Unexceptional exceptionalism: the origins of American football in a transnational context

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Journal of Global History / Volume 8 / Issue 02 / July 2013, pp 209 - 230
DOI: 10.1017/S1740022813000193, Published online: 06 June 2013

Link to this article: http://journals.cambridge.org/abstract_S1740022813000193

How to cite this article:

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Unexceptional exceptionalism: the origins of American football in a transnational context

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Abstract
This article explores the origins and early history of American football in relation to the development of rugby and similar codes in the English-speaking world of the last third of the nineteenth century. It suggests that the traditional narrative description of the emergence of the American game – which is ascribed in large part to the individual initiative of Walter Camp – fails to situate the sport in the context of the wider, transnational dynamics of the development of the various handling codes of football. In particular, it contends that the common assumption that the gridiron game's early development was a sporting expression of American exceptionalism is mistaken and that it only acquired its distinctive national character in the early twentieth century.

Keywords American exceptionalism, British world, football, gridiron, rugby

It is a commonplace assertion to say that American football is an example of American exceptionalism. The sport's rules, together with the fact that it is played professionally only within the United States, suggest that it is a particularly acute exemplar of the differences between America and the ‘old worlds’ of soccer-playing Europe and the former British empire nations that play rugby. In his 2004 The meaning of sports, Michael Mandelbaum explained that ‘the dissimilarities between the rules of the English and American games, and how the sports are organized on the two sides of the Atlantic, do reflect, in ways that an interpretative anthropologist would recognize, important differences between the Old World and the New’. More recently, the historian of American sport Mark Dyreson has argued that football, along with baseball, emerged in the United States ‘not only as expressions of American exceptionalism and empire but as explicit rejections of British exceptionalism and empire’.

There is of course a long and detailed literature on the history of the idea of American exceptionalism. Often traced back to Alexis de Tocqueville’s observations in part two of his

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Democracy in America (1840), the view that the development of American society is exceptional when compared to that of European nations is based on the absence of a feudal past, the vastness of its geography, the weakness of its labour movement, and an apparently great degree of social mobility, encapsulated in the concept of the ‘American Dream’. Those who argue for the exceptional character of American sports have extended this reasoning into the realm of play. Allen Guttmann has pointed to Frederick Jackson Turner’s famous 1893 article ‘The significance of the frontier in American history’ (which argued that the expansion of America’s western frontier shaped and defined the national character) as the source of these ideas about sport. Although Turner did not mention sport, his thesis was taken up and elaborated by historians and sociologists of sport seeking an explanation for the seemingly unusual development of games in the United States.

The most fully formed academic exposition of this thesis as it relates to football can be found in the seminal 1951 article ‘Football in America: a study in cultural diffusion’, by David Riesman and Reuel Denney. In this, they interpret the American ‘rejection’ of the rules of rugby football as being an example of the contrasting national cultures of America and Britain. Arguing that rugby’s rules relied heavily on the shared informal cultural understandings of the British upper-class young men who played the game, they claimed that ‘British players, according to tradition as well as according to rules, could be expected to tolerate such ambiguity [in the rules of rugby], but that ‘in America it was quite another matter to solve such problems’ because Americans lacked such traditions and their culture made them less accepting of ambiguity. This view has subsequently been echoed by almost all scholars of American football: ‘Why our insistence on amending the rugby union code once adopted?’ asked the leading historian of the sport, Michael Oriard, in Reading Football. “American exceptionalism” too often reduces more complex cultural relations, but in this case a fundamental difference is indisputable.

Like almost all histories of the non-soccer football codes, this type of account is based entirely on a nationally focused, if not nationalist, narrative, in which the rules of a sport are seen as a direct reflection of differing national characteristics. Indeed, we can find arguments using the same logic as that of American exceptionalism to account for the emergence of the rules of the Australian, Canadian, and Gaelic codes of football. In Australia Rob Pascoe has

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argued that Australian Rules football is an example of Antipodean ‘post-feudal society’ that contrasts with the pre-capitalist mind-set of English football codes. Writing about Canadian football, William Humber suggested that, ‘in the tension between an English heritage and American influence, Canadians gradually carved out a gradual definition of a new game which was uniquely their own’. This approach might usefully be termed the ‘national school of football history’, based on an emphasis on the differences between the codes of football rules while downplaying their similarities, and complemented by an absence of comparative analysis of the pathways of development of the sport in a transnational context. However, the approach does not explain why and how the handling football codes emerged around the world at the same time and how, in the space of little more than a generation, from 1859 to 1895, the six games derived from the version of football played at Rugby School – American, Australian, Canadian, Gaelic, rugby league, and rugby union – were established.

In contrast, this article seeks to transcend nationally limited perspectives and the simple drawing of causal links between national identity and rule-making. It argues instead that the development of the handling codes of football across the English-speaking world in the mid nineteenth century was an interlinked and interdependent international phenomenon, involving the exchange of ideas and sporting practices that transcended national boundaries. Debates about and challenges to the rules of rugby were not unique to the United States. Rugby football and the games that derived from it were in a permanent state of social, cultural, and technical flux in the late nineteenth century, to which their adherents responded in a variety of ways, sometimes contradictorily and sometimes complementarily. The choices that Americans made were part of a spectrum that was replicated across the English-speaking world.

The football codes are themselves an example of the transnational exchange of people, products, and ideas that increased exponentially from the mid nineteenth century. Between 1871 and 1890, the two decades in which football of all codes emerged in Britain and North America, more than 1.7 million people migrated from Britain to the United States, with a further 409,000 going to Canada. Rapid advances in communications technology (such as ocean-going steamships, railways, telegraphy, and printing) meant that, along with many other aspects of culture, football could be reported, discussed, and eventually played across continents. In 1866 Britain and America were linked by the first transatlantic telegraph cable and six years later Australia was also connected to the international telegraphy system. Football’s symbiotic relationship with the press meant that it did not develop in a national vacuum. The debates and discussion about the technical and social issues of the game were common to all football codes, and the answers provided in different countries were often very similar. Most importantly, the emergence of football in its handling form was a result of the common emergence of new pedagogical practices that sought to educate a rapidly expanding professional and administrative middle class in the anglophone advanced capitalist economies. It is in this context that the development of the rules of American football must be viewed.

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‘The English-speaking race’

Football emerged in the United States in the 1860s and 1870s as a direct consequence of the increasing importance that physical training and sport were acquiring in educational philosophy across anglophone countries. The growth of the middle classes in the English-speaking world, most notably in professions such as law, medicine, and finance, alongside clerical workers in general, led to increasing concerns about physical fitness and the dangers of urban life. In June 1857 the *New York Times* noted that, although the average New Yorker was wealthier than the average Londoner, the position was reversed when it came to health. ‘There can be no reasonable doubt that one very prominent and efficient cause of this difference between ourselves and out transatlantic kinsmen in respect of physical development is to be found in the greater prevalence through England of a taste for all manner of manly and athletic exercises’, it argued. ‘The young Englishman … begins his education in self-reliance and fair-play, through the trying ordeal of foot-ball at Eton or Rugby.’¹¹ Three years later it noted with some approval ‘the large space occupied by the subject of gymnastics in the debates of the American Institution of Instruction. What with the steady preaching of the school of muscular Christianity during the past few years … the human body has attained to a dignity and importance in the eyes of instructors of youth’.¹² The importance of physical education to the training of young men had been highlighted in the popular consciousness by the success of *Tom Brown’s schooldays*, first published in 1857. The book was a bestseller in North America, as it had been in Britain, and it served as the model for football in US colleges. In 1872 the *New York World* even reproduced in its entirety the book’s description of a football match to accompany its coverage of the inaugural Yale–Columbia game.¹³

The emergence of interest in sport in the mid nineteenth century was not merely about the health and wellbeing of young middle-class American males. The end of the era of Reconstruction in the 1870s renewed interest in the external and overseas expansion of US interests. Americans looking to revive the spirit of manifest destiny gazed enviously at the imperial successes of their British cousins: ‘The splendid empires which England has founded in every quarter of the globe have had their origin largely in the football contests at Eton, the boat-races on the Thames, and the cricket-matches on her downs and heaths’, argued William Mathews, a Chicago professor, in 1873.¹⁴ Despite barely a century having passed since the American Revolution, cultural ties to Britain remained strong and a shared sense of identity persisted. Parke H. Davis, in his chronicle of the early years of American football, *Football: the intercollegiate game* (itself inspired by the Reverend Frank Marshall’s *Football: the rugby union game*, published in London in 1892), stressed the enduring cultural and sporting ties between the United States’ WASP middle classes and their British equivalents:

There are many places in England so endeared to Americans by the ties of sentiment that we feel an ownership therein by the title of fancy if not by the title of actual fact.

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¹³ *New York World*, 17 November 1872.
Where is the lover of letters that does not claim an interest in the town of Avon? Where is the lawyer that does not believe that he possesses an inalienable right in the Inns of Court? Where is the football man from the field, side line, or stand who does not feel that he is an inheritor in the glories of Old Bigside at Rugby?\textsuperscript{15}

In 1896 Henry Cabot Lodge emphasized the link between this bond and sport: ‘Injuries incurred on the playing field are part of the price which the English-speaking race has paid for being world conquerors.’\textsuperscript{16} Teddy Roosevelt himself, the very embodiment of restless American national interests, believed that \textit{Tom Brown’s schooldays} was one of two books that every American should read.

Underpinning these attitudes was a common belief in the philosophy of muscular Christianity.\textsuperscript{17} Derived largely from the educational philosophies of the Rugby School headmaster Thomas Arnold, muscular Christianity spread rapidly throughout the British empire, not least owing to the success of \textit{Tom Brown’s schooldays}. It offered an ideology that linked sport, education, and a sense of moral or religious superiority that encompassed the whole of the English-speaking world. Although it originated as a form of British nationalism, it also provided a framework into which other forms of nationalism could be inserted, hence its appeal to French patriots such as Pierre de Coubertin and Zionists such as Max Nordau.

Muscular Christianity therefore found fertile ground across the Atlantic, albeit with a specifically American accent, best exemplified by the Young Men’s Christian Association, which, although it had been founded in England in 1844, became a considerable force in the United States. Amos Alonzo Stagg, after Walter Camp probably the most influential figure in the formative period of American football, embodied a tight interlocking of the Christian ideal and sport, being a graduate of divinity school and a seminal coach with the University of Chicago. As was the case in the white settler colonies of the British empire – known as the Dominions – muscular Christianity became the dominant ideology not only of late nineteenth-century sport but also of education. It integrated these two spheres so that sport was portrayed as a force for moral education rather than entertainment, and thus rejected commercialism and professionalism. Consequently, the United States adopted, and adapted, the British model in which schools and colleges were central to the organization of amateur sport, with Ivy League universities modelling themselves on Oxford and Cambridge universities.

The organization of sport in American schools and colleges followed that of elite British education, in which Eton and Harrow schools’ cricket and rowing contests, ‘Varsity’ cricket and rugby matches, and the Oxford and Cambridge boat race occupied the foremost place in national, middle-class sporting culture. Indeed, one could argue that the structure of nineteenth-century American sport closely mirrored that of England, divided between the amateur rugby union and gridiron games based on educational principles and institutions, and professional, highly commercialized mass spectator sports games such as soccer and baseball. The annual Oxford versus Cambridge university rugby match attracted tens of thousands of spectators and was, until the Second World War, the most important

\textsuperscript{17} These issues are explored in J. A. Mangan and James Walvin, eds., \textit{Manliness and morality: middle-class masculinity in Britain and America, 1800–1940}, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1987.
non-international match in the English rugby calendar. However, the number of universities in America grew exponentially in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, due in large part to the impact of the Morrill Land-Grant Acts of 1860 and 1892, precisely the period in which football became identified as an educational asset, a marker of social distinction, and, not least, a significant revenue generator. This intertwining of football and the universities provided the platform for the subsequent exponential growth of the college sports' system. In contrast, there were barely a dozen universities in the UK in 1900, and the expansion of higher education was slow and piecemeal until the 1960s. British university sport therefore never had the opportunity to acquire the geographic spread or national significance that college sport acquired in twentieth-century America.

Despite this eventual divergence, the environment within which football initially emerged in the America of the 1860s and 1870s was one heavily shaped by British culture and ideology. And, as we shall see, the subsequent debates that eventually produced the distinctive American version of football were not unique to the United States but took place in a transnational context.

**Football emerges in America**

As we have seen, the standard work on how and why the rules of football in America came to diverge from those of rugby is David Riesman and Reuel Denney’s 1951 article ‘Football in America: a study in cultural diffusion’. Despite its age, this account has been accepted by almost all subsequent academic historians of American football and has never been subject to serious historical examination. This is somewhat surprising because Riesman and Denney’s research into the early years of the sport is derived almost entirely from an 1886 article by Walter Camp, ‘The game and laws of American football’, published in the sports monthly *Outing*.

Dubbed ‘the father of American football’ by Caspar Whitney, the editor of *Outing*, Walter Camp attended Yale from 1876 to 1882 and was the outstanding football coach of his era, the most prominent member of the Intercollegiate Football Association’s rules committee, and a prolific writer on the sport. The 1886 article is perhaps Camp’s most detailed explanation of the divergence between the rugby and American codes of football. In it he argues that, after initially adopting the English Rugby Football Union’s (RFU) rules, Americans were confronted with numerous ‘ambiguities’ in the rules and the playing of the game which led them to reform it to suit American sensibilities and attitudes. The rules had to be amended, he reasoned more concisely in a later article, because of ‘the absolute lack of any existing foot-ball lore or tradition on American soil. The English game was one of traditions. “What has been done can be done; what has not been done must be illegal”

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answered any question which was not fully foreseen in their laws of the game.’

In a long discussion of rugby rules, Camp argued that ‘the first difficulty American players encountered was in rules eight and nine of the Rugby Union’, pointing to an apparent ambiguity in the RFU’s rules governing the definition of a ‘dead’ ball (when the ball was stationary on the ground, necessitating a stoppage in play and the formation of a scrum).

But this account is problematic in terms of both facts and context. There is no factual evidence that the Intercollegiate Football Association (IFA) ever discussed rules eight and nine of the RFU. At the first meeting of the IFA’s Rules Committee in November 1876, it reviewed all fifty-nine rules of the RFU in force for the 1874–75 English rugby season. There is no record in the minutes of the meeting that rules eight and nine were debated; indeed, they were left unchanged. The meeting amended just two rules – relating to scoring and match officials – and added another two, regulating the size of the pitch and specifying that each team must comprise fifteen players. In this the Americans anticipated two changes that the RFU would also make to their own rules in 1879 and 1892 respectively.

As this last point highlights, rugby’s rules at this time were not fixed or static (as might be inferred from Camp’s writings) but in a state of flux and development. Indeed, the ‘ambiguities’ of many of the RFU’s rules were as much an issue in England as in America. The observation of an unnamed ‘Yale Player’ in 1889 that ‘the [Rugby] rules were also deeply ambiguous. It was frequently impossible to decide with certainty a disputed point, in which case play was suspended, often for fifteen to twenty minutes, while the referee held a watch in his hands and the judges and the captains wrangled’ was as true in Britain as it was in the United States. Here, too, matches were regularly delayed while points were disputed and consequently, as one English rugby player from the 1870s admitted, ‘the more plausible and argumentative a player was, the more likely was he to be considered as a captain’. Indeed, the formation of the International Rugby Football Board in 1886 was the direct consequence of an on-field dispute that took place during the 1884 England versus Scotland international match about the ambiguity of the ‘knock-on’ rule. And anyone who has witnessed recent debates over the National Football League (NFL)’s ‘tuck rule’ or rugby union’s ‘crouch, touch, pause, engage’ scrummage rule could also argue that controversies around the ambiguities of football rules are just as much in evidence today.

But the central argument of Camp’s 1886 article concerned the ambiguous nature of the scrum in rugby. For him, and for those who have followed his analysis of the evolution of American football, this represented the central difference between British and American conceptions of the game: ‘English players form solid masses of men in a scrummage and engage in a desperate kicking and pushing match until the ball pops out unexpectedly

23 Camp, ‘Game and laws’, p. 69.
somewhere, leaving the struggling mass ignorant of its whereabouts, still kicking blindly where they think the ball may be.\textsuperscript{27} To remedy this, the IFA adopted Camp’s proposal in 1880 to introduce an orderly ‘snapback’ after a player with the ball had been tackled, whereby the two sets of forwards would line up opposite each other and the ball be put back into play by being heeled back by the center to the quarterback. This, Camp argued, did away with the uncertainty and ambiguity of the scrum. According to the sports historian William Baker, this constituted Camp’s ‘newest and most revolutionary proposal’.\textsuperscript{28}

But Camp was not unique. The problems of the scrum were also under scrutiny in other parts of the football-playing world. In Australia, football clubs in and around Melbourne playing the Victorian (later to become known as Australian) rules code, which had originally been based on a version of Rugby School rules, were gradually reforming the scrum out of existence. More importantly for our purposes, a significant debate about the scrum had emerged in Canada in the mid 1870s, significantly before Camp’s proposals. On 16 October 1875 a ‘football convention’ had been held at Rossin House Hotel in Toronto, at which representatives of nine football clubs discussed adopting a common set of rules. The meeting decided to adopt the rules of the RFU but three delegates, including those from McGill University and University College Toronto, voted against, ensuring that the debate on football rules would continue. Much of their opposition was based on a dislike of the scrum, which a sympathetic correspondent to the Toronto Daily Globe described as ‘an exhibition of brute force by thirty men crushing and jamming in a surging mass’.\textsuperscript{29}

This debate continued with some vigour over the next few weeks, with supporters of Association and rugby rules contributing. Most importantly, the McGill delegate to the convention was reported to have described scrums as ‘monotonous, uninteresting and dangerous’ and explained that in Ontario some football clubs simply refused to take part in scrums. ‘The majority of disinterested spectators will probably conclude that it is far more interesting and more scientific practice for members of a team to kick or play into each others hands, than for both sides to engage in a melee where no advantage results from precision, agility or experience’, he argued.\textsuperscript{30} Indeed, it would appear that both McGill and University College Toronto played a form of rugby without the scrum, predating Camp’s ‘revolutionary’ reform.

**Scrummages and scrimmages**

Camp therefore was clearly not the first nor the only person to propose radical reform of the traditional rugby scrum. Moreover, a close reading of the available documentary and contextual evidence suggests that the abolition of the scrum was not an isolated revolutionary act in itself but a direct outcome of another, earlier reform in the game: Yale’s insistence that football should be played by teams of eleven.

According to Parke H. Davis, Yale’s commitment to eleven-a-side football derived from a visit to New Haven in 1873 by a team of footballers from Eton College in England, who

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\textsuperscript{27} Camp, ‘Game and laws’, p. 72.


\textsuperscript{29} Toronto Daily Globe, 23 October 1875.

\textsuperscript{30} Toronto Daily Globe, 12 November 1875.
played their own eleven-a-side code, three years before Camp began his freshman year. Yale and Eton played each other under a hybrid set of rules on 6 December 1873, with Yale unexpectedly winning by two goals to nil. Consequently, eleven-a-side replaced twenty-a-side as Yale’s football configuration of choice. Harvard had also originally favoured fewer players than rugby’s then customary twenty-a-side. The original 1872 rules of the Harvard Football Club had specified that a team should consist of ‘not less than ten nor more than fifteen players’. In 1875 they played two matches in Canada with eleven players per team. When they met Yale at New Haven in November 1876 for only the second time, they each played with eleven men. The return match the following week at Boston was played with ten men on each side.  

At its first meeting in 1876, the IFA – essentially composed of Harvard, Princeton, Columbia, and (from 1879) Yale – decided that matches should be played between teams of fifteen. It is worth noting that on this issue the IFA was slightly ahead of the RFU – it was not until 1877 that all rugby matches were played fifteen-a-side and the RFU did not formally change its rules until 1892. Yale did not accept the decision and argued in favour of eleven-a-side. In 1877 it suggested to Harvard that the game might be played thirteen-a-side but was rebuffed. Yale unsuccessfully pushed for eleven-a-side at the 1878 and 1879 IFA meetings but it was not until the meeting in October 1880 that the reduction in players on a team to eleven was adopted. It was this move to eleven players that fundamentally changed the nature of the scrum, opening the door for all future innovations in American football.

Although the debate over how many players should comprise a team may appear to be secondary to other rules, in practice it can determine the technical development of the game. Having fewer players on the playing field creates greater space and consequently speeds up a game. To appreciate why the American move to eleven-a-side rugby had such profound consequences, we must first understand the nature of the scrum in mid-nineteenth-century rugby.

The rugby scrum of the 1860s and 1870s bore little resemblance to that of the modern game. Most importantly, for this discussion, it had precisely the opposite purpose. Its aim was not to heel the ball back and out of the scrum but to drive it forward and scatter the opposing forwards. Writing in 1877, the RFU secretary, Arthur Guillemand, explained the peculiar mechanics of the contemporary scrum. As soon as the player carrying the ball was stopped by a tackle,

the forwards of each side hurry up and a scrummage is instantly formed, each ten facing their opponents’ goal, packed round the ball, shoulder to shoulder, leg to leg, as tight as they can stand, the twenty thus forming a round compact mass with the ball in the middle. Directly the holder of the ball has succeeded in forcing it down to the ground, he shouts ‘Down’ and business may be commenced at once.  


34 For example, see John Sayle Watterson, College football: history, spectacle, controversy, Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003, p. 19; Baker, Sports, p. 129.

The forwards did not crouch as today but stood upright. The ball was not put into the scrum by a scrum-half but placed on the floor by the player in possession of the ball, who was deemed to be at the centre of the scrum. Crucially, the forwards were not expected to heel the ball out but to kick the ball forward, break through the opposing scrummagers, and dribble the ball downfield. Known in Britain as ‘straight-ahead propulsion’, this was the heart of the sport and consequently, out of a twenty-a-side team, there would often be as many as fifteen forwards per side.

As in America, many British rugby followers were dissatisfied with the scrum’s dominance of the game and sought to move it away from what the weekly *Bell’s Life in London* described as ‘monotonous shoving matches’. As a consequence of this, pressure to reform the sport increased and by 1877 games were played fifteen-a-side. But just as the reduction of teams to eleven changed the nature of the scrum in America, so too did the move from twenty-a-side to fifteen-a-side in Britain. Scrum no longer lasted for minutes, because it was easier for the ball to come out of the scrum. The frequency with which the ball now came out from the scrum meant that forwards began to look for opportunities to break away from the scrum and dribble the ball downfield independently. The ball also began to be passed from the scrum-half to the other backs to start attacks. Moreover, and to the horror of traditionalists who tried unsuccessfully to persuade the RFU to outlaw the practice, teams began to deliberately heel the ball out of the scrum in order to start a charge of backs and loose forwards up the field. In 1878 the rules were further amended so that a tackled player – who would previously hold the ball until his forwards gathered around him to form a scrum – was forced to release the ball immediately the tackle was completed. The game was now faster and more open. These changes led Arthur Budd, a future president of the RFU, to remark that the change to fifteen-a-side ‘marked the dawn of modern scientific football’.

Thus, far from being an example of American exceptionalist thinking, reform of the scrum and a reduction in the number of players was also underway in Britain at exactly the same time as it was across the Atlantic. But in America the change to eleven-a-side teams was far more profound. Although Yale preferred a mere six forwards, seven became the standard number of forwards, sometimes known as rushers, in American football. However, a traditional scrum was impossible with so few players. In rugby, propelling the ball forward through a thicket of fifteen or more pairs of legs and boots took considerable skill and strength. Opponents could line up several columns deep, preventing headway from being made for considerable periods. With seven or fewer opposing forwards, in contrast, the ball could not be contained in the scrum for any length of time. The lack of depth in the scrum meant that kicking the ball forward resulted in it quickly emerging out on the opponents’ side, giving them use of the ball to set up their own attack. Conventional scrummaging thus became wholly counter-productive. Yale and the other teams playing eleven-a-side rugby therefore began to line their forwards up in a single line, which became known as the ‘open formation’, with the intention of transferring the ball behind them to their backs as quickly as possible.

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36 *Bell’s Life in London*, 16 October 1875.
37 Frank Marshall, ed., *Football: the rugby union game*, London: Cassell, 1892, p. 120.
Yale officials were well aware of the consequences of the move to eleven-a-side. At the same IFA meeting in 1880 that approved the reduction to eleven-a-side teams, a resolution was also passed that redefined and renamed the scrum:

A scrimmage takes place when the holder of the ball, being in the field of play, puts it down on the ground in front of him and puts it in play while on side, first, by kicking the ball; second, by snapping it back with his foot. The man who first receives the ball from the snap-back shall be called the quarter-back, and shall not then rush forward with the ball under penalty of foul.\(^\text{38}\)

The first part of the new rule was simply a restatement of the old rugby rule – which had itself been superseded by the RFU’s 1878 amendments – and it should be noted that the use of the word ‘scrimmage’ was not an American development, as Camp would later claim. It was used interchangeably in Britain with ‘scrummage’ until at least the 1900s.\(^\text{39}\) But it was the legalization of ‘snapping’ or heeling back the ball by the foot that was a fundamental change. In Britain, heeling the ball backwards out of the scrum was still highly controversial because it was thought that by putting forwards in front of the ball they would be in violation of the off-side law. At the RFU’s general meeting in March 1880, Gypsies Football Club unsuccessfully proposed that heeling out of the scrum should be made illegal. The Americans were also aware of this dilemma and the off-side law was amended several times by the IFA in the 1880s. Camp himself discussed the development of heeling out of the scrum in an 1899 article.\(^\text{40}\)

There was one further consequence of the American move to eleven-a-side. Teams that continued to play fifteen-a-side rugby found it difficult to compete against sides who were experienced in the eleven-a-side version: the rugby tactic of the forwards driving the ball forward played into the hands of those who employed the ‘open formation’ at the scrum. This presented particular problems for teams in Canada, for whom matches against American university sides were both prestigious and, owing to the sizeable crowds they attracted, profitable. In 1879 the University of Toronto visited the University of Michigan and agreed to play according to RFU rules but with eleven players per side. The success of the game was such that at the return match in Toronto the following year the Canadians opted for eleven-a-side rather than fifteen. The efficacy of the open-formation scrum tactic could also be seen in 1885, when Michigan visited Ontario to play against Windsor and recorded an 8–2 victory despite playing under fifteen-a-side rugby rules.\(^\text{41}\) The continual success of Harvard teams when playing against opponents from north of the border, even when playing fifteen-a-side, was a constant source of frustration for Canadians. Thus the open formation and its single line of forwards also became the dominant form of rugby in Canada, not least because the Canadians ‘wish[ed] to fight the Harvards with their own weapons’.\(^\text{42}\) Once more, we can see the international context of the development of the football codes.


\(^\text{39}\) See for example the use of ‘scrimmage’ in the Manchester Guardian, 20 September 1906. Camp’s claim is in Camp, ‘Game and laws’, p. 73.

\(^\text{40}\) Walter Camp, ‘Methods and development in tactics and play’, Outing, 37, 2, November 1899, p. 172.

\(^\text{41}\) Detroit Free Press, 2 November 1879; Michigan Argonaut, 14 November 1885.

\(^\text{42}\) Montreal Gazette, 2 November 1881.
Transatlantic problems, transatlantic solutions

The problems inherent in the RFU’s rules of rugby were therefore not only the concern of Walter Camp and other American footballers but part of wider debate across the English-speaking football world about how to play a handling form of football. In many ways, the development of the American game echoed and even foreshadowed many of the debates and developments that would take place not only in Canadian football but also in British rugby.

Alongside the replacement of the scrum with the snapback, the most obvious difference between rugby and American football – at least until the legalization of the forward pass in 1906 – was the latter’s acceptance of ‘interference’ (‘obstruction’ in rugby parlance), whereby players could obstruct opponents who were not carrying the ball. Defined by Camp as ‘the assistance given to a runner by a companion or companions who go before him and break a path for him or shoulder-off would-be tacklers’, this appeared to be a fundamental break with the rugby tradition. Yet even this was a development of a tactic that had been used in rugby until the 1870s. At Rugby School itself, not only could the ball carrier be stopped but ‘the “first-on-side”, i.e. the one nearest the ball on the opposite side might also be hacked over or charged, but not tackled’. Blackheath, the leading rugby club of the nineteenth century, developed a tactic in the 1860s which featured, according to the RFU president Arthur Guillemard, ‘forwards charging down the ground as an advance guard to ward off opponents from the back who [sic] was in full run with the ball behind them’. Writing in 1898, B. F. Robinson described the tactic of ‘tandem play’, whereby ‘a halfback with the ball [would] run round the back of the scrummage, and be so covered by his companion on the other side that neither the halfback on that side nor the nearest three-quarter could get at him’. It was not until 1888 that the RFU ruled that, except in a scrummage, it was ‘not lawful for a player to charge against or obstruct any opponent unless such opponent is holding the ball’.

Rugby’s was not the only code in which obstruction was tolerated. In the early days of Association football, obstructing or knocking the goalkeeper out of the way by opposing forwards (known as ‘charging’) was a legitimate tactic and entirely within the laws of soccer as they stood until 1893. Most prominently, in Australian Rules football, obstructing opposing players has historically been a legitimate tactic, known as ‘shepherding’. Thus, once more, American football was not so much innovating as developing a feature already present in British football codes.

Moreover, we can see further points of contemporary similarity between the American and rugby forms of football. For example, passing the ball (known as lateral passing in modern American football) initially seems to have been as common, if not more so, in the American game as in rugby. Harvard in particular became known for their eagerness to pass

44 Anon, ‘Football as played at Rugby in the ’sixties’, Rugby Football, 3 November 1923.
the ball among players, in contrast to the rugby players’ then traditional reluctance to do so. Indeed, passing in the early history of rugby was rare and only became common in the 1880s. Commenting on Harvard’s ‘almost monotonous success’ against Canadian teams in 1880, one writer pointed to the fact that ‘the two styles vary as to passing. The English game discountenances passing, except in rare cases, whilst the Harvards always shy the ball back when about to be tackled, that is, if it be at all possible.’49 A few days earlier a practical example of this style of play had been provided by Harvard captain W. H. Manning in his side’s match against the Britannia club, who fulfills himself the responsible duty of receiving the ball as it comes out of the scrimmage.

The Intercollegiate Convention having passed a rule that the ‘snap-backer’, as he is called, i.e. the man who catches the ball as it is thrown back from the scrimmage, should not run with the ball himself, Manning with unerring aim shies the ball to one of his half-tends, sometimes one and sometimes another.50

In fact, unlike American football today, the game in the 1880s placed a much greater premium on passing combinations between players. An 1887 article on ‘The American game of foot-ball’ in the Century Magazine noted that:

‘Passing’ the ball, or throwing it from one to another, is another feature of the game. Hardly any combination of team-playing and individual skill is more noteworthy than the sight of a first-rate team carrying the ball down the field, each player taking his turn in running with the ball and, when hard pressed, passing it over the head of an opponent to one of his own side, more fortunately situated, who carries it farther.51

Indeed, the designation ‘quarterback’ for the player positioned directly behind the forward line – an apparently defining feature of the gridiron game – was commonly used in Scottish and Irish rugby before the 1890s. In Scotland, backs were originally arranged as ‘quarterback, half-back and full-back’, using the same terminology as in North America, rather than the English system of ‘half-back, three-quarter back’, and ‘full-back’.52 American football’s formalization of the role of the quarterback, whose duty was to pass or kick the ball but initially not to run with it, once more anticipated the development of what became known as the ‘passing game’ in British rugby. Following the RFU changes to the scrum rules in 1878, the speed with which the ball could be heeled from the scrum brought a new importance to the role of scrum-half (roughly the equivalent of the quarterback), who could now pass the ball quickly from the scrum to his three-quarter backs. This set off a chain of developments that would fundamentally alter the rugby game itself. The number of three-quarters increased from one or two to three and then, owing to an innovation of the Welsh, to four three-quarters in 1884, reflecting the new opportunities to pass and run with the ball. The scrum itself became more organized and planned. Teams in the north of England used quick heeling of the ball out of the scrum and allocated specific positions

49 Montreal Gazette, 2 November 1880.
50 Montreal Gazette, 27 October 1880.
to their forwards in the scrum, echoing the increasing ‘specialization’ of players across the Atlantic.53

Further similarities in the debates in football on both sides of the Atlantic can be seen in the struggle over the nature of rugby that would lead to the 1895 split, resulting in the creation of two distinct forms of rugby, league and union. Walter Camp’s support for the primacy of the touchdown (the equivalent of rugby’s try) over the goal – ‘the advocates of team play were especially strong against such a premium as existed on what seemed to be but an act of individual skill’ – would have found a supportive hearing from many British rugby players.54 In the north of England, where the game had rapidly grown into a mass commercial spectator sport, the emphasis shifted from scrummaging and the scoring of goals to an open passing game in which scoring tries rather than goals was viewed as rugby’s raison d’être. In 1892, James Miller, the president of the Yorkshire Rugby Union, argued for the reduction of players from fifteen to thirteen in terms not unlike those of the American reformers:

by lessening the number of forwards taking part in a game, he was convinced it would be a reform which would ... bring the game nearer the perfected state. It was clear to him that the end of the ‘pushing age’ had been reached and instead of admiring the physique and pushing power of those giants which took part in the game in the early stages, at any rate in the future they would be able to admire the skilful and scientific play of the game.55

When English rugby finally split in 1895 over the question of ‘broken-time’ payments to players, the style in which the game should be played was an important issue. Hence the first major reform of the rebel Northern Union (which became the Rugby Football League in 1922) after the split was to make the value of a try worth more than a goal.

Indeed, the new body continuously reformed the rules of rugby to decrease the importance of scrummaging and emphasize the running and passing game. The decisive differences between the rugby league and rugby union codes emerged in 1906 when the new code reduced teams from fifteen-a-side to thirteen and introduced the ‘play-the-ball’, whereby a tackled player would regain his feet, place the ball on the ground, and play it backwards with his foot to a teammate, known as the acting half-back. It bore more than a passing resemblance to the original snapback legislated for by the IFA in 1880. Princeton’s Richard Morse Hodge’s description of the American scrimmage in 1888 applied equally to the rugby league play-the-ball. The aim of the snapback was to ‘accomplish the restoring of play when the ball has been brought to a standstill by a tackle. ... the position of the ball in the field should be the same and the team in whose hands the ball became “dead” should retain it in possession when it is put again in play.56

The adoption of the snapback in American football and the play-the-ball in rugby league also gave rise to similar problems caused by the automatic retention of the ball by the tackled

53 For Thornes, see Yorkshire Evening Post, 21 and 28 November 1903.
55 Yorkshire Post, 9 October 1892.
player’s team. Both innovations meant that it was possible for one team to monopolize possession almost at will. By not kicking or passing, it was possible to ensure that the opposing team was completely starved of the ball. The most notorious example of what became known in America as the ‘block game’ was the 1881 Princeton versus Yale encounter, when each side effectively controlled the ball for a full half of the match. The IFA’s solution to the problem was the introduction of a rule decreeing that if, after three consecutive scrimmages (or ‘downs’ to use the rugby term), a team ‘shall not have advanced the ball five yards or lost ten, they must give up the ball to the other side at the spot where the fourth down was made’. This was not a uniquely American solution to the problem. Rugby league suffered from similar problems of unlimited possession, a phenomenon known as the ‘creeping barrage’ game. After a debate that lasted from the 1920s to the 1960s, the answer was found in the introduction of a limited number of tackles – the equivalent of downs – and the requirement that if a side had not scored after four tackles they would forfeit possession of the ball.

Once again, we can see that concerns over the problems and indeed the ambiguities of the RFU’s rules of rugby were not confined to the United States. This was a transnational debate that took place across the English-speaking world. In Canada, the north of England, and to a lesser extent south Wales, the rules of rugby were being questioned and reformed from the 1870s, as would later happen in Australia and New Zealand. In the previous decades, the same critical impetus had caused footballers in Melbourne to modify Rugby School rules. Although the answers to these problems differed, there is nothing uniquely national in any of the solutions adopted by the various football organizations. Rather, the emergence of the snapback and its variations, together with limitations on the number of downs or tackles in Canadian football and rugby league, suggests a fundamental similarity in the way in which these issues were approached on both sides of the Atlantic.

This point is illustrated further if we move back to an even earlier stage in the evolution of football in the United States and consider the case of Princeton’s rules of football. Although this is commonly viewed as a form of soccer, the written rules adopted at the foundation of the Princeton Football Association in October 1871 are scant and vague. If we turn to contemporary accounts, however, it appears that the Princeton code of football also bore some resemblance to the Australian Rules code of football played at that time largely in Melbourne. One of the distinct features of Australian Rules is a rule that forbids players from carrying the ball as they run, instead insisting that they bounce it on the ground every few yards. Yet bouncing the ball while running was also a central feature of Princeton football rules before the college adopted the standardized IFA rules, as an old player, W. J. Henderson, remembered: ‘You were positively forbidden to carry the ball in your hands a greater distance than one yard. You must kick it, or else throw it upon the ground, causing it to bound; and by catching it again and bouncing it again, you might

57 The ‘block game’ is described in Camp, American football, p. 19.
58 Proceedings of the Convention of the IFA, 14 October 1882, reprinted in Davis, Football, p. 468. This was later increased to four downs in which to move the ball 10 yards forward.
59 See Tony Collins, Rugby league in twentieth century Britain, Abingdon: Routledge, 2006, pp. 112–13. It was later increased to six tackles.
60 Davis, Football, pp. 51–2.
advance it.’ This was not the only rule that Princeton shared with Antipodean footballers: ‘if you desired to pass the ball to a fellow player, you had to bat it. Batting the ball was done with the closed fist ... there was no such thing as off-side play’. These two aspects of Princeton football survive as central features of Australian Rules football today. Furthermore, as in the Australian game, tackling was not allowed by Princeton but shoulder-charging, known as ‘butting’, was legal.61

This is not to suggest that the Princeton code was directly influenced by the Australian game or vice versa. Rather, it highlights the extent to which the early development of the rules for playing football had little to do with national characteristics and was based on a largely technical appreciation of the efficacy – and enjoyment – of playing under different rules. The problems presented by playing football were common to the game wherever it was played and the solutions were limited by the nature of football itself. Thus it should not be surprising to find similar rule innovations emerging in the various codes of football played around the world.

**Walter Camp and the invention of an American tradition**

In the early years of the development of American football, the sport was not necessarily viewed as a uniquely national version of football by its supporters. In 1881 Harper’s Weekly published an article on ‘foot-ball’ rules that claimed that the American ‘modifications are mostly technical, and have little interest to any but foot-ball players’. Four years later, a sister publication stressed the international nature of football: ‘the great beauty of this game is that although English boys discovered it and Americans took it up, yet it is not any more English or American than it is French or German’.62 Even as late as December 1893 the New York Times could call the game ‘rugby’ in the headline of a major article on the growing danger of mass plays in American football.63

The chief proponent of the idea that the code of rules that was adopted in the United States represented a uniquely American phenomenon was Walter Camp himself. Amateur and professional historians have without exception accepted the views of Riesman and Denney that Walter Camp was the single individual responsible for the development of American football from its rugby origins. Most recently, Allen Guttmann has claimed that ‘to a remarkable degree, the impetus behind the transformation [from rugby to football] came from a single man’.64 Camp was certainly an innovator but he was also an adept publicist for his chosen sport. In his writings he sought to justify his rule innovations as both

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61 W. J. Henderson, ‘College football twenty-five years ago’, Outing, 37, 1, October 1899, p. 16. It is also worth noting that a former Yale student, Rudolf Wurts, who became a senior transportation official in Melbourne in the 1890s, thought that Australian Rules football was ‘as near as can be the game played at Yale’ in 1879: quoted in Walter Camp, Football facts and figures, New York: Harper & Bros, 1894, p. 163.


63 ‘Change the football rules: the rugby game as played now is a dangerous pastime’, New York Times, 2 December 1893.

64 Guttmann, ‘Civilized mayhem’, p. 535. Bizarrely, Riesman and Denney also accepted the myth that a single individual, William Webb Ellis, was responsible for inventing the rugby code.
a corollary to American national characteristics and a rejection of the traditional British old world in favour of a practical, dynamic, modern America.

To achieve this, he claimed that football in America was ‘bound by no traditions and [had] seen no play’ of football beyond the United States. But this seriously exaggerates the isolation of the sport in the United States.\(^{65}\) As we have already seen, there were deep-seated cultural ties between Britain and the elite east coast universities in which football blossomed. Yale’s first football president and captain, David Schley Schaff, who was to become a noted biblical scholar, had been educated in England at Rugby School itself and was the driving force behind football at New Haven. Meanwhile, it was the November 1873 visit to Yale by an Eton football team that played a crucial role in popularizing the idea of eleven players on a football team.\(^{66}\) There were regular matches from at least 1874 between east coast, and later Midwest, colleges and their counterparts in Canada. Debates between advocates of ‘British football’ and supporters of American innovations were reported in the press. For example, in April 1882, the *New York Times* reported on the objections of the newly formed ‘British Foot-Ball Club’ to the local adaptations of rugby rules.\(^{67}\) And, of course, *Tom Brown’s schooldays* circulated almost as widely in the US as it did in Britain.

Moreover, Camp himself was highly aware of the wider football world and its developments. His 1911 article ‘Rugby football in America’ compared, not entirely unfavourably, American football with the rugby union, rugby league, and Australian Rules codes, and showed significant knowledge of the strengths and weaknesses of each.\(^{68}\) Undoubtedly, the vast majority of Americans who took their places on the football field or in the bleachers would have been unaware of the wider debates about how football should be played, but a significant proportion of those in the leadership of the sport were not. It is not unrealistic to suggest that Camp used national identity as a way to legitimize the rule changes that he promoted. In 1876 the United States had celebrated the centenary of its independence from Britain and Camp was keen to assert football’s unique place in the national culture, as A. G. Spalding would do for baseball.\(^{69}\) Thus a narrative emerged which suggested that America differed in sporting matters from the old British world as fundamentally as it did in politics and economics.

This view has generally been accepted by historians. Many have also highlighted Camp’s career as a director of the New Haven Clock Company as an example of the ‘managerial and technocratic perspective’ that he brought to football, contrasting it with the more relaxed and informal ways of football in Britain.\(^{70}\) This was a view endorsed by his contemporary supporters. Caspar Whitney, Camp’s collaborator and editor, compared football on both sides of the Atlantic from a similar perspective: ‘Neither the Rugby Union nor the Association approaches our game either in skill or demand on the players’ physical endurance’, he wrote in

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\(^{66}\) Davis, *Football*, pp. 24, 40.

\(^{67}\) *New York Times*, 9 April 1882.


his 1894 *Sporting pilgrimage*. ‘It would be utterly impossible to fit our football players on the slight training done by the Englishmen, whose season of preparation is very much shorter, and whose game is simplicity itself compared with ours’. John Corbin, an American who studied at Balliol College, Oxford, and played rugby for the college in the 1890s, observed that:

the Englishman has on the whole subordinated the elements of skill in combination to the pleasantness of the sport, while the American has somewhat sacrificed the playability of the game to his insatiable struggle for success and his inexhaustible ingenuity in achieving it. More than any other sport, Rugby football indicates the divergent lines along which the two nations are developing. By preferring either game a man expresses his preference for one side of the Atlantic over the other.

There is clearly some truth in these comments, as a glimpse at Anglo-American sporting rivalry in rowing and athletics during the early twentieth century demonstrates. But Whitney and Corbin were describing football only as it was played at Oxford and Cambridge universities by upper middle-class young men schooled in the codes of amateurism. In reality, by the time both were writing, rugby and Association football had become mass spectator sports throughout Britain’s industrial towns and cities, with professional players and highly commercialized cultures.

Although they may have differed in style, the men who ran professional soccer and rugby league in industrial Britain were often no less managerial or technocratic than Camp and his fellow American football coaches. It has been claimed, most recently by Guttmann but originally by Riesman and Denney, that Camp’s reforms represented a unique form of American ‘procedural rationalization’ born of its ‘industrial folkways’. But leaders of soccer’s Football League and the Rugby Football League, not to mention their players, were largely drawn from the intensively competitive industrial society in England’s north and midlands. They were also fiercely committed to the pursuit of victory and, like Camp, they too campaigned for changes to the laws of their football codes, and introduced trainers and tactics into their sport. ‘Specialization’ – players who were selected for particular positions in a team – was a feature not only of Camp’s coaching method but also of professional sport in Britain, and much condemned by supporters of amateurism. Men such as the Preston North End manager William Suddell could almost be described as counterparts of Camp. Suddell was the manager of a cotton factory and, like Camp, was a believer in the use of ‘science’ and management in sport. Interviewed in 1887, he declared that ‘[Association] football is played more scientifically than it ever was, and that is solely due to the fact that in a professional team the men are under the control of the management and are constantly playing together’.

The description of play as ‘scientific’ was the highest compliment that could be paid to a British player of soccer or rugby.

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Moreover, it is worth noting that Suddell and his fellow managers of professional soccer and rugby league teams were, like college footballers and coaches, also adept at ‘taking advantage of the rules’ of their sport. Michael Oriard has argued that this was a uniquely American practice, calling it a ‘a national genius for circumventing’ regulations. Yet Suddell and others had successfully evaded the Football Association’s amateur regulations in the 1880s and forced it to recognize professionalism in 1885. Their counterparts in rugby league in the north of England had spent even longer in a subterranean war with rugby’s amateur regulations. The ability to extract maximum advantage from the written rules or to ignore them completely would become a widely admired quality among professional rugby league players. This was also a constant issue in Canadian football, to the extent that the 1884 rules of the game explicitly stated that the union viewed ‘with grave apprehension the fact that a number of clubs now seem to make a point of playing according to the letter instead of the spirit of the law .... They earnestly appeal to the different clubs in Canada to unite in an effort to suppress this quibbling spirit.’

There was clearly nothing uniquely American about gamesmanship or unalloyed cheating in football under any code.

And in one key respect Camp stood firmly in the ‘old world’ traditions of the British establishment. Unlike the leaders of the professional football codes in Britain, he was a staunch advocate of amateurism, the shibboleth of the English middle-class gentleman. In 1889 he moved the motion to outlaw all forms of payment to players and to forbid former or current professionals from participating in college football. In contrast, Suddell and his ilk stood firmly in the modern age: ‘professionalism must improve football because men who devote their entire attention to the game are more likely to become good players than the amateur who is worried by business cares’. Despite the rhetoric of science and modernity, Camp and his followers were as committed to amateurism as the most hidebound member of the RFU or the Amateur Football Association in England. Writing in 1891, he admitted that ‘there is one common ground between the English rugby unionist and the American, and that is the amateur status of the sport. Both are going to be menaced by professionalism in the near future, and if they could unite upon rules there is no doubt that an international assistance might be rendered.’ Indeed, the amateur regulations proposed by Camp and adopted by the IFA in 1889 demanded that any athlete accused of professionalism had to prove his innocence, a violation of the principle of ‘innocent until proven guilty’ that even the RFU shrank from adopting in 1894 in the midst of the crisis that led to the split of 1895.

Some American supporters of amateurism were even more explicit than their British counterparts in seeing sport as a device for social segregation. Commenting on the rise of

76 Oriard, Reading football, p. 30.
77 Canadian Rugby Football Union, Constitution and laws of the game, Toronto: Canadian Rugby Football Union, 1884, p. 16.
78 Meeting of the IFA Graduate Advisory Committee, 4 November 1889, reprinted in Davis, Football, p. 478. See also Parke H. Davis, ‘The two problems of amateur athletics’, Outing, 19, 3, December 1891, pp. 197–200.
79 Suddell quoted in Carter, Football manager, p. 18.
working-class participation in British sport, Caspar Whitney attacked as ‘quite incompre-
hensible’ the desire to ‘bring together in sport the two divergent elements of society that
never by any chance meet elsewhere on even terms’\textsuperscript{82} This class-consciousness was also
expressed by Dr John C. Loveland, writing in Camp’s 1894 *Football Facts and Figures*, who
thought that football was invaluable to ‘the man of the future [who] must be able to elbow
his way among rough men in the foul air of primary elections; he may need courage enough
to take his part in vigilant and safety committees and the like; he may need to “tackle”
an anarchist now and then and perhaps oftener’.\textsuperscript{83} The supposedly ‘democratic’ and
‘equalitarian’ attitudes of American footballers, to which Riesman and Denney ascribe the
early rule changes, were as absent from their worldview as they were from the outlook of
the supporters of amateurism in Britain.\textsuperscript{84} In this, as in much else on and off the field, the
founders of American football shared more with the old world they claimed to reject than
they would admit.

There is of course one final, rather obvious, point to be made. If sporting Americans such
as Camp were so keen to differentiate themselves from the British and their culture, why
choose to play football, a sport that in all its forms in the nineteenth century was
synonymous with Britain and its empire? In Europe, members of the Turner and Sokol
gymnastic movements opposed the playing of ‘British’ football and sought to counter its
popularity with a nationalist-based alternative. The fact that elite American colleges chose
football – and ignored the gymnastics practised by the large number of Turner clubs that had
been founded by German immigrants to the United States since the 1840s – underlines the
close, if not unproblematic, proximity between the English-speaking white middle classes
around the world and, consequently, the transnational nature of the development of the
football codes in the nineteenth century.\textsuperscript{85}

It is therefore possible to suggest that, by highlighting the differences between rugby and
American football and ignoring the similarities of playing styles and debates within the two
forms of football, Camp and the historians who followed him created a consciously national
narrative that sought to legitimize the changes made to the game in the 1870s and 1880s.
Indeed, as we have seen, there is little factual basis for the explanation given by Camp for the
evolution of the rules of football in America. Moreover, there is nothing uniquely American
in the debates about the rules nor in the attitudes towards them on the part of coaches and
players. Consciously or not, Camp’s writings helped to invent a creation myth about the
origins of American football that had little or no justification in reality.

**Conclusion**

In fact, the major innovation of American football that had no precedent in rugby and was
unique among the various handling codes of football was not introduced until 1906. This
was the forward pass, which was legalized in order to rescue the game from the brutal,

\textsuperscript{82} Whitney, *Sporting pilgrimage*, p. 164.
\textsuperscript{83} Camp, *Football facts*, p. 47.
\textsuperscript{84} Riesman and Denney, ‘Football’, p. 317.
attritional battle of mass plays that it had become.\textsuperscript{86} American football was the first – and until 1929, when Canadian football followed its lead, the only – rugby-derived football code to cross the Rubicon of allowing the ball to be passed forward. More than any other it was this change that gave the game its distinctive nature.

Yet, strangely enough, no historian has sought to argue this position. This is perhaps because the introduction of the forward pass presents a particular problem for the traditional narrative of American football. Unfortunately for the proponents of the view that Walter Camp was the father of the game, the forward pass was not advocated by him. The new innovation was proposed by John C. Bell of Pennsylvania and Paul J. Dashell of the Naval Academy, and was met with indifference or downright opposition by many of the leading names in football.\textsuperscript{87} Camp’s stance has been characterized by David Nelson, the leading historian of the rules of American football, as that of ‘a non-supporter’.\textsuperscript{88} Although Camp made no public statement about the forward pass, one might speculate that his lack of enthusiasm was founded on a residual distaste for something that so clearly violated rugby’s original commitment to the off-side rule. In short, he appears to have retained some of the underlying attitudes of nineteenth-century British football.

By 1906, American football had become the major winter sports spectacle of the United States, attracting crowds in the tens of thousands, often exceeding those for baseball, and commanding vast amounts of coverage in the press. It had become the concern not only of university presidents, for whom the game provided considerable revenue, but of the President of the United States himself, Teddy Roosevelt.\textsuperscript{89} Its cultural importance and the role that it played in the educational and entertainment life of the United States meant that it was now a truly American sport, with few if any links to its British rugby ancestor. It was at this point, when it had become part of everyday American cultural life, that the rugby connection finally atrophied and football would develop on purely American lines.

Thus, the transnational football world of the English-speaking middle classes that had emerged in the mid-nineteenth century began to disappear. As each code acquired popularity, commercial appeal, and cultural relevance in its nation or region, the transnational debates that shaped the first decades of codified football ceased to have relevance to sports that now had their national markets to serve and societal imperatives to follow.\textsuperscript{90} Paradoxically, it was only soccer, the last football code to be exported beyond the British Isles, that would become a truly global sport.\textsuperscript{91} And the American game, which had both been shaped by and


\textsuperscript{87} Minutes of the American Intercollegiate Football Rules Committee, 12 January 1906, reproduced in Davis, \textit{Football}, p. 112.

\textsuperscript{88} For Camp’s attitude to the forward pass, see Nelson, \textit{Anatomy}, pp. 116–20.


\textsuperscript{91} Soccer’s failure to become the dominant football code in the United States, often pointed to as another example of American exceptionalism in sports, was repeated in every other English-speaking country, with the exception of England and Scotland. Soccer predominantly became the game of the non-anglophone world.
anticipated debates taking place around the rugby football world, would become one of the most insular codes and glory in its supposed exceptionalism. If American football did not emerge initially as an expression of American exceptionalism, its separation from other codes of football by the 1900s meant that it could be portrayed as, and present itself as, an exemplar of the apparent uniqueness of the American character and experience. Not only did society now influence football; football also influenced society.

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