

A dark, rainy night scene at a stadium. A tall floodlight tower stands on the left, and a man in a light-colored jacket stands in the foreground on the right. The ground is wet and reflective, and the sky is dark with some light clouds. The overall atmosphere is moody and atmospheric.

# FOOTBALL IN WIND AND RAIN

The Making of  
the British Game

John Williams

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*Part One*

*Inventing the People's Game*

Football as a barbaric celebration. The many frustrating early problems of producing a viable (round) football. The first written rule-makers for modern team sport and the English public schools. The men from the FA outwit the hackers and crunch some laws for a national game for all. Football's working people in the north start to take football ownership. England first play Scotland – but in a very gentlemanly way. The FA Cup arrives as a very messy affair, with easy routes to the first final. The amateur Spiders from Scotland offer English elites stiff early competition. The first football professionals are finally here – and they are mainly Scottish. Women are barred from playing football, but not from watching or reporting on it. In East London, Oxford alumni Arnold Hills wants the game to enrich the lives of his Ironworks employees, but not at any price.

## The Barbaric Game

THE FIRST recorded example of a team game involving a ball – in fact it was a rock – is probably *Tchatal*, played by the Aztecs in old Mesoamerican cultures over 3,000 years ago. Hard core. There are also plenty of images around of *Cuju* or *Tsu Chu* in ancient China, one of the earliest-known recorded games played with a leather ball stuffed with feathers and hair. *Tsu Chu* even has some loose similarities to modern football, although it dates all the way back to the Han dynasty of the second century. *Calcio storico* (historic football), played by rich Italian aristocrats, can be traced to Florence in the Middle Ages. The French like to talk about their own *La soule* from the 14th century, a clearly organised team game played with a solid-looking ball. There are others, but none lead to the development of the modern game.

If you still think that a wet Tuesday night's football in Stoke (insert your own preference here) is a primeval masculinity test, then read on. Because you just might consider now some of the challenging *British* roots of the modern association version of the world's greatest game. Crude variations of a sport that is identifiably a version of 'football' have been played here for centuries. In 1603 King James I had debarred 'foot-ball' from his court for its wanton violence. About the time of the French Revolution in the 1790s, some youths from Kingston-upon-Thames were taken to court because of their role in a riotous 'football' match played on Shrove Tuesday. Their defence? That in the past, raids by Viking warriors had been heroically defeated by English townsmen, and the prized heads of the invaders had

been used as footballs. Naturally, these inventive and patriotic young men were acquitted of all charges.

Recognisable, but chaotic, early 'football' matches in England were often staged in town centres, but this disreputable 'people's amusement' was gradually moved, by law and proclamation, outside towns because of the public nuisance and injury it caused. Matches would now typically be played on festival weekends, across open fields and rivers. They enjoyed patronage from local landowners and even reluctant employers, and they could last hours, or even days in some cases. These wild sporting bouts had their own traditions but no written rules or laws; hands, feet and the head were all in ready use. They were based on local hearsay, and were contested at first by possibly hundreds of local young men, before they began to evolve into smaller-scale local match-ups, often for wagers (11 to 20 a side). No formal colours were involved and, invariably, drink would have been taken by participants and onlookers alike. Hobnailed boots might be worn. Mind your head.

Depending on local customs, these contests could be extremely violent, or else just intensely physical. Either way, serious injury – and even fatalities – were common. Old scores could be settled, so you needed to trust your luck and watch your back. Ball shape and quality – even by now an important matter – was always up for grabs. The ball itself was typically shunted around the field by a collective combination of booting, catching and handling. In some places, kegs or small barrels were used. When traditional or pre-modern folk forms predominated in the early 1800s, matches were typically played out using smaller, harder, oval or even rather straight-sided footballs – balls whose bounce was likely to be muted and highly unpredictable. All this was exaggerated by the churned, or uneven, surfaces of local commons or farmland. A popular, less violent team sport played mainly with the feet would eventually evolve from all this.

At this stage, there was no 'positional' organisation of the players, nor much in the way of thoughtful attempts to somehow 'get outside' or weave through the opposition. Essentially, early folk football, in all its varieties, was a highly localised celebration of collective strength, brute force and masculine bravery, much more than it was of inventive passing or moments of sublime skill. Think about how pre-modern warfare was waged and you are getting there. As the philosopher Gavin Kitching points out, these games were typically played out in an almost exclusively 'straight ahead' fashion; 'goals' were scored by physically forcing the ball through the opposition ranks and reaching a target or crossing a natural marker, rather than by outwitting opponents and scoring between posts. Sam Allardyce-style tactics ruled. Massed rushes forward while controlling the ball were typically met, head-on, by a massed defence and, as a result, a great deal of the play was what we would now call violent 'scrimmaging'. The group scrimmage – push and maul as hard as you can, while someone in your ranks looks after the ball – remained a defining feature of the early years of the organised association game. It survives today, of course, in rugby union.

You can still find versions of these early folk forms played out today by young men in towns and cities all over Britain: in Hallaton and Medbourne in Leicestershire; in Stirling in Scotland; in Ashbourne in Derbyshire; in Alnwick in Northumberland, and in many more locations. They are still important for local people, but are mainly maintained today as tourist attractions and part of place marketing. Look how crazy we once were – until technology came to the rescue.



# It All Starts with a Ball

*There is always a beginning: it all starts with the ball.*

YOU CAN see the oldest-surviving inflatable football found anywhere in the world at the Stirling Smith Art Gallery and Museum in Scotland. Slightly smaller than a modern football, it sits regally in a small glass case on a plinth resting on some lush green velvet. It has the feel of a valuable old treasure and oozes mystery and class. We can only guess that this ball might have been miskicked or overthrown during a ball game played at some time during the 1540s, because it became lodged behind panelling in the rafters of Mary Queen of Scots' chamber in Stirling Castle during James V's reconstruction of the castle (1537–1542). (The early 'long-ball' game perhaps?) The Queen was certainly well known for having a taste for tennis, golf and other ball sports. She even recorded the playing of 'foote-ball' in her diaries while staying at Carlisle Castle. Some suggest she may have hidden the ball behind the panelling because witches feared its magic.

This ball eventually fell to earth once more during enabling works carried out in 1981, but it was soon mislaid again. It was rediscovered in 1999 in the archives of the museum, and tests confirmed that it was, indeed, around 436 years old. We are not told whether it was successfully bounced on its recovery: I do hope it was. Made of a pig's bladder with a leather cover, this remarkable sporting relic reminds us how animal organs were used before finally giving way to the more rounded, inflated

rubber version of a ball in the 1860s. A Colonel Ferguson in the 1840s, a young scholar based at the Edinburgh Academy, memorably described the art of getting an early modern pig's bladder football inflated and ready for play. You would not want to try it yourself:

The ball was composed of a raw bladder. Fresh – but that is hardly the word – from the butcher's hands, enclosed in a leather case. The 'blowing' of this contrivance was a disgusting operation in which a quill was used as a mouth-piece. The process was taken in turns as a necessary, but repulsive, duty – one not without risks. Consequently, it was considered prudent to perform the operation of orally inflating the bag at home because, as certainly as anyone attempted to do so at school, somebody would watch his opportunity and, when the bag was three-quarters filled, squash the whole thing flat. The effect of the foul blast from the unsavoury interior of the ball, thus forced down the throat of the unhappy blower, is not to be described.

Footballs around at this time were never truly spherical, of course; they were individually unique, broadly plum-shaped oddities. The precise form of each individual animal bladder ultimately dictated the final shape of the ball; which is one reason why the handling and kicking versions of early football remained so indistinct. Colonel Ferguson and his ilk would need to wait at least another 20 years for these imperfections – and this inflating torture – to stop. By 1855, the American Charles Goodyear (of tyres fame) had designed and manufactured the first vulcanised rubber ball, in the USA, but the first-known inflatable rubber insert used for a ball in Britain arrived later, in 1862.

Its inventor, Richard Lindon, lived near Rugby School and his ball was soon modified into a shape for those prestigious British colleges and universities who originally favoured the handling code – rugby. Tragically, Lindon lost his wife, Rebecca, to lung disease at a relatively young age, but not before she had produced a full squad of 17 children. Lindon believed that, rather than the childbirth stresses, it was Rebecca's selfless role in blowing up and inhaling from so many green pig bladders for footballs that caused her early death.

Fuelled by grief, Lindon was determined to develop a safer, man-made bladder to improve the shape and size of his 'balls for football'. His early India rubber versions required a new pumping device – so no more sucking in animal poisons – but the final round-ball product was still far from perfect. Initially it was distorted because two large leather buttons were required to hold the external stitching together. But at least *this* ball guaranteed a more rounded shape, more sure-footed play and more consistency on the ground. It also meant that early football clubs emerging from different parts of England could now play against each other without having to worry too much about variations in codes or in the size and shape of the ball produced by the home side. Finally, of course, it promised that early innovators, like Lindon, who were in the sports equipment business might be able to celebrate the life of their devoted and dutiful wives for just a little while longer.