David Stubley

GAMECHANGERS & RAINMAKERS

How Sport Became Big Business

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PART ONE

Flat Caps and Blazers

'Sport – an activity involving physical exertion and skill in which an individual or team competes against another or others for entertainment' – The Oxford Dictionary

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1850–1914

Old Etonians. William Webb-Ellis. Pierre de Coubertin.

HUMANS HAVE participated in sport for millions of years. Neanderthal man were expert archers, the Romans raced chariots, and 'kolfers' hit a pebble around the west coast of Scotland with a bent stick. The game of football has also been around for centuries and was originally known as 'mob football' with hundreds of villagers trying to transport an inflated pig's bladder from one end of their town high street to the other.

If we fast forward to the mid-Victorian era, it was a time of growing conflict across Europe. Britain's top public schools were therefore keen to teach students the values of teamwork in order to prepare them for the likelihood of military service. Quite soon, an unwritten hierarchy formed which favoured the boys who were good at sport and with the leg-up continuing on to university, with a rowing blue from Oxbridge often impressing employers far more than anything academic these young men could point to.

Something else the top schools liked about team sports was that learning to play by the rules imbued in their students the values of behaving like a gentleman: an odd British concept which a Swedish friend once asked me to describe and which I found hard to define. We therefore Googled it together and words like 'chivalrous, courteous and honourable' came pinging back at us. Although my favourite description came from *The Life of Pi,* with the lead protagonist describing an English gentleman as 'someone who still uses a butter knife even when dining alone'.

Whatever definition we go with, the reason this one word matters so much to this story is that for years it was weaponised by the privileged few as private sports clubs emerged as safe spaces where 'the old boys' could carry on enjoying their top-dog status. To gain entry

you first needed to get proposed and then seconded by other old boys, which acted as perfect filters to keep out the riff-raff. Once elected you then swapped your old school uniform for the new club blazer and tie and were welcomed into the inner sanctum. Today, people complain their clubs are run by 'the old-boys' network' but in the 1800s they literally were, as private member clubs such as the Jockey Club and Marylebone Cricket Club (MCC) took it upon themselves to codify the rules of sport and decide who could and could not take part.

As their economy prospered, wealthy Americans soon became interested in how they too were perceived in society but unlike in Britain there was no convenient class system to put them in their place. Getting involved in sport was therefore an excellent way to show everyone how well you were doing. Take John Cox Stevens, for example: a successful steamboat entrepreneur from New Jersey who in 1821 offered $1k to anyone who could run ten miles in under an hour. He went on to establish the New York Yacht Club (NYYC), which 30 years later challenged the Royal Yacht Squadron to a race around the Isle of Wight after his members had built an elegant 93ft schooner to represent their club. They christened her *America* and in the summer of 1851 she proceeded to trounce Britain's fastest sailboats in their home waters. As the fleet neared the finish line off Cowes, Queen Victoria who was watching onboard the royal yacht, turned to her signal-master and asked him who was in the lead. 'The *America* your Majesty,' he replied. She then asked who was coming second and received an answer Nike's ad agency would have been proud of: 'Ah, your Majesty, there is no second.'

Back in the day, if you wanted to run, row, bat or sail for your club or country, then you needed to be a member of one of these clubs. Oh, and also be expert at using a butter knife.

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#1 THE FOOTBALL SPLIT

(London, October 1863)

JC Thring was the headmaster of Uppingham School and in 1863 wrote *The Basic Rules of Football,* which included how to score a goal, how to take a goal kick and, wait for it, … the first offside rule. However, many clubs at this time preferred playing by rules invented by Rugby School, which not only allowed players to kick the ball but also to pick it up: hence our first rainmaking moment, which took place at the Freemasons Arms in Covent Garden in 1863 and involved ten clubs from the London area who wanted to agree a common set of rules for football so they could all play each other fairly.

At their first meeting they decided to call themselves the Football Association of London (FA) and voted Ebenezer Morley, the founder of Barnes FC, as their secretary. Over the next 44 days and four follow-on meetings, it was agreed the group would go with Rugby's version of the game: handling was therefore now going to be OK, along with Rugby's other odd rule that allowed players to 'hack' opponents in the shins. All was therefore well until Morley arrived at the sixth meeting and told his colleagues he'd changed his mind and couldn't get comfortable with either hacking or handling. The supporters of Rugby's rules were furious and, since they were also unwilling to back down, there was only one possible solution: to form two codes, with one allowing its players to pick up the ball, run with it and hack one another. And another which did not.

Morley wasted no time putting his legal skills to work and within days had written the 13 rules of Association Football, which included how big the pitch should be, outlawed handling, and my personal favourite which stated that 'no player shall wear projecting nails, iron plates, or gutta percha

on the soles or heels of his boots'. Meanwhile, Edwin Nash – the secretary of Richmond FC – called another meeting at the Pall Mall restaurant for clubs like his who wanted to carry on playing the 'rugby-type of game'. The gathering attracted 21 clubs who decided to call themselves the Rugby Football Union (RFU) and over lunch voted unanimously to play by the rules developed by their namesake. However, the bust-up up with Morley had obviously left its mark on some of them too, since they surprisingly voted to also ban hacking. This decision must have seriously hacked off Morley when he heard about it but undeterred he went on to serve as president of the FA for seven years and left behind him an enduring legacy which included introducing the FA Challenge Cup with its first final played at the Kennington Oval in 1872, won by the old boys of Harrow.

Congratulations, therefore, to our first rainmaker, Mr Ebenezer Cobb Morley, who gifted us the FA Cup, a spherical ball to kick and a crossbar for Ruud van Nistelrooy to hit. As for the Freemason's Arms? Well, you can still enjoy a pint in there today as it celebrates its rightful place in history with FA memorabilia on the walls and multiple plasma screens showing Sky Sports on a loop. You can also watch both codes of football in the Ebenezer Morley pub in Hull and the William Webb Ellis in Twickenham, whom legend tells us was the student at Rugby who was the first to pick up the ball and run with it.

North v South

The Industrial Revolution was led by a cohort of northern mill and factory owners who worked their employees hard, usually seven days a week, and often in unpleasant conditions. In the late 1800s, workers therefore formed trade unions to fight for their rights, which soon led to the Factory Act of 1874, which was a pivotal moment for this story, since it ruled that workers must be given time off

at weekends to rest. Employers subsequently encouraged their staff to set up works teams since they saw it as a good way for them to keep fit. In 1878 the carriage workers of the Lancashire and Yorkshire Railway formed Newton Heath FC, who a few years later changed their name to Manchester United and began playing at a ground called Old Trafford. Meanwhile, other clubs such as Everton FC, Derby County and Burnley FC formed as offshoots of local cricket clubs and some grew out of English pub culture, with one in north London formed by regulars of The White Hart who played on a pitch down the lane.

During this prosperous period in history, towns across the north competed ferociously with one another for the honour of having the most elegant town hall or most attractive park. The idea of civic pride therefore became important to Victorians and expressing it on the football pitch soon became part of the rivalry. Local businessmen then started to get interested in the game, but not to make money (since the FA rules only allowed dividend payments up to five per cent), but for the kudos of being associated with something the people living and working in their community cared passionately about. Like club directors, players weren't allowed to be paid either, although that was easily solved by ambitious clubs like Blackburn Rovers paying their players through the owner's private company and was a loophole that led to regular complaints. One of these involved Notts County, who complained to the FA that Rovers' star striker Jimmy Douglas had been paid to play in the 1884 cup semi-final, although a subsequent FA inquiry discovered that Douglas was in fact listed on the payroll as a mechanic at the owner's mill.

As the motivation to win increased, the policy of self-regulation was clearly not working and so a few clubs joined in the Notts County chorus and threatened a breakaway competition unless changes were made, with historian Simon Heffer explaining the pressure this placed on

football's governing body: 'The FA had to capitulate to survive, which it did on 20 July 1885. It decided to allow payment of players provided they had been born or had lived for two years within six miles of the club's ground. Football's evolution into a predominantly working-class sport would soon be complete.' This was a good start, but the big clubs were still unhappy since now there was an expectation from their players that they would be paid to play, which meant the owners faced the new challenge of having to fund a sizeable wage bill which could only be covered by selling matchday tickets. The big clubs therefore turned on the FA again and accused them of prioritising FA Challenge Cup matches over scheduling more lucrative derby games that would sell out and therefore help them pay the bills.

In 1888, William McGregor, a director of Aston Villa FC, wrote to 11 of the top English clubs to propose a new Football League competition. However, he wasn't looking for a revolution, just the opportunity to play more games that would attract big crowds. His suggestion was thus that the new league should continue playing under FA rules but that two home and away fixtures should be scheduled each season between league teams. That way, Villa would be guaranteed two games against their arch-rivals West Bromwich Albion and their fans could also jump on the new railway network to enjoy a day trip to Wolverhampton and Nottingham. It all made sense, and so in May 1888 the English Football League was formed with six founding teams from Lancashire (Blackburn Rovers, Bolton Wanderers, Preston North End, Burnley, Accrington and Everton) and West Bromwich Albion, Derby County, Notts County, Stoke and Wolverhampton joining Villa as the six founding clubs from the Midlands.

As Association Football started to get organised, interest in rugby football was growing fast too, especially amongst the working people of the north, with the catalyst

being the launch of the Yorkshire Challenge Cup, which held its first final in 1877 between Halifax and York, attracting a huge crowd of 9,000 fans. With growing excitement around this competition, towns like Batley and Leeds set up their own clubs and, as gate receipts grew, money started to become available to pay players for the wages they were missing out on when representing their club. However, this development didn't go down at all well with the southern clubs, who feared the direction of travel was to follow Association Football towards the pathway to professionalism. With the growth in the north, the RFU sensed their control of the game was slipping away and so a new rule was introduced which stipulated that rugby football could only be played by amateur clubs and that fines would be issued to anyone found to be paying their players to play. A game of cat and mouse then ensued until the RFU upped the stakes in 1898 by announcing that any game which was played at a ground charging an entrance fee would have the result declared void. These latest 'establishment punishments' were a step too far for the northern clubs, who didn't have wealthy benefactors to lean on like their southern cousins, so losing gate receipts would make it impossible for them to survive. A meeting of the top clubs in Yorkshire and Lancashire was therefore hastily arranged at the George Hotel in Huddersfield to discuss the idea of a new breakaway league codenamed 'The Northern Rugby League'. A unanimous vote then decided players would be paid and that new rules would also be introduced to make this league more exciting, which included scrapping the line-out, changing the scrum format and reducing the number of players on the pitch to 13.

'*Take Me Down to the Ballgame*'

John Higham wrote a fascinating book called *The Reconstruction of American History,* which analysed the

transformation of North America from a continent of just seven million people to a population of over 70 million. He believes sport played an important part in shaping modern America as German settlers imported their love of gymnastics and the Irish brought with them their passion for prize fighting and horse racing.

Towards the end of the 1800s football was introduced by British workers and was soon adopted by America's elite colleges, who again couldn't decide whether or not to pick up the ball. Harvard liked the rules of rugby, McGill preferred Morley's, and so the two teams alternated the rules whenever they played one another. As the game's popularity grew, Walter Camp, a former Yale alumnus, phased in a new set of 'American' rules and, just like the northern rugby clubs, decided to introduce new ideas to make the game more exciting, which included the touchdown and allowing players to throw a forward pass.

In 1892, the success of American football helped create another new sport that would emerge as the nation's third power sport and also have a profound impact on the lives of young people living in urban America. It was the idea of Dr James Naismith, a PE instructor from Springfield College, Massachusetts, who was looking for an indoor activity to help keep his footballers fit during the winter months. He therefore nailed two peach baskets to each end of his gym and told players to try and score a 'basket'.

If football was emerging as the most popular game to play in England, then its equivalent in America was a game which evolved as a hybrid of rounders and softball and one that Higham believes played a big part in helping to galvanise immigrant communities. As wealth and leisure time increased, baseball fans soon became happy to pay to watch the top players, which in 1876 led to the creation of Major League Baseball (MLB) featuring the Boston Red Stockings, Chicago White Stockings, Cincinnati Red Stockings, Hartford Dark Blues, Louisville Gray's,

Mutual of New York, Philadelphia Athletics, and the St Louis Brown Stockings.

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#2 THE CREATION OF THE MODERN-DAY OLYMPIC GAMES

(Paris, June 1896)

In 1886, a 23-year-old French baron visited Rugby in search of inspiration to help restore his country's broken morale after the humiliation of the Franco-German war. After a guided tour of the school, he was impressed with how competitive sport had been integrated into the curriculum and so when Pierre de Coubertin returned to Paris, he decided it was a model the top French schools could benefit from in order to strengthen the character of their own young men. He therefore created the *Union des Societies Francaises des Sports Athletiques* (USFSA) which he briefed to tour schools across the country and teach students about the values of competitive sport.

Like many Europeans of this era, De Coubertin had developed a deep fascination with Ancient Greece and a personal interest in the Olympic Games, which was a religious festival created to honour the Greek god Zeus and involved hundreds of cities competing against each other in a range of athletic events. In 1894 De Coubertin was then invited back to England by William Penny Brookes to watch the Olympian Games, which was an event he'd created in the small Shropshire village of Much Wenlock. He was a doctor and was convinced playing sport could help improve the health of young people, and when he heard about the Frenchman's interest in using sport to drive societal change, he wanted him to experience the Olympian Games and to discuss the idea of creating an international version.

In June 1896, De Coubertin was invited to attend an international sports conference in Paris and seized the

opportunity to pitch the idea. These were tense times in Europe, and the notion of using sport as a platform to unite the world therefore landed well with delegates, who agreed they would create an organisation to make it happen. They called it the International Olympic Committee (IOC) and felt it would be symbolic if the first event was staged at its spiritual home. They also devised an Olympic flag with five interlocking rings to personify the world's five continents, and chose black, red, blue, green and yellow so each athlete could identify with at least one colour from their national flag. Two years later the first modern Olympic Games took place in Athens with 200 athletes representing 13 individual nations.

Despite dedicating his entire life to developing the modern Olympic movement, unlike many of the rainmakers we'll meet in this book, De Coubertin did not profit personally from his work. In fact, he died almost penniless, although as the IOC's website explains, this man's motivation was never to make money for himself: 'Baron Pierre de Coubertin was only 1.62m (5ft 3in) tall, but by many measures, he was a giant of the 20th century. Born into the French aristocracy on 1 January 1863, he became a champion of the common man, embracing the values of France's Third Republic – liberty, equality, fraternity.'