The Development of the American Scrimmage System: A Discussion

By Ian Speers

The development of the American scrimmage system in the early years of the game marked the first significant departure of American football from its Rugby parent, and has had a lasting effect upon the American game since that time, and would later have a similar effect upon Canadian football. The secondary historical accounts of the development of this innovation are surprisingly brief, giving the impression that the point of divergence of the American game from Rugby can be dated to 12 October 1880: the day that Walter Camp persuaded the American Intercollegiate teams to accept the following "snap-back" rule, which he is alleged to have drafted personally:

> A scrimmage takes place when the holder of the ball, being in the field of play, puts it down in front of him and puts it in play (while on-side) by--
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> 1st, kicking the ball;
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> 2nd, by snapping it back with the foot.
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> The man who first receives the ball from the snap-back shall be called the quarter-back, and shall not then rush forward with the ball under penalty of a foul.

This rule has lately been interpreted as the sole innovation of Walter Camp, and is reported in most recent histories as marking the first departure of American football from the game of Rugby Union. By eliminating the old-style Rugby scrum and replacing it with the more open scrimmage system, many historians have argued that Camp single-handedly directed American football away from its English parent. From personal research experience with Canadian accounts of the American style of play prior to this date, I believe that this account is a dramatic oversimplification that disregards the revolutionary nature of American football in the late-1870s.

The Canadian perspective of the development of the American game provides some insights that might otherwise be overlooked by American football historians. Annual series between Harvard and Montreal clubs, and two between Michigan and University of Toronto, provided significant cross-over between the two countries' games. More importantly, the game played by the Canadian clubs was for all practical purposes pure Rugby Union. Thus, where American reports of games may occasionally fail to mention a change in style that might have been well known to the American sports fans of the day, Canadian observers were more apt to note divergences in the style played of the teams from south of the border. American football history also tends much more to rely on secondary sources, given their greater abundance when compared to the literature available on the Canadian game. Canadian sources must therefore be taken as serious pieces of evidence in explaining the evolution of the American game. More importantly, the evidence therein that applies to the American game must be reconciled with the accepted history of the southern game.

To understand the development of the American-style scrimmage, one must first understand the nature of the Rugby scrummage of the 1870s. The fact that the game of Rugby, including the scrimmages, has changed substantially since that time has been lost on past American football historians. The scrum rule adopted by the Rugby Union upon its foundation in 1871 read as follows:

> A "scrummage" takes place when the holder of the ball being in the Field of Play puts it down on the ground in front of him and all who have closed round on their respective sides endeavour to push their opponents back and by kicking the ball to drive it in the direction of the opposite goal line.

The goal of a properly-run English scrimmage was to drive the ball through the opposing massed body of forwards: an often brutal undertaking of almost two dozen men kicking furiously at one another, occasionally making contact with the ball. When the ball was finally driven through the scrum, it would generally be taken up by a back, who would then run with the ball until tackled; this would then be followed by a subsequent scrummage, and so forth. Lateral passing played a lesser role in the game than it does now, thus the scrum was an integral part of the Rugby Union game of the 1870s.

The introduction of a Rugby-based game to American colleges is well documented in the Harvard-McGill contests of 1874. Likewise, the formal adoption of the snap from scrimmage in 1880 is also well known even to many casual students of football history. The changes in the conduct of the game in the intervening years remains somewhat obscure, and has perhaps led to the conclusion that Walter Camp's introduction of the snap-back occurred in a vacuum.

The Harvard-McGill contests of 1874 are well known to many as marking the introduction of Rugby to the United States. As early as the following year, Harvard had already diverged somewhat from the closed scrimmage. The following was written by R.D. McGibbon of McGill University, and appeared in the Toronto *Globe* of 8 November 1875:

> …The only way to [avoid close scrimmaging] is for any team to entirely avoid these by simply putting no men into them, the consequence of which will be that the side which enters the scrimmage *en masse* will mutually upset one another, and their opponents will almost invariably secure possession of the ball. This was the course which the Harvard team adopted in the match against the Montreal Club, and to this fact may be attributed their success.

The match against the "Montreal Club" to which McGibbon refers is presumed to be the 23 October 1875 contest between Harvard and All Canada, the latter being represented only by players from Quebec teams, one of whom was McGibbon. A letter in the Toronto *Mail* of 22 October 1880 from Walter H. Perram describes the formations used by Harvard in 1876, suggesting further development from the previous year. Perram was in a position to know about such matters, as he had played for both All-Canada teams in their matches that year against Harvard:

> Harvard…played two men forward, and it was their place to kick the ball behind them to a player, who picked it up and passed it still farther back to a good runner, who immediately started out with three or four good men in his wake; as soon as he was collared he tossed it back to the next man, who in turn took up the running, passing the ball as soon as caught. Any man who has played the Rugby Union rules in England will see at once that this was mere handball--not a violation of the Rugby Union rules but a different interpretation of them.

This formation tends somewhat more toward later rules of American football than Rugby Union. In the "scrummage"--already beginning to resemble the more open scrimmage--the role of the forwards has already been altered to their trying to heel the ball backward, instead of driving the ball through their opponents. With only two men entering the scrum, the length and harshness of the tussles could not help but be reduced, and men would be freed up from this engagement to spread around the field and permit a more open style of play. A similar formation may be found in a report of the University of Toronto v. Michigan game in the *Mail* of 3 November 1879:

> The first scrimmages showed that Michigan intended playing the open or Harvard formation instead of the forwards. Forming a regular scrimmage, they simply line out while one of their number passes the ball out at the side or behind to someone of the second line. Our men not being up to this formation, lost the first scrimmage...

One therefore comes to 1880: the year of Camp's supposed innovation, and therefore what should (by conventional thinking) mark the first exposure of the Canadian players and observers to a distinctly American game. Any such exposure should have come some time after 12 October: the date Camp's rule was adopted. Instead, the players at Toronto began experimenting with what they considered to be the American style of play some days *before* Camp had gained acceptance of his "innovative" snap-back rule.

The Toronto *Mail* of 7 October outlined a hope that Harvard might see fit to play a Toronto club later in the season, and suggested that "a lesson should be learnt from our cousins across the border, and that is the abolition of the scrimmages altogether and the adoption of what is known as the 'open formation'."

(By 1880, many Canadian reporters had corrupted the word "scrummage" into "scrimmage": the word therefore has no deeper meaning, as some might initially believe.) A series of letters followed over the ensuing days, speaking for both sides of what is explicitly noted as a distinctly American style of play.

Meanwhile, Toronto football clubs began trying their hands at the open game, in an abortive experiment which would be abandoned by the middle of November in favour of the Rugby style of play. The first formal Toronto game of this style was played on 14 October between Toronto FC and Upper Canada College; the *Mail* of the following day explicitly suggests from its criticisms of the participants that there were already established tactics in the "open formation" game:

> The placing of the teams was also not as suitable as it might have been. The recognized position of the "open formation" game is with two backs, five half-backs, one quarter-back to seize the ball as it comes from the scrimmage, one scrimmager, and the rest lined out "forward." The half-backs are advanced in the centre so that the ball may be thrown from the centre men to the sides without danger of "throwing forward." A recognized feature of the game is also the kicking, in preference to running, of the half-backs.

The above evidence presents a significant challenge to the accepted historical development of the American scrimmage system. A matter of days before the 1880 Intercollegiate convention, a Toronto newspaper mater-of-factly noted that the American style of play had abandoned the English scrummage system. This contention is supported by independent evidence, specifically the description of the Michigan-Toronto game and Walter Perram's account of Harvard in 1876. Secondly, a nameless reporter in Toronto, composing his copy some two days after Walter Camp is supposed to have single-handedly sent American football permanently away from its Rugby roots, already had a concept of a game strategy and player alignment that is often attributed as arising from Camp's "snap-back".

This "open formation" was no minor tinkering with the game of Rugby, but rather something that heralded the emergence of a distinct game. As a result of the opening up of the scrum, the men who had previously been entangled in that churning mass of humanity were now free to act as "wings" of the scrimmage, alternately protecting their own backs or rushing their opponents' backfield. This predecessor of the present offensive and defensive lines permitted more complex formations and passing strategies than was possible when all of the forward players were locked in a scrummage. In this development, I believe that a distinct American game of football had emerged well prior to the 1880 Intercollegiate convention.

That the "open formation" American style was materially different from Rugby Union can be shown by a letter of A. G. Guillemard, at the time the President of the English Rugby Union. Guillemard was sent clippings from the Toronto *Mail*--most probably including the above description--describing the open formation, and his response was printed on 14 February 1881:

> Much of the spirit and pluck of forward play is lost if no properly formed scrummage follows the holding of the ball, but instead of it, the practice of "open formation" is had recourse to. To drive the ball through the ranks of opponents requires strength, skill, and good foot-work, all of which are sacrificed if no proper scrummage is formed.

I believe that it can therefore be established that a distinct American game, materially different from the proper Rugby Union style, had already developed prior to Camp's snap-back "innovation" at the 1880 Intercollegiate Conference. Indeed, after the first 1880 encounter between Harvard and Montreal Britannia, a game observer from Montreal scarcely noted the substance of the new rule:

> The inter-Collegiate Convention having passed a rule that the "snap-backer", as he is called, i.e., the man who catches the ball as it is thrown back from the scrimmage, should not run with the ball himself…
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> (Montreal *Gazette*, 27 October 1880)

The "innovation" of the new formations and method of putting the ball in play attracted minimal interest because the Montrealers had seen something resembling it for years. The only innovation the reporter notes is a requirement that the quarterback hand the ball off to another player, something which can therefore not be taken as a part of the pre-1880 strategy of American football.

To understand more fully what may have happened with the development of the scrimmage rule, a passage from Walter Camp's 1891 instructional book, *American Football*, provides a good description of the evolution of the American system:

> The feature of the American game in distinction from the English, just as it was within a year from the time of the adoption of the sport, the *outlet of the scrimmage*.
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> In this lies the backbone to which the entire body of American football is attached. The English half-backs stand outside the scrimmage, and when the ball pops out it is their duty to seize it and pass it out to a three-quarter, who runs with it. The American quarter-back stands behind the scrimmage and gives a signal, immediately after which he knows the ball will come directly into his hands to be passed for a run or a kick…
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> The Americans started with the English scrimmage, kicked at the ball, and pushed and scrambled for a season, until it was discovered that a very clever manifestation of the play was to let the opponents do the kicking--in fact, to leave an opening at the proper moment through which the ball would come, and a man a few feet behind this opening could always get the ball and pass it while the men who kicked it were still entangled in the scrimmage. After a little of this, no one was anxious to kick the ball through, and the rushers began to roll the ball sidewise along between the lines. Then almost immediately it was discovered that a man could snap the ball backwards with his toe, and the American outlet was installed.

Reading this early account from Camp's pen--written long before panegyrists had styled him the "Father of American Football"--gives a far different view of the development of the scrimmage: one which reconciles the Canadian sources far better than the historical account that would later emerge. Far from being a supremely radical innovation, the "snap-back" rule codified in 1880 represented the final stage in the evolution of the American scrimmage system away from that of the Rugby scrum.

Parke Davis took the view in his 1911 book on intercollegiate football history that the 1880 rule was part of an evolutionary process: "It is true that in defining the scrimmage the convention did not invent it, but merely extended to it the recognition of the rules. The play itself had been evolving gradually through the genius of the collegians in actual play" (p. 76). Davis, however, suffered from the misconception that heeling out of a Rugby scrum was an accepted practice in the 1870s (p. 68); he therefore failed to appreciate the full extent to which this development, and the consequent elimination of the massed scrummage, led to the divergence of American football from Rugby. Davis also failed to connect the introduction of the heel-out with the opening of the scrimmage to form forward wings. Yet modern histories of the early development of American football invariably point to 12 October 1880 as the precise moment that the scrimmage was extracted from Walter Camp's mind and incorporated into the rulebook (see Bibliographical Note).

This reappraisal solves a significant problem that has been entirely ignored by most American football historians: why did the Intercollegiate Conference so willingly accept the extreme innovation of the snap-back, when it had for two years running opposed the reduction of players from fifteen to eleven men a side? Simply put, it accepted the snap-back because it was not entirely innovative, but rather a formal recognition of and development along a continuum that had already caused the game to diverge from English Rugby in no small substance.

The American Intercollegiate teams might well have adopted the Rugby Union rules *verbatim*, and used them prior to 1880--as almost all sources imply--but the evidence herein presented strongly suggests that the application of this rule bore no resemblance to the Rugby Union concept of a scrummage, and had already set American football on its divergent course well before Walter Camp's 1880 "snap-back" rule was introduced.

The matter of whether a *de facto* principle of possession also antedates the 1880 Conference still needs to be addressed. Specifically, did the "open formation" as used prior to 1880 give the team that had held the ball before being tackled the right to heel the ball out of the scrimmage, without the risk of the opposing team gaining possession.

The nature of the open scrimmage under a scrummage rule does leave the team being tackled in an advantageous position: the player who had been tackled was required to place the ball on the ground in front of himself, and could presumably (albeit speculatively) heeled the ball back immediately upon so placing it, thus effectively eliminating the possibility of the other team gaining possession. If such were the case, the absolute importance of the 1880 "snap-back" rule in the development of the American game becomes somewhat lessened.

The sources at my disposal--both those contemporary ones from Canada and secondary accounts of recent scholars--provide no definite insight into this matter. I therefore leave this to another researcher--one who has better access to the pertinent American sources. It remains possible that some colleges continued with a more traditional scrummage prior to 1880--the above evidence admittedly only applies directly to Harvard and Michigan. At the very least, I believe that the above evidence and argument shows that a serious critical reassessment is required of the development of American football up to and including 1880, as the current authorities are somewhat deficient in the specifics of that time period.

Bibliographical Note

For the history of Rugby Union football, see O.L. Owen. *The History of the Rugby Football Union.* (London: Playfair, 1955), which includes early codifications of the Laws of the Game. There is still no good systematic study of Canadian football in this era, although the author is presently engaged in writing a history of football in Ontario prior to 1892.

A masterful account of the early decades of American football can be found in Parke H. Davis. *Football: The American intercollegiate game.* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1911), although specific criticisms of the book are noted above.

Secondary accounts expressing the traditional view of the development of the American scrimmage include Alexander M. Weyand. *The Saga of American Football* (New York: Macmillan, 1955); PFRA "Camp and His Followers: American Football 1876-1889. (see www.footballresearch.com); and John Sayle Watterson. *College Football*. (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins UP, 2000). Watterson's grasp of rule development in this era is quite suspect, as he has inexplicably formed the opinion that the 1882 innovation of a system of three downs for five yards was inspired by Canadian football--despite the fact that no Canadian Union adopted any such rule prior to 1902!

David M. Nelson. *Anatomy of a Game*. (Newark: U of Delaware P., 1994) provides a detailed account of the annual developments in the American college rules from the 1870s through to the 1990s. Its description of the consequences of the principle of possession are quite detailed (pp. 47-48), and I would refer the curious to that account. Nelson does make general comments that suggest the evolutionary nature of the American scrimmage in the 1870s, although they remain generalised and do not adequately address the specifics of its development (see pp. 45-46). Sadly, Nelson's untimely death while still revising his manuscript may have played some part in this deficiency.

Ian Speers, 6 March 2001, Toronto