

# No Christian End!

## The Beginnings of Football in America

By PFRA Research

Originally Published in *The Journey to Camp: The Origins of American Football to 1889* (PFRA Books)

America got into football early. Colonists kicked and threw inflated bladders or sawdust-filled leather balls around long before they decided to fire on the whites of the redcoats' blue eyes. Understandably, games played a minor part in the lives of people more concerned with clearing trees and Indians off the land, but, by the latter part of the 18th Century, football had found its way onto the college campuses. Infrequent matches joined fisticuffs, wrestling, and drinking bouts as popular ways to relieve the severe mental discipline of college life. Some students were relieved right onto probation or worse.

Much as had happened on English campuses, each American school developed its own form of the sport. At Princeton, they were playing a version called "ballown" by 1820. Harvard, Yale, and others each had individual variations. However, if the diverse development echoed Britannia early-1800's, the American style of play resembled circa medieval. The only thing missing was the Dane's head. The young gentlemen attacked each other in most ungentlemanly ways. The New York EVENING POST was moved to observe that one such game would "make the same impression on the public mind as a bull fight. Boys and young men knocked each other down, tore off each other's clothing. Eyes were bugged, faces blacked and bloody, and shirts and coats torn to rags."

The usual excuse for a game was the "class rush", a joyous custom in which the sophomores demonstrated the benefit of an additional year's education by trampling the freshmen into the campus sod. The frosh proved their worthiness among halls of ivy by attempting to fertilize the sod with sophomores. Although a ball of some sort was involved, no one really kept score so long as a sufficient number of opponents were mangled.

At Harvard, "Bloody Monday" took place on the first Monday of each new college year, starting in 1827. The two lower classes vied with each other so lethally that, as a modern historian put it, "Had 15-yard penalties been handed out, it is conceivable they would have reached California." Apparently, the freshmen kicked the ball well, but the sophomores kept missing the ball and kicking the freshmen. The game, according to another account, "consisted of kicking, pushing, slugging and getting angry."

At Yale, the interclass conflict took on a more definite form. The upper classmen supervised the freshmen who were herded into a huge phalanx with the ball carrier in the center. Then the sophomores attacked this mob and tried to push, kick, throw, or otherwise coerce the ball over the goal. Meanwhile, the upper classmen stood off to one side and clucked about school spirit and sportsmanship while occasionally wiping off spatters of blood.

The faculties and administrations alternately approved and condemned football playing. On the plus side, the game revved up school spirit and decreased class sizes. But, on the other hand, there was altogether too much destruction of school property to be tolerated.

In 1860 when the destruction began to spread into the town, New Haven officials complained to Yale authorities, and the game was abolished. Harvard banned football playing the same year. The school authorities may have been echoing all those English kings, but there was one new note -- the bans stuck. Harvard students reacted with an elaborate funeral for "Football Fightum". As they interred the game, one student read an eloquent eulogy while a chorus of mourners solemnly chanted:

*Beneath this sod we lay you down,  
This sign of glorious fight;  
With dismal groans and yells we'll drown  
Your mournful burial rite!*

### The Boston Game

But football wasn't really dead; it had just gone away. It now became the property of New England schoolboys who took care of it much better than their older college brothers. The kids had been playing versions of football for years, of course. Unlike the college students, they usually followed some simple rules, although these might vary considerably from town to town. Primarily, they played variations of soccer, and boys could be seen on autumn days diligently practicing dribbling or "puddling" balls across fields by tapping them with their feet while school books were forgotten back by the fences. Occasionally, a locally popular game allowed carrying, making it a rugby derivative. Then the books could be tucked under arms as football-substitutes and the boys would be away dodging down lanes, eluding imaginary tacklers.

On Saturdays, groups of as many as forty or fifty boys might gather at a chosen lot or meadow, divide into teams, and spend several hours happily agitating a ball across the grass. Usually, the ball was handmade by someone's father, but, if the boys were lucky, they might have one of the store-bought rubber balls that had been introduced in 1855. These allowed for more accurate kicking, and as the use of them spread, they encouraged soccer-like games over rugby styles. These schoolboy gatherings were quite informal, but "buddies" tended to hang together and set teams sometimes were developed.

One such group of prep school boys in Boston formed the Oneida Football Club in 1862. The original Oneidas had been a tribe of Iroquois Indians long gone from the Boston environs, but the boys

# The Professional Football Researchers Association

---

liked the heroic aura of the name. The mainspring of the bunch was teenager Gerrit Smith Miller, named for his maternal grandfather, the ardent abolitionist Gerrit Smith. Young Miller was a natural leader and exceptional athlete who soon had his gang practicing soccer and rugby on the Boston Common. After awhile, the boys tired of both games, perhaps because they could find no one to play. Rather than disband, they occupied their time by inventing a new game, one that combined their favorite features of both soccer and rugby. They liked goal kicking from the former and running with the ball from the latter, and both became features of their hybrid, "The Boston Game".

On November 7, 1863, the boys finally found someone to play. They lured a pick-up team of non-members to the Common and explained the rules to them. Not surprisingly, Miller's well-drilled crew zapped the neophytes. Reportedly, the score was 12-0, but just what scored how many points in the Boston Game is open to dispute.

At any rate, the Boston newspapers found the Oneidas' victory sufficiently amusing to honor it the next day with a one-paragraph write-up. Over the next three years, Gerrit Miller's gang took on anyone they could sucker into a game. They remained undefeated, never once allowing a point. The Oneidas credited their success to diligent practice; some suggested it was more due to their having invented their own game.

Some historians have gone so far as to call the Oneidas' victories the first games of American football, maintaining the hybrid Boston Game was neither soccer nor rugby and, therefore, was what Americans recognize as their favorite autumn sport. To call the Oneidas the inventors of American football is surely giving the little devils more than their due. Their game allowed running under certain circumstances, but it was still essentially soccer. Perhaps it should be called football's missing link.

Although the Boston Game can't be placed any higher on football's evolutionary ladder, it seems fair to say that the Oneidas themselves exerted an important influence on the eventual course of American football, particularly because several of the boys grew up and took their game with them to Harvard. And, it was the Crimson's preference for the Boston Game that proved the key in turning America away from soccer.

## Princeton-Rutgers: 1869

By the end of the 1860's with the Civil War a thing of memory, Yale, Princeton, Rutgers, Brown and most of the other eastern colleges began experimenting with soccer as an enjoyable alternative to studying. Princeton even published a set of rules in 1867 based on those of the London Football Association. Despite slight variations, the games played on most campuses resembled each other sufficiently that sooner or later one school was bound to challenge another to a match.

1869 was a pivotal year in American sport. It was, for example, the year in which the Cincinnati Red Stockings became the first all-professional baseball team. For those interested in comparisons, baseball had reached the point where it stood only two years away from its first pro league, the ill-fated National Association. Professional football had not even been thought of for the very good reason that American football did not yet exist. However, an

important step was taken in the fall of 1869 when William Leggett, the captain of Rutgers' soccer team, took advantage of the proximity of the two schools and issued a challenge to William S. Gummere, his opposite number at Princeton.

Gummere accepted and a three-game series was planned. Both schools had class teams for intramural games, but Leggett and Gummere were to captain school teams made up of the best players from each institution. The two captains worked out the details. The first game was scheduled for three o'clock on the afternoon of November 6 at Rutgers. Generally, the Rutgers' version of any rule differences was to be in force. Each team would field twenty-five men, and the first side to score six goals was to be declared the winner.

Despite a cold wind whistling over the field, about a hundred spectators showed up on the commons at New Brunswick to watch the contest. Some perched on an old board fence; others sat in buckboards. Reportedly, organized cheering was a feature. It was based on a Civil War Regiment cheer first heard when soldiers marched through Princeton.

Spectators later told of a crotchety Rutgers professor who pedaled up on a bicycle. He watched for a few minutes and then shook his umbrella at the players, shouting, "You men will come to no Christian end!" With that, he wheeled off, missing what turned out to be an excellent game.

Within five minutes of the kickoff, the better organized Rutgers men scored the first goal. Princeton came right back, using superior size and muscle, to tie the game. Except for red stocking caps worn by a few of the Rutgers players, neither side was in any kind of distinctive uniform. However, the crowd had no trouble distinguishing between the smaller, quicker Rutgers team and the taller but slower men of Princeton. Rutgers speed and superior kicking skill paid off in a second goal, but once more Princeton's greater strength tied it up. It was a classic confrontation.

At one point, two players pursuing the ball crashed into the board fence, spilling spectators hither and yon. For a few moments, Rutgers pulled away, scoring twice. Then, in a moment of confusion, a Rutgers player aimed a shot at his own goal. A quicker-thinking teammate blocked the kick, but Princeton was on the ball immediately and kicked a legitimate goal. Before Rutgers could completely recover, the Tigers added another goal to tie the score yet again at 4-4.

During a break in the action, Leggett instructed his men to keep the ball low to negate Princeton's height advantage. The strategy worked. Rutgers quickly knocked in two goals against the baffled Tigers to win 6-4.

The contest is usually called the first intercollegiate football game. American fans celebrated football's centennial in 1969. They were mistaken. The game played was not American football, nor even its more direct ancestor rugby. Rutgers' historic victory was in soccer. Despite that little confusion, the game was notable on two counts. It came three years before an equivalent intercollegiate match was held in England, and it instituted the practice of one American school playing some kind of football game against another.

# The Professional Football Researchers Association

---

A week later, November 13, everyone went over to Princeton to play by the Tigers' rules. The Princeton version favored height by allowing a player to catch the ball in flight and then take a free kick. The taller Tigers booted eight straight goals to none for Rutgers. A spectator at the second game reported that the ball used was never quite the regulation shape. It constantly lost air. Several times during the game the players took turns blowing it up, but by the time the last man was out of breath the ball always remained lopsided.

The third game, scheduled for November 29, was cancelled. Most likely the captains couldn't agree on whose rules to use for the rubber match.

Several of the players in those historic games went on to better things. Captain Leggett, the first American strategist, became a respected clergyman of the Dutch Reformed Church. His Rutgers teammate, George H. Large, was later elected to the state senate. On the Princeton side, Jacob E. Michael became Dean of the Faculty at the University of Maryland, and Captain Gummere served as Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of New Jersey for over thirty years. Others enjoyed distinguished careers in business, law, and medicine.

So much for the dire predictions of one crotchety old Rutgers professor!

## The First Rules

The idea of intercollegiate matches didn't exactly spread like wildfire. Columbia tried it in 1870, losing to Rutgers, who in turn lost again to Princeton. A pair of games was hardly a bumper crop.

The next year, the total number of intercollegiate games dropped by two. Supposedly there had been criticism of rough play the year before. The games were nothing like the old class rushes, but they weren't exactly pattycake either.

Even so, a good deal of intramural soccer was going on. The Cornell Football Association was organized in 1870, and, that same year, Yale students started playing again on the New Haven green. When the police moved in, the students moved out and found a vacant lot for their class games. On October 15, 1871, Tiger students formed the Princeton Football Association and adopted rules.

In 1872, intercollegiate matches were back in style. Columbia played four games, tying Rutgers, losing twice, and defeating Stevens Tech. Rutgers, in a return match, handed Columbia one of its defeats but lost to Princeton again. The Tigers and Yale each had 1-0-0 records. Yale's win, a 3-0 victory over Columbia, drew 4,000 people at 25 cents a head to Hamilton Park in New Haven.

Rules still varied from campus to campus. Hours were wasted before each match deciding who could do what to whom under which circumstances. On October 19, 1873, representatives of Yale, Columbia, Princeton, and Rutgers met at the Fifth Avenue Hotel in New York to thrash out the first set of intercollegiate rules in America. Compared with today's voluminous and exquisitely worded rule book, the twelve rules they came up with seem almost absurdly brief. A player could memorize them on the way from the dressing room.

1. *The ground shall be 400 feet long and 250 feet broad.*
2. *The distance between the posts of each goal shall be 25 feet.*
3. *The number for match games shall be 20 to a side.*
4. *To win a game 6 goals are necessary, but that side shall be considered victorious which, when the game is called, shall have scored the greatest number of goals, provided that number be 2 or more. To secure a goal the ball must pass between the posts.*
5. *No player shall throw or carry the ball. Any violation of this regulation shall constitute a foul, and the player so offending shall throw the ball perpendicularly into the air to a height of at least 12 feet and the ball shall not be in play until it has touched the ground.*
6. *When the ball passes out of bounds it is a foul, and the player causing it shall advance at right angles to the boundary line, 15 paces from the point where the ball went, and shall proceed as in rule 5.*
7. *No tripping shall be allowed, nor shall any player use his hands to hold or push an adversary.*
8. *The winner of the toss shall have the choice of the first goal, and the sides shall change goals after every successive inning. In starting the ball it shall be fairly kicked, not "babied", from a point 150 feet in front of the starter's goal.*
9. *Until the ball is kicked no player on either side shall be in advance of a line parallel to the line of his goal and distant from it 150 feet.*
10. *There shall be two judges, one from each of the contesting colleges, and one referee; all to be chosen by the captains.*
11. *No player shall wear spikes or iron plates upon his shoes.*
12. *In all matches a No. 6 ball shall be used, furnished by the challenging side and to become the property of the victor.*

The No. 6 ball was imported from England where it was used by the London Football Association. It was 30 inches in circumference, entirely round, and very strong. It was NOT pigskin. Rather, the covering was heavy canvas thoroughly saturated with rubber.

It's worth noting that the goal posts had no crossbar. Another interesting provision, or lack of one, was that a game went on and on until darkness unless one team managed to get six goals. The game was a test of endurance as much as skill.

Rule number ten, providing for two judges and a referee, proved a bit naive. Each school had its own judge, and, in effect, the referee invariably made all the tough decisions.

Rules number five and number seven stamped the game as soccer by eliminating carrying and the use of hands. There was unanimity among the four assembled schools for the exclusion of these practices. And, it was because everyone knew that the four assembled schools felt that way about it that Harvard, although invited, chose to skip the whole get-together.

In the long run, Harvard's absence was the most important thing about the entire meeting.

## Harvard-McGill: 1874

Harvard's funeral for Football Fightum turned out to be premature, to say the least. By 1871, only ten years after the burial, they were playing at Cambridge once more. The Boston Game, developed by the Oneidas, was favored by the Crimson for its class games. This, remember, was a combination of both soccer and rugby. The

# The Professional Football Researchers Association

---

emphasis seems to have been on kicking, but the ball could be caught and run if the catcher was pursued. That made it just different enough to cut off Harvard from competition with other schools, all of whom played the strict kicking game.

When the invitation came to attend the 1873 meeting, Harvard had a tough decision to make: should they keep running by themselves or kick with the pack?

They decided to stay home and keep running. Some people have called it the most momentous decision in the history of American football. Some people exaggerate. Football lends itself to hyperbole -- the greatest, the best, the most, etc. Harvard's decision was important. Let it go at that.

The reason it was important is that Harvard began to look high and low for someone to play their precious Boston Game against. No other U.S. school would touch it.

Finally, in the spring of 1874, McGill University of Montreal, Canada, issued a challenge to the Crimson. Captain Harry Grant happily accepted. It turned out Harvard got more than it bargained for. McGill agreed to come to Cambridge for a session of Boston Game if Harvard would then have a go at a game by McGill's rules. McGill played rugby. The two teams met on May 14. Played under Harvard's rules, the game was such a rout they called it off after only 22 minutes with the home team in front 3-0.

"Just wait until tomorrow when we play rugby!" warned the McGill men.

The Harvard team laughed, but when the McGill players were out of earshot they asked each other nervously, "What's a rugby?"

Years later, a member of the Harvard class of 1874 said, "There were many points of difference [in the Boston Game] from the Rugby game. It was eminently a kicking, as distinguished from a running and tackling, game. The rules ... existed only in tradition. We went to work to learn the Rugby game, but I should question if there were three men in college who had ever seen the egg-shaped ball. A drop kick was an unknown and incredible feat, and the intricacies of 'off side,' 'free kick,' 'put out,' and such commonplaces of the game seemed inextricable mysteries to novices like us."

The game played the next day, May 15, was the first rugby game on U.S. soil. Harvard acquitted itself very well and struggled to a scoreless tie. More importantly, they fell head over heels in love with rugby and all thoughts of the once-cherished Boston Game disappeared. Harvard couldn't wait until the next fall. When it came, they raced up to Montreal to play some more rugby. In addition to kicked goals, the Canadian version of the game allowed

touchdowns to count in the scoring. Harvard scored three of them to win.

Flushed with success, the Crimson came home and, the next year, challenged Yale to a rugby match. The sons of Eli thought it over and decided it might be fun. The two schools scheduled a game for November 13, at Hamilton Park in New Haven, to be played under what were called the "Concessionary Rules". These had nothing to do with selling beer, hot dogs, or crackerjacks, but were instead a special set of rules agreed to in which each side gave up a little.

Harvard sacrificed counting touchdowns in the scoring. The only thing a TD gained was the right to try for a goal. Yale agreed to play with 15 men instead of the eleven they preferred. They had been won over to the smaller group two years earlier when they played soccer against a traveling team of eleven Englishmen from Eton. Yale found it made for a more open, exciting game. From then on they kept pushing for eleven on a side until everybody was sick to death from hearing about it. For Yale to agree to put four extra men on the field was a major concession and showed real sportsmanship.

In their first rugby game, Yale's nice guys finished last. Harvard ran all over them, and the poor sons of Eli, knowing nothing about tackling, let them. The final stood 4-0 Harvard, with one of the goals coming after a touchdown. Despite the one-sided defeat, Yale was completely captivated by rugby. Forthwith, they decided, they would play it themselves.

Aside from being the first game in what became one of the most famous series in college football, the 1875 Harvard-Yale encounter saw the first uniforms worn in an American football game. Yale wore dark trousers, blue shirts, and yellow caps. Not to be outdone in sartorial splendor any more than in the score, Harvard showed up in crimson shirts, stockings, and knee breeches. From the descriptions, they looked like a couple of spiffy bowling teams.

All told, the crowd of 2,000 -- including 150 Harvard students -- got its money's worth even though the admission had been doubled from 25 cents to half a dollar for the occasion. Two fellows who paid the price were W. Earle Dodge and Jotham Potter, both of Princeton. They rushed back home singing rugby's praises to high heaven and to any Princetonians who would listen.

And so, as the United States made ready to celebrate its centennial year, the coming game on at least three trend-setting eastern college campuses was that old English favorite, rugby. Anglophobes viewed the whole thing with distaste.

As for the game we know as American football, that hadn't been thought of. Or, as some would say, it wasn't even a gleam in Father's eye. But, in the fall of 1876, Father enrolled at Yale. His name was Walter Camp.