

The History of Football By Frederick Maxwell

Most Americans do not understand football's mystique and worldwide popularity. Yet, such a mystique is quite apparent; the game is played without the use of the hands, which separates football from almost all other sports. Hands with their opposable thumbs tend to dominate all aspects of most sports but not in football. Hand usage makes ball playing trite with a few common procedures like catching and throwing. In football, techniques are far more complex. Feet orchestrate the game with the head, chest, thighs and whole body following into line. All the body parts, except for the hands, manipulate the ball. Such a freedom from the powerful effects of hands give football its fluidity and flexibility and makes it a very pliable sport. The absence of hands, however, are not the only characteristic that makes football the most popular sport in the world. It has history and passion like no other.

Football has a long and unique history. The first known version of football was called tsu-chu (kicking ball with feet) invented by the Chinese Emperor Huang-Ti in 1697 B. C. A thousand years later, the Japanese started playing kemari, a game that was probably copied from tsu-chu. The two games evolved enough that a Chinese writer Li-Ju in 50 B. C. recorded the first ever-international match between the two countries. The ancient Egyptians also claim to have originated football, citing balls placed in tombs that were used for playing and kicking as evidence. The seventh century B.C., Berbers played a football-related game called koura as a fertility rite. Kicking a ball over the fields taught the crops how to abundantly grow. The founders of the Olympics, the ancient Greeks had their own version-episkiros. This form included kicking and throwing the ball and was the first game to have boundary lines. The Romans plagiarized the Greeks with their own more physical game called harpastum. It was the Romans who brought this game to the shores of England in 43 A.D.

England is credited with founding the modern game and it began with the Roman occupation. By the time the Roman Empire collapsed, the game was firmly entrenched as a highly popular sport. Football had progressed from a ball representing the sun ritually kicked across fields as a fertility symbol to a contest between two villages. The object was to kick the ball to the opposing village in a barbaric melee. The game spread from the villages to the cities where it was a violent threat to lives and property. Football was a menace to law and order, and the first royal proclamation banning football was issued in 1314. No one heeded the proclamation and everyone kept on playing. By 1349, a frustrated King Edward III who wanted to conquer France demanded prison terms to anyone playing football because it was not only a public menace, but also disrupted archery practice. King Edward III actually coined the name "Football" to the English language in an effort to produce better archers. The name came not from the obvious inference of a ball played with feet, but to differentiate a game played on foot rather than on horseback. It did not matter which following ruler or which following proclamation forbade football, it still prospered amongst the people. Such early forms of the sport had one dominant characteristic—the complete lack of rules. Players advanced the ball by any means they could muster. Participants used tactics such as kicking, handling, running with the ball, brawling and fighting. However, the sport did progress enough to warrant some rules.

At a time when football was nothing more than an organized riot, a few early schoolmasters saw a rational benefit in the sport. These schoolmasters saw sport as part of the educational process. Thus, if they added order, discipline, and composure to the game, fit bodies and minds would excel from the venture. Great academic institutions like Cambridge, Eton, Harrow and Winchester all played chaotic forms of football. The lack of rules caused immense consternation to the educated gentlemen of the time. In order to form a consensus, rules were established. J.C. Thring, out of Cambridge University, wrote the oldest surviving set of rules in 1862. He posted what he dubbed the ten rules of the “Simplest Game.” Such rules, however, created a severe chasm amongst the football community. The rules specifically outlawed running with the ball in favor for dribbling the ball with the feet. Also, another rule banned hacking or shinning; now, all kicks are intended for the ball and not the opponent. These two rules negated the Rugby faction of the sport who deemed it necessary to run with the ball and hack their opponents. Legend stated that during a football match at Rugby school in 1823, William Webb Ellis grabbed the ball with his hands and ran it into the opposing goal which caused mayhem and strife to the dribbling game. This running with the ball outburst invented the sport of Rugby. However, there is very little truth to such a myth as people were playing Rugby-style football for centuries. Football was now at an impasse and needed clarification.

The sport was extremely popular amongst the common man. Elite schools were playing the game and football clubs were forming everywhere. The problem was when schools, clubs or just an ordinary common man’s brawling version played each other was what style to use—kicking or handling. Popular clubs gathered at the Freemason’s Tavern, Great Queen Street, London, in 1863 and to organize a Football Association to govern the sport. Their first task was to establish a common set of rules for everyone. The Rugby enthusiasts, however, could not accept the outlawing of running with the ball and hacking, so they defected to form their own sport. Thus, the pure form of kicking the ball was now called association football as opposed to rugby football. The term “soccer” is 19th century slang for association. One of the first tasks of the fledgling Football Association was to organize a single-elimination tournament open to any team (amateur or professional) first played in 1871. Known as the Football Association Cup, it was a masterstroke in popularity and pageantry. Where else could an unfashionable amateur team knock-off a highly vaunted professional team in a one match giant-killing scenario. Famous traditions were established such as the “Hallowed green turf,” the “Majestic Twin Towers,” the “Thirty-nine steps,” and the famous “Royal” greeting. Wembley stadium was eventually chosen as the Cup final site, which made the famous “Hallowed green turf” the home of modern football. People were playing village football at Wembley since the 9th century, so it was a natural choice for a national stadium. The following year in 1872, the first modern international match was played between England and Scotland (0-0 draw). The Scots were cunning and mastered the forward pass. Queen’s Park, an amateur Scottish club, was the first team to cultivate the passing game changing the tactics of the dribbling game. Skilled passing made football a fluid, effective, and attractive team game rather than of one individual mass dribbling against his opponents. By 1888, the Football Association finally organized a proper professional league modeled after American baseball (which started play in 1871).

With the vast majority of athletic clubs playing association football, the sport suddenly exploded internationally. Britain at the time was a dominant maritime and commercial power and her fleets brought the kicking game to every shore possible. British sailors, merchants and artisans living abroad formed their own football clubs in their respected countries. Soon local populations were fervently playing with a passion. Football had league games, Cup ties, and international matches; something was always happening in the sport and it flourished from country to country. By the turn of the 20th century, football was the most passionate sport on the globe. The game had grown so fast that an international governing body was founded in 1904 in Paris called Federation Internationale de Football Association or as FIFA. FIFA wanted to organize a true world championship. The first Olympics had five countries compete for the gold in 1908 and by the 1928 Olympics over twenty nations were competing. However, the problem was that the Olympics were strictly amateur. FIFA wanted the best players a country had to offer and, therefore, created the greatest international sporting event—the World Cup. The first World Cup was held in Uruguay in 1930 and such a world championship took football to the highest level of passion for its fans and players.

People who cannot understand the passion for football do not understand the dynamics of the game. Football is truly an international game, and from culture to culture and country to country, it means something different to each of them, yet it is the same. Such diversity creates a multitude of emotions and passions, where the game is molded and reshaped depending on who and where the game is played. Yet, the ball is still round and the familiarity is always there. Football by nature is a low scoring game and it takes a great amount skill to score. Thus, during a match there is a constant build up and let down of emotions, where expectations are far more frustrated than realized. The scoring of one goal, and the possibility that is the only goal or the winning goal, releases explosive passionate emotions for one set of supporters and total despair for the other. Such an atmosphere compels its followers to make football so much closer to their personal lives than other sports. Football is the beautiful game, fluid and malleable, full of passion, frustration, grace, power, and humor. A game of unprecedented skill, where everyone has to learn how to control the ball, pass, shoot, dribble, and tackle. A game of passion and nationalistic fervor, a game with a history like no other, and a game one cannot dominate with hands.