall; another forms down behind him, and has to prevent the opposite side drawing or 'fucking' it out (these two are backed up by the heavy weights of the side); another, called a 'toucher,' has to assist the 'getter,' and when the ball is off the ground and against the wall, and resting on his own foot or on that of one of his own side, to touch it and claim a 'shy.'

The great object of every wall game is to enable the players to eventually take part in the great match of 'Collegers and Oppidans' on St. Andrew's Day. The preparation which the opposing teams receive is very different, as are the numbers from which they have to choose. The total number of Collegers is 70, whereas the Oppidans considerably exceed 900; but while the former practice the game during the whole of their Eton career, the latter, owing to the fact that there is only one wall available, rarely play more than a year or two. And it is chiefly this superiority in opportunities of practice which enables the College eleven to show a good front on St. Andrew's Day.

The field itself is a pretty sight on that day (with the Oppidan eleven arrayed in their colours of purple and yellow in broad stripes, and their rivals in purple and

THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 10 Annual (1988)

white in narrow stripes), while the game itself is unusually 'fast' owing to the whole arena being covered with sawdust and a brand new ball being used. At some distance from and parallel to the side-line a boundary line is staked off, along the whole length of which members of the school congregate in crowds, besides numerous old Etonians and other visitors. The top of the wall is also lined with spectators. At 12.30 punctually the ball is put in, and thenceforth at intervals during the whole match shouts of 'Collegers!' 'Oppidans!' arise, the babel when either eleven is in calx being deafening. In that brief form of excitement, indeed, the whole vitality of the wall game is centred; and the moment the ball rolls over the line, after the College clock has struck half- past one, the season may be said to be over.