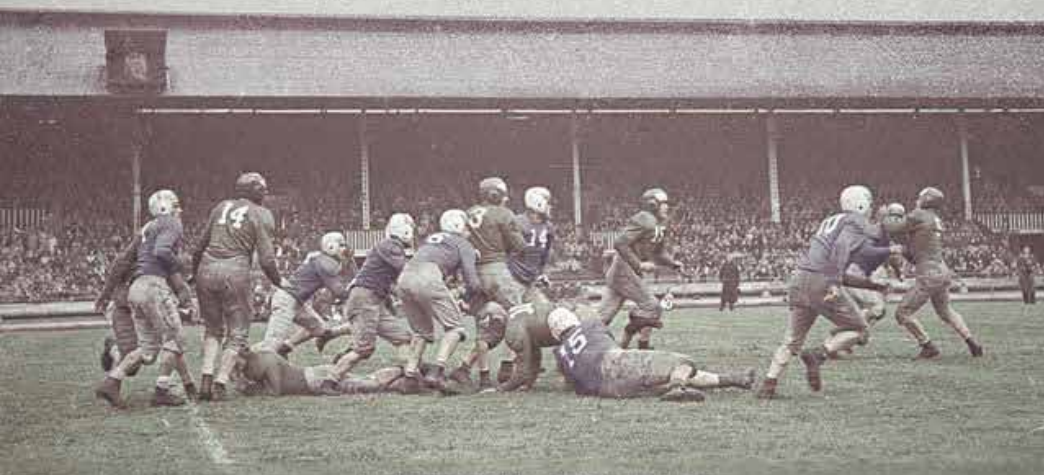




THE
SPECIAL
RELATIONSHIP

THE HISTORY OF
AMERICAN FOOTBALL
IN THE UNITED KINGDOM



ANDREW GAMBLE

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SECTION 1:

THE HISTORY OF AMERICAN
FOOTBALL IN THE UK

CHAPTER 1

The Silver Cup and a Golden Reception

‘North American football has the reputation of being more dangerous than the South American revolution!’ – Ernest Prater, *The Graphic*, December 1910

THE UNITED States of America and the United Kingdom have always shared a common history and the ‘special relationship’ between the countries is unlike most nations in the world. Given the nature of this kinship, it makes sense that America’s greatest sport arrived in the UK early in the 20th century – a chaotic but ultimately fortifying period for the Anglo-American bond.

The first taste of American football on these shores came in 1910, during the reign of King George V. The *Daily Mirror*, a British tabloid, sponsored a clash between two teams of US Navy servicemen from the USS *Idaho* and the USS *Michigan*, pitting the Navy’s Division III winners against the Division I champions. It was the first time an organised game of the sport was to be played in the country and, beginning a tradition that runs to this day in the National Football League, it was scheduled to be played on 23 November – Thanksgiving Day 1910. In the build-up to the anticipated match, the *Michigan* team were unfortunately forced to

pull out due to military commitments. They were quickly replaced by the USS *Vermont*. In front of a crowd of 10,000 awestruck fans, the USS *Idaho* team won 19-0 at Crystal Palace to win the Silver Cup. The trophy was awarded by the Duke of Manchester, William Angus Drogo Montagu.

The USS *Idaho* team had to defend the Silver Cup just 11 days later in the American Navy Football Final against the new challengers, the USS *Connecticut*. The match, organised by Rear Admiral Seaton Schroeder, was once again held at Crystal Palace, but the 12,000-strong crowd were treated to a much tighter affair. USS *Idaho* came out victorious in a gritty 5-0 game to retain the cup, awarded by the Duchess of Marlborough. The second game was deemed to be more serious as word of the first match and its impressive attendance had spread. The fascination surrounding American football was broadening and beginning to take hold on the British Isles.

For the third time in just over a month, the Silver Cup was contested – although this occasion was more muted. Taking place on 21 December 1910, servicemen from the USS *Georgia* and the USS *Rhode Island* competed at Stonebridge Sports Ground in Northfleet, Kent just 25 miles south-east of London. In front of just 4,000 people on the frozen soccer pitch at Stonebridge Road, the team from the USS *Georgia* came away with a 12-0 victory. This was a far cry from the high-octane scoring fans of the modern game are accustomed to, with a lack of a genuine playbook and amateur players leading to fragmented offensive displays. *Georgia's* star player, Levy, scored two touchdowns, with each point after converted. There was little celebration and no presentation of the trophy to the victorious side, markedly different to the noble affairs at Crystal Palace the month before.

A London reportage artist, Ernest Prater, could reasonably claim to be the first British person to cover an American football game. At any rate, he certainly was the first to do so on British soil, and Prater admitted that British newspapers were initially

sceptical of the new, unfamiliar and worryingly violent sport that had arrived from the US. Prater worked for *The Graphic*, a weekly illustrated newspaper that ran from 1869 to 1932, and he equated the physical nature of the new sport to the grim violence of war. Prater stated: ‘North American football has the reputation of being more dangerous than the South American revolution!’ – a hyperbolic assessment that was rather disingenuous.

However, this comparison wasn’t completely wide of the mark for British media. On the same autumnal day that the USS *Idaho* team lifted the first edition of the Silver Cup, a young player from Winsted in Connecticut died playing in an American football match. This was widely reported on in the US and even made it to the desks of British newspapers. Prater mentioned the tragic death in his report of the Silver Cup match, while the *Illustrated London News* provided a more detailed report on the incident. In the 26 November 1910 edition – just three days after the first game on British soil – the newspaper expressed concern with the fact a player could be acquitted on the legal charge of murder if it took place in the course of a game, evidencing how ‘rough-and-tumble’ the sport of American football can be. On Christmas Eve of 1910, a *Gravesend and Dartford* reporter struggled to grapple with the fact that this sport could share a name with football – a problem many Britons still suffer from – although they were intrigued by the American equivalent: ‘The game is interesting to watch, but “football” seems a misnomer, the feet being very seldom used, whilst the match seems to be won more by sheer physical strength than by science.’

After the heyday of the Silver Cup, it was all quiet on the gridiron front in the United Kingdom. The sport was admired by the fans and intrigued servicemen that attended the games in south London and Kent, but British athletes and the general public showed great reluctance to get involved or even remain interested in the sport. The NFL would be formed in September 1920, initially as the American Professional Football Association

before switching to its familiar name ahead of the 1922 season, but – aside from the odd footage of college games such as Harvard versus Yale – American football stayed true to its name and clear of the British Isles.

Appropriately, the silence ended when the US Army was drafted in to help the Allied powers in World War Two. The American servicemen returned, bringing with them all sorts of necessary equipment – tanks, artillery and pigskins.