

By Maurice Walsh

Come April, all over Australia its denizens, large and small, will devote their energies to kicking blue blazes out of all types of leather balls - and each other. This country is unique that four different codes of football are played here, but football is much older than it.

The game has one of the most ancient and most interesting histories of modern sports, for it is generally agreed that the Romans introduced the rough basic idea of the game to Britain, a form of ball play popular among their legions.

The use of a ball as a form of entertainment is believed to have had its origin in ancient pagan festivals. It is known that at early Egyptian festivals the priests used to toss a ball to each other, the ball representing the mummified head of their god Osiris.

At all events the Romans had a game Harpastum, in which two teams faced each other on either sides of a dividing line, above which the ball was tossed into the air. Immediately the teams went for it all in, the idea being to grab it and run with it, touching it down on a line drawn behind the opposing team. Just as it is today in Australian Rules or Rugby, if any player got killed or hurt it was just too bad that he got in the way.

Whatever its origin, an early version of the game was played at Chester and Derby soon after the Romans pulled out of Britain. An extraordinary, macabre legend of the time suggests that the ball used in the first game was the head of a luckless Danish invader. The citizenry of Chester had repulsed the Danes and, capturing one, to celebrate their victory lopped off his head and had joyous sport kicking it around the streets of the town.

However, as apparently there was a scarcity of Danish heads available later, a leather ball replaced the skull. Every Shrove Tuesday, it is recorded, the Shoemakers Guild met in the presence of the Mayor, and delivered to the Drapers Guild "one football valued at not less than three shillings and four pence. It will be made of leather". Whereafter all hands settled down to a pleasant game of putting the boot into the ball, and into one another.

By the Middle Ages, football games between rival villages had become a regular Shrove Tuesday custom. It was a cruel and barbarous game which allowed rival villagers to have an open slather at each other. On the morning of the match the players involved took up a collection from door to door of "wind-money" to defray the cost of a feast at the local inn after the affray.

On the day of the match the ball was kicked off at noon at some handy spot such as the village green, after which licensed mayhem was the order of the day for young and old. The goals were miles apart, and open field or village street was all the same to the milling horde. Nothing was allowed to prove an obstacle to the participants, especially bystanders. Sensible folk barricaded their doors and windows and stayed indoors, but eventually the riotous behaviour, especially when the sport spread to the streets of London, attracted the attention of the authorities, but attempts to ban the game, even by Edward 11, were unsuccessful.

By Tudor times the game was still popular and played in much the same crude style. Scores of people were being killed or maimed each year at the "sport", but both the efforts of Henry VIII and Elizabeth to outlaw the game failed. It was not until Stewart times that the pastime showed some faint traces of refinement. Still very popular, it still amounted to a riot when played in London streets, but King Charles 11 was often an interested spectator, and with his interest the game improved.

The transition from rough-and-tumble and free-for-all to that approaching today's soccer game took place mainly in the big English public schools, and the different codes of modern football were evolved because of the facilities there. At Rugby school's large open fields there was room for the rushing game by numbers of players similar to the old streets game, and sometimes the entire school of more than 300 boys took part, and the wild scrums were something to see.

However, even as played at Rugby, football was still mainly a kicking game, the player not being allowed to run with the ball. But in 1823, one Rugby lad earned himself contemporary disgrace, but immortal sporting fame, by catching the ball, tucking it under his arm, and making a beeline for the opposition goal.

Today a granite slab let into a wall at Rugby records his feat thus :

This Stone
Commemorates the exploit of
WILLIAM WEBB ELLIS
who, with a fine disregard of the rules of football as played in his time, first
took the ball in his arms and ran with it, thus originating the distinctive feature
of the Rugby game.
A. D. 1823

At other big schools such as Charterhouse and Westminster, however, only paved courtyards and cloisters were available in which the pupils could play, and a new game had to be evolved in the interests of the safety of boys and school windows. So there developed a system of dribbling the ball with the feet so that it kept low, and body tackling was barred. Thus in these two schools began gradually the football game which today we know as Soccer.

While young Master Ellis was perpetrating his historic gallop at Rugby, the hardy inmates of the penal colony of New South Wales, 12,000 miles away on the other side of the world, and completely unsullied by any suggestion of Public School influence, were free to invent a game of their own, which was something on the lines of the village "free-for-all" and, unless the aborigines had forestalled them, was the first game of football played in these parts.

About mid-century the game began to be played in a roughly organised fashion in Melbourne, with rules differing greatly from those recognised in England and, in 1858, a number of enthusiasts, including an old Rugby boy in T.W. Willis, formed the Melbourne Football Club.

As played then football was still a rough and brutal game in which sinking the boot into the opponent was all part of the game. However, after a large number of clubs came into existence in the next eight years, it became obvious that some systematic control of the game was necessary so, on May 8, 1866, delegates met to formulate a set of rules, and those devised then are substantially the rules of the Australian game as it is played today.

Rugby Union, the amateur game, and Soccer were imported from England much later, and the popular professional game, Rugby League, was not introduced into Sydney until about seventy years ago, when clubs were formed by break-aways ~~for~~ from the Rugby Union code, but the game is confined mainly to N. S. W. and Queensland.