

History of Rugby

William Webb Ellis and the Origins of Rugby

Most rugby players have at one time or another heard the classic story of rugby's beginning. In 1823, during a game of soccer at Rugby School in England, 16 year old William Webb Ellis, in fine disregard for the rules, picked up the ball and ran with it. After William's display it was so obvious to his classmates the genius of that move that soon the whole school adopted the new rules and word quickly spread. And so the game of rugby was born.

Unfortunately the legend of William Webb Ellis is most likely just that- a legend. Most scholars agree that this story is probably too good to be true and point out that games that involved running with the ball had existed centuries earlier.

While it is true that such games did exist for centuries, their may be a kernel of truth to the William Webb Ellis legend. As far as most historians can tell, the earliest form of football with much similarity to rugby as we know it today, did originate at Rugby School around Ellis's time. Whether he was the actual creator of the game or the game simply evolved into something like the modern game during his time is still a point for debate.

Most probable is the slightly different version of the legend that the English Rugby Union relates. According to the English Rugby Union, the type of football played at Rugby School in Ellis's time was not soccer, but a game with a mixture of both soccer and rugby rules. Handling the ball was prohibited unless the ball was airborne, when the player was permitted to catch it. After catching the ball he would stand still, as did all the other players, and had the option of kicking it wherever he chose, or placing it on the ground and kicking for goal.

It is also very important to remember that in those days at English Public Schools, students often developed their own rules for the games of football they played on the spot as there was very little official refereeing. So it is possible that William Webb Ellis did in fact pick up the ball and run with it during an impromptu game of football, which set an example for others. But one thing does remain, it is highly dubious that rugby originated from soccer as we know it today. It is far more likely, and most historians tend to agree, that both rugby and soccer developed roughly side by side as rules became more formalized and documented.

Whatever the case, the story of William Webb Ellis is too good not to be held on to and cherished. William Webb Ellis has an official headstone on the grounds of Rugby School with the following inscription:

"This stone commemorates the exploit of William Webb Ellis who with a fine disregard for the rules of football, as played in his time, first took the ball in his arms and ran with it, thus originating the distinctive feature of the Rugby game A.D. 1823"

By the 1840s running with the ball had become the norm, and by the 1870s rugby clubs had sprung up all over England and in the colonies. But just as it was during the earliest days at the public schools, different rules were being used by different clubs with no official codification of the rules being laid down. To try and remedy this situation and provide a more uniform set of laws, a meeting was held in January 26, 1871, attended by the representatives of 22 clubs. It was at this meeting that the Rugby Football Union was founded.

The meeting was called by Edwin Ash, then secretary of the Richmond Club. He sent a letter to the newspapers which stated: "Those who play the rugby type game should meet to form a code of practice as various clubs play to rules which differ from others, which makes the game difficult to play".

Following the founding of the Rugby Football Union, a committee was formed consisting of three ex-Rugby School pupils who were invited to formulate a set of laws to help govern and unify the game. By June 1871 they had accomplished their task.

Soon after the Scottish members of the Union challenged the English to a match. This was by all accounts the first international match between England and Scotland, perhaps between anyone, and took place at Raeburn Place in Edinburgh on March 27, 1871, resulting in a win to Scotland.

Rugby Union Becomes Professional

As the years wore on, the IRB and the Rugby Football Union clung to their amateur roots and traditions tightly, but there were growing cries from around the globe to turn professional. Ironically many of these reasons shadow the reason the Northern Union split away in the first place, namely increased demands on players time as well as increased media attention on the sport and revenues generated as a result. Many felt it was simply unfair to have so much money generated and the players receive none of it in spite of all of their sacrifices for club and country.

Along with this was a growing "hidden professionalism" in Rugby Union. While open air payments were unlikely, it became clear that most players were receiving a number of perks for playing such as houses, cars, and other under the table deals.

Realizing that the sport needed to move to a professional model if it was to remain intact, the IRB and RFU accepted professionals in Rugby Union in August 1995.