

# Evolution of the Gridiron

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150 years ago American football made its official debut in the first collegiate game played by Princeton and Rutgers University. It took several decades and adjustments, however, to evolve into the game we know and love today.

Developed as a hybrid of soccer and rugby, many forms of football were seen in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. There were unlimited players allowed on each team, and the minimal rules included prohibiting murder as a means to move the ball.<sup>1</sup>

In the 1820's Princeton University – then College of New Jersey – played an adaptation of the game called “ballown”, with other schools having their own variations. Many of the matches were between incoming freshman and upcoming sophomores. At Yale, the freshman would surround the ball carrier in the middle, while the sophomores were to keep the carrier from crossing the goal line by any means necessary. This was similar to “Bloody Monday” held at the start of each school year at Harvard, which as the name suggests was far from clean and injury-free. The destruction of school and city property as well as injuries to players caused the game to be shut down at each school in 1860.<sup>2</sup>

The ban did not deter the lovers and players of the game, and it was less than ten years later that the Princeton vs. Rutgers game would take place, on November 6, 1869. This game was far closer to soccer than football or rugby, having shaped their rules from the London Football Association. This was the dominant form and accepted by most universities, but not by Harvard, who opted for a more rugby-styled play called “Boston Game” where you could carry the ball as well as kick it.<sup>3</sup>

Refusing several match offers from other schools, they accepted a challenge from Canadian school McGill University. They were to play one game under Harvard's “Boston Game” rules, and the second under McGill's rugby rules. While Harvard and many other U.S. teams used a round, inflated ball, McGill used a standard oval rugby ball, which was foreign to many of the Crimson players and harder to kick. Harvard won the first game 3-0, but both teams remained scoreless in the second game.<sup>2</sup> Harvard quickly adopted McGill's regulations, playing them again the following year and challenging Yale to a similar rugby style game. Yale, Princeton and other schools in attendance are said to have appreciated the benefit and advantage this style of play had and in 1876 formed the Intercollegiate Football Association.<sup>3</sup>

A key player in this association, as well as a halfback and later coach for Yale, is Walter Camp, known as the “Father of American Football.” His ideas and changes are a large part of the transformation to the traditional game of football today. His innovations include implementing scrimmage and offensive plays, the rule of downs and the “T-formation.”<sup>4</sup> His design and modernization of the game led to the widespread popularity of the “Americanized” style by the 1890's. Over the next several decades, many changes would be implemented, including the use of passing and the alteration of field and goal sizes.<sup>2</sup>

By 1905, the National Collegiate Athletic Association was born, organizing the sport even further with matchups and formal rules, with the teams growing from only a handful to over 400 across the country. This rapid growth in interest opened the doors to the American Professional Football Association, later known as the NFL, beginning with 14 teams in 1920 and swiftly adding eight more. By the first championship game in 1932, further rule changes made passing a much bigger part of game-play, showcasing a sport more recognizable as the game we watch on Sundays today.

From the humble beginnings of soccer and rugby to the unique design of gridiron football now, this game has been shaped and molded over the past two centuries, with changes still unfolding. The rest is history in the making.

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<sup>1</sup> “Walter Camp and the Birth of Modern Football.” New England Historical Society, 6 Oct. 2019, <http://www.newenglandhistoricalsociety.com/walter-camp-and-birth-modern-football>.

<sup>2</sup> Braunwart, Bob, and Bob Carroll. The Journey to Camp: the Origins of American Football. Professional Football Researchers Association, 1997.

<sup>3</sup> Oriard, Michael. “Gridiron Football.” Encyclopædia Britannica, Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc., Updated 4 Feb. 2019, <https://www.britannica.com/sports/gridiron-football>.

<sup>4</sup> The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica. “Walter Camp.” Encyclopædia Britannica, Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc., Updated 3 Apr. 2019, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Walter-Camp>.