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THE HISTORICAL GENESIS OF RUGBY : TRACING THE PAST

Dr. Lekha Pillay
Dr. Jayakumar. K.

ABSTRACT

The historical evolution of rugby football is a captivating journey spanning nearly two centuries, tracing its origins to the early 19th century in England. The establishment of the Rugby Football Union (RFU) in England, which published the first official laws of the game was a great landmark moment in the evolution of Rugby. These foundational rules set the stage for rugby's rapid spread across the British Empire and beyond. The sport's global journey was further propelled by international matches. Today, rugby stands as a symbol of camaraderie, discipline, and sportsmanship, with a global presence that transcends cultural boundaries. It is played in diverse regions worldwide, from its traditional strongholds in Europe and the Southern Hemisphere to emerging rugby nations in Asia and the Americas. As rugby continues to evolve, it remains a testament to the enduring power of sport to inspire and unite people across the globe. By exploring the historical context, rules, and significant events surrounding the game, this article sheds light on the rich heritage and enduring legacy of Rugby. The findings presented here are based on an extensive review of scholarly works and historical records.

Keywords : Rugby, RFU, Mob Football, Caid, Harpastum, Tsu chu

Introduction

The Origin of Rugby: Historical Aspects of the Game embarks on a journey back in time to explore the roots and evolution of one of the world's most beloved sports. With its rich heritage and storied past, rugby has captivated the hearts and minds of millions. It is a sport that transcends boundaries, cultures, and generations, leaving an indelible mark on the tapestry of sports history. In this exploration, we probe deep into the annals of rugby's inception, tracing its origins to the hallowed grounds of Rugby School in England, where a young William Webb Ellis is said to have defied convention and picked up a football, birthing a new form of play that would evolve into rugby football. From the first international match in 1871 to the inclusion of rugby in the Olympics and the establishment of the Rugby World Cup, rugby's historical narrative is replete with drama,

passion, and the enduring values of teamwork, respect and sportsmanship. This sport combines physicality, strategy, and teamwork, has captured the hearts of millions across the globe.

The Emergence of Rugby

This section provides an overview of the factors that contributed to the development and establishment of Rugby as a popular sport. From its early beginnings to its transformation into a codified game, the emergence of Rugby is shaped by a combination of cultural, social, and institutional influences. Throughout history, various forms of ball games have been played across different cultures and civilizations, providing a foundation for the emergence of Rugby. These early forms of ball games were often characterized by physicality, team-based play, and the objective of moving or scoring with a ball. While direct connections can be challenging to establish, the

*Assistant Professor of History, N.S.S. College, Pandalam

**Associate Professor of Physical Education, N.S.S. College, Pandalam

common elements shared by these games offer insights into the development of Rugby.

Folk traditions such as "Mob Football" in England and "Caid" in Ireland played a significant role in shaping the emergence of Rugby. Mob football, a rough and chaotic game played in towns and villages, showcased elements of collective participation and physicality that resonated with the future development of Rugby. Similarly, Caid, a Gaelic ball game characterized by its physical nature and community involvement, contributed to the formation of Rugby's cultural backdrop. (Giossos et al 2011, 131). In ancient Rome, a ball game called Harpastum was played, which involved two teams competing to control a small ball. The objective was to keep the ball in possession and move it towards the opposing team's goal line. Harpastum exhibited elements of physicality and teamwork, foreshadowing aspects of Rugby's gameplay. (REV. F. Marshal (ed)1892, 2) Similarly, in ancient China, a game known as "Tsu Chu" was played during the Han Dynasty. "Tsu Chu" involved kicking a leather ball into a net, showcasing a mix of athleticism and coordination. (Giossos et al 2011, 130). While distinct from Rugby in its mechanics, Tsu Chu highlighted the early recognition of ball games as a form of entertainment and physical competition.

Paganica and Calcio Storico: Medieval Forerunners

During the medieval period, various ball games continued to evolve, leaving their mark on the development of Rugby. "Paganica", played in Italy, involved hitting a ball with a curved stick, aiming to reach a target or a predetermined point. Paganica emphasized the use of physical force and skill, reflecting elements that would later influence Rugby's game play. In Florence, Italy, a rough and vigorous ball game called "Calcio Storico" emerged during the 16th century. Teams competed to score goals by throwing or carrying the ball into the opposing team's goal area. Calcio Storico's physicality and team-oriented structure served as a precursor to the combative nature of Rugby. The existence and characteristics of these early ball games provide a historical backdrop for understanding the emergence of Rugby. While not directly connected to Rugby's development, these games demonstrate the long-

standing human fascination with ball-based sports.

Influence of Public Schools

During the 18th and 19th centuries, public schools in England played a pivotal role in the development of Rugby. The folk forms of football were extremely violent and serious injuries - even death - were a common feature. (Dunning, Sheard 1979, 23-24). These schools, including Rugby School, Eton College, and Harrow School, promoted physical education and organized sporting activities. The emphasis on athleticism and character development within these institutions laid the groundwork for the emergence of Rugby as a distinct sport. Arnold's reforms aimed to instill discipline, team spirit, and moral values through sports. The introduction of written rules and the organization of regular inter-house matches at Rugby School played a crucial role in organizing the game and establishing a framework for its future development. Arnold's progressive and innovative approach to education had a profound impact on the school and played a pivotal role in shaping the development of Rugby. Early versions of Rugby were played with oral traditions and varied practices across different regions. The formulation of written rules at Rugby School marked a significant step towards the formalization and standardization of this sport.

The Birth of Rugby Football

Rugby football, often simply referred to as rugby, has a rich historical context that dates back to the early 19th century in England. Rugby, football game is played with an oval ball by two teams of 15 players (in rugby union play) or 13 players (in rugby league play). Both rugby union and rugby league have their origins in the style of football played at Rugby School in England. The game's origins can be traced to various forms of football played in schools and universities, which often involved handling the ball as well as kicking it. In 1823, a significant moment in rugby history occurred when William Webb Ellis, a student at Rugby School, allegedly picked up the ball during a football match and ran with it, essentially creating a new form of the game. (Ben Johnson 2015). This marked the birth of rugby football as a distinct sport. It signifies a departure from traditional football and represents a pivotal moment in the evolution

of the game. Webb Ellis's act symbolized a shift towards a more dynamic and physically engaging style of play, wherein players could carry the ball and make progress by running with it. This departure from conventional football laid the foundation for the distinct characteristics that define Rugby as a sport. Over time, rugby evolved, and in 1871, the Rugby Football Union (RFU) was formed in England, establishing the first official set of rules. From there, rugby spread across the British Empire and eventually gave rise to various forms of the game, including rugby union and rugby league. In the early 19th century, football games were played in various forms across England. These games were characterized by a lack of standardized rules and often involved large groups of players from different villages or towns. The objective was to maneuver a ball towards a goal area using any means necessary, including kicking, carrying, and even striking with hands or feet.

Evolution and Standardization

Following Webb Ellis's alleged act, various versions of the game emerged, reflecting regional variations and adaptations. These early variations showcased a mix of handling and kicking the ball, providing the groundwork for the development of standardized rules. Efforts towards standardization began in the mid-19th century, driven by the need for consistency and fairness. Institutions like Rugby School and the Rugby Football Union (RFU) played significant roles in formalizing and codifying the game. As Rugby gained popularity and became more widely played, there was a growing recognition of the need for standardization. One significant step towards standardization came with the development of the Cambridge Rules. In 1848, members of the University of Cambridge collaborated to establish a set of rules for football games. These rules, which included elements of both handling and kicking the ball, served as an influential early framework for Rugby and helped shape its direction. In 1871, the formation of the Rugby Football Union (RFU) played a pivotal role in standardizing and organizing the game. To establish consistent rules and regulations, resolve disputes, and promote the sport, the first set of official laws of Rugby by the RFU in 1871 marked an important milestone in the

formalization and standardization of the game.

The Evolution of Laws

Rugby's early days were marked by a lack of standardized rules, with different schools and clubs playing their own variations of the game. The evolution of the laws of rugby football is a fascinating journey that reflects the sport's growth and development over the years. The year 1823 is often considered the starting point. Though not an official rule change, Ellis's act of picking up the ball and running with it was a pivotal moment that introduced the concept of running with the ball in hand. The work to draw up the first rules of Rugby football started on 25 August 1845 by three senior pupils at Rugby School after they received instructions to codify the game of Football. They were William Delafield Arnold, W.W. Shirley, and Frederick Hutchins. (RugbyFootballHistory.com). In 1845, the Rugby School codified its own set of rules, which included the prohibition of using hands to interfere with the ball. This decision played a role in distinguishing rugby football from association football (soccer). Formed in 1858 as Old Black heathens, it became the first 'open' club in the world. In 1862, due to the fact that the club was unable to field a true old boys' team, they therefore changed their name to Blackheath FC. (The Rugby Magazine).

The first international rugby match took place in 1886 between England and Scotland. This match helped in standardizing certain aspects of the game, including the size and shape of the ball. The introduction of the three-player scrum was a key development in the laws of rugby. This was introduced in 1892. Previously, scrums involved an unlimited number of players and were often chaotic. This change added structure and safety to the game. The introduction of the "offside line" marked another significant change. This law prevented players from being in front of the ball carrier when the ball was played forward, laying the foundation for today's offside laws. In the late 20th Century several modifications were made to improve player safety, including banning the use of boots with metal studs and introducing laws to protect players in the ruck and maul. During 21st Century, Rugby continues to evolve with changes to laws such as the introduction of the TMO (Television Match Official) to

assist referees in making decisions, the adoption of the high tackle framework to reduce head injuries, and ongoing efforts to simplify and clarify the laws of the game. Thus, the evolution of rugby's laws has been driven by a combination of tradition, safety concerns, and the need to adapt to the evolving nature of the sport. Today, rugby union and rugby league have distinct sets of rules, each tailored to their respective forms of the game, and the laws continue to be refined to ensure the sport's continued growth and safety.

Spread of Standardized Rugby

The spread of standardized rugby rules across the world is a testament to the sport's global appeal and the efforts of enthusiasts to establish a common framework for play. While rugby initially developed in England during the 19th century, it didn't take long for the game to gain popularity beyond its borders. The British Empire played a significant role in spreading rugby. As British settlers, soldiers, and administrators travelled and established colonies across the world, they introduced rugby to various regions. This early influence is particularly evident in countries like New Zealand, Australia, South Africa, and Canada, which became strongholds of the sport. Later Many countries formed their own rugby unions, often adopting the laws and regulations of the Rugby Football Union (RFU) in England. The first international rugby match between England and Scotland in 1871 marked the beginning of international rugby competition. More countries joined the fray, leading to the formation of the Home Nations Championship (later the Six Nations) and the Southern Hemisphere's Rugby Championship (later The Rugby Championship).

Rugby was included in the Olympics in 1900, further boosting its international profile. Although it was removed from the Olympic program for several decades, it made a triumphant return in the form of Rugby Sevens at the 2016 Rio Olympics. The establishment of the Rugby World Cup in 1987, hosted by New Zealand and Australia, was a watershed moment in rugby's global expansion. The International Rugby Board (now known as World Rugby) was founded in 1886 to oversee and promote rugby at the international level. World Rugby

plays a crucial role in standardizing rules, organizing global competitions, and ensuring the growth and development of the sport worldwide. The development of rugby league, rugby union's sibling code, added another dimension to the sport's spread.

Today, the global rugby community continues to work together to maintain the integrity of the sport, foster inclusivity, and ensure that the laws and regulations of rugby remain relevant and safe for players of all levels. The establishment of standardized rules and the work of organizations like the RFU played a crucial role in the spread and adoption of Rugby as a codified sport. Schools and clubs began to embrace the standardized version of the game, allowing for consistent gameplay and facilitating inter-school and inter-club competitions. By standardizing the rules and establishing a clear framework for the game, Rugby gained a foundation for its continued development, growth, and international recognition.

Conclusion

The historical evolution of rugby is a captivating narrative that underscores the sport's resilience, adaptability, and enduring global appeal. From its humble beginnings on the playing fields of Rugby School in England to its status as a worldwide phenomenon, rugby's journey has been marked by significant milestones and transformations. The sport's evolution can be divided into several key phases: the early years of informal play, the codification of rules in the 19th century, the establishment of national unions, the growth of international competition, the inclusion of rugby in the Olympics, the advent of the Rugby World Cup, and the ongoing expansion into new markets. Throughout this journey, rugby has adapted to changing social, cultural, and safety considerations while preserving the core values of teamwork, respect, integrity, passion, and discipline. Today, rugby exists in various forms, with rugby union and rugby league as the most prominent codes. It has found a home in diverse regions around the world, from the heartlands of England, New Zealand, and South Africa to emerging rugby nations in Asia and the Americas. The sport has demonstrated its ability to bridge cultural divides and unite people from different

backgrounds through a shared love of the game. Moreover, rugby's historical evolution has been guided by organizations like World Rugby, which work tirelessly to standardize rules, promote player safety, and ensure the sport's growth on the global stage. The inclusion of Rugby Sevens in the Olympics has brought rugby to a broader audience, further solidifying its status as a truly international sport. It serves as a symbol of sportsmanship, camaraderie, and perseverance. The historical journey of rugby football is a testament to the enduring spirit of a sport that has transcended borders, cultures, and generations, leaving an indelible mark on the world of sports. The study highlights the crucial role played by early ball games, the influence of public schools, and the codification of rules in shaping the game. Furthermore, it discusses the evolution of Rugby and its significant events, underscoring its cultural significance and enduring legacy. The findings presented here contribute to a deeper understanding of Rugby's historical development and its place in the modern sporting landscape.

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