

Early Ball Games

Ball games have a very long history. Young men and women have been getting together to play them for thousands of years. The earliest games were played in Mexico, South America, at least three thousand years ago. Later games, which had their own rules, were part of the culture of the ancient¹ Olmec and Aztec peoples.

We do not know a lot about these ball games because it is very difficult to understand the written accounts of them. But they were all very similar and in some ways they were like the modern game of football.

The games were played on a special piece of ground – the ‘pitch’. The spectators – the men, women and children who watched the game – stood on the terraces and they often bet their gold, slaves² and houses on the result of the game. Small figures³ of the players could be bought by their ‘fans’.

In these early ball games, there were two teams of seven players. The players were men who had been captured in wars and kept as prisoners. They played with a ball made of black rubber that probably weighed about five or six kilos. The ball had to be kept in the air – it was not allowed to touch the ground. But the players did not kick the ball. They used their hips, their knees and their arms to keep it in the air and they wore pads⁴ to protect themselves.

The players tried to score a ‘goal’ by getting the ball through one of the two stone rings above the terraces. Perhaps the game ended with this goal, but we are not sure. We know that in some games, the goalscorer was given gold and fine clothes.

How long did the games last? We do not know, but they usually ended in a terrible way, so the players would play for as

long as possible. The games were not just about winning a cup, gold or clothes. They were a matter of life and death because they were part of the people's religion. Each game ended in a sacrifice⁵ ordered by the priests⁶. When the ball hit the ground, the captain of the losing team would have his head cut off or his heart torn out! Sometimes every player in the losing team was sacrificed. The fans went mad with excitement. The games were followed by a lot of eating and drinking.

These games were still being played in South America when the Spanish arrived in 1519. The soldiers took a team back to Spain, but the game was soon banned⁷ there. The Church did not like it.

Some Chinese writing, dating from 50 BC, describes football games played between China and Japan. The teams played with a leather ball which was filled with hair. The players could use their backs, chest and shoulders as well as their feet. They could not use their hands. These players must have been very clever. They learnt to do tricks and flicks⁸, just like modern players do.

The Japanese game, *kemari*, is also very old and is still played today. The game is not competitive and there are no teams. The players stand in a circle. They pass the ball to each other and must keep it in the air as long as they can.

Records show that the Ancient Greeks also played a kind of football from about 2000 BC. There were two teams and the ball could be kicked or thrown. The ball was made from an inflated⁹ pig's bladder¹⁰, covered with leather. The Greeks did not have to worry about their kit¹¹ getting dirty. The players, both men and women, did not wear any clothes at all!

Later, in Italy, in the streets of Rome, boys played a similar game that they called *harpastum*: 'the small ball game'. Roman soldiers enjoyed playing the game too and it kept them fit. The

soldiers played on a rectangular pitch, with lines marking the two halves. Only the player with the ball could be tackled. The fans shouted out advice as they do today: 'Too far! Too short! Pass it back!'



A Roman ball game in Rome, Italy, in the second century BC

When the Romans invaded Britain in the first century AD, they played the game there too. We do not know how the players scored goals, but a record¹² of one game tells us that the Roman soldiers won:

England 1– Italy 3 perhaps

How Football Began in England

The Romans left England at the beginning of the fifth century AD, but the game of football stayed.

As time went on, the game was played with very few rules and a great number of people. Football was often just an excuse for the young men of one town or village to fight those of another. The players were more likely to kick each other than the ball. This often led to trouble and football became very noisy and dangerous.

In 1314, the mayor of London banned football in his city. The kings of England did not like the game either. They wanted young men to practise archery¹³ in their free time. Their bows and arrows were needed in the Hundred Years' War, to kill French soldiers. Football was not useful at all.

By 1555, football was banned in the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge too. Then, in 1581, the headmaster of a big English school thought that he could see some good in football. He believed that with smaller teams, a strict referee and a few rules, the game could become a healthy way of passing the time. And it could teach boys to play together and learn to obey orders.

Nearly one hundred years later, a man called Francis Willoughby wrote the *Book of Sports*. He described the game of football in a way we can recognize today. He wrote about the pitch and the goals – or 'gates' – defended¹⁴ by the best players. The main aim was to get the first goal, and high tackles were not allowed.

Young men went on playing football, but there were not many places where they could play because football had been banned

from the streets. But rich boys in some big English schools played the game. One of these schools was called Rugby. The school had big fields where lots of boys could play football at the same time.

Then, in 1823, a football player at Rugby School took the ball in his hands and ran with it. And so the game of rugby football – or *rugger* – began. In this game, hard tackles were allowed and several players would fight for the ball. ‘Hacking’ – kicking the shins of players in the other team – was allowed too.

Other schools, like Charterhouse School, had no fields where they could play rugger. So Charterhouse decided that the ball could not be carried. Kicking people, rather than the ball, was not allowed either.

A few years later, working men, mostly in the north of England, started playing this original form of football. Men who worked in the big factories there wanted to play football with their friends in their free time.

The first football club in the world was started in the northern English city of Sheffield. The club made its own rules – the ‘Sheffield Rules’. When other clubs were formed, their rules were different. Soon all the clubs agreed that their teams had to play using the same rules.

In 1863, people from schools and clubs all over England met in a pub in London. They wanted to agree on the rules of football. There were many issues to talk about: should the ball be carried or not? Was hacking allowed? After a lot of talking, the men who wanted to say yes to these questions walked out. They wanted to play rugby football or rugger. The men who stayed decided to work together and so the Football Association¹⁵ was founded.

Over the next few months, the Football Association agreed on fourteen rules. They also agreed on the weight and size of the ball and the size of the pitch.

How Football Began in England

Only the goalkeeper could touch the ball with his hands. Kicking someone's legs, rather than the ball, was not allowed and players could not trip each other up¹⁶. They could not use their hands to push or hold their opponents¹⁷ either. Some modern players should remember these last three rules!

Football soon began to be called *soccer* from the word 'association'. The important thing was that the game could now be played in the same way anywhere in the country.



A football game using FA rules, England, in the 1800s

The first game to be played using the Football Association's rules was in 1865. Sheffield FC had a match with Nottingham FC, a club in the English Midlands. During this time, more and more clubs were being formed all over England and Scotland. By 1873, fifty clubs had joined the FA.

These clubs did not have much money. The young men who joined them worked hard at their jobs in factories, offices and shops all week. They played football in their free time and they were not paid for it. They were amateurs – they played for fun and because they enjoyed the game. They played anywhere they could. Their friends came to watch them and everyone had a great time.

So the game of football – or soccer – now had rules. The game was beginning to look more and more like modern football, but some things were different.

The goals had no crossbar and no net, just two upright posts. There were corner flags though and corner kicks and goal kicks were already part of the game.

There had been referees since 1840, but the referees shouted at the players because they did not have a whistle. Referees were not given whistles until 1878. They did not have any red or yellow cards in their pocket either. These cards were not used until nearly one hundred years later.

There were other differences too. The ball was made of leather and it was very heavy. All the players in the team wore shirts of the same colour, so that the spectators could recognize them. The players' shirts had no numbers, no names and no sponsors'¹⁸ logos! Their dark leather boots were heavy too. But the teams played a game that we can recognize – it was football!