Rugby Fever:
Football's Evolution from Rugby to Collegiate Obsession

By Thomas Gibbs '11

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Sports are a central part of modern American society. They provide a means for the common American to escape and forget about everything except who they will cheer on for a couple of hours. Despite competition from basketball and of course baseball, which has traditionally been labeled America’s pastime, football is America’s most beloved, as well as most violent, sport. This is evident when one considers the Super Bowl, which is the final game of the season played between the two best professional football teams who battle for bragging rights as well as the Lombardi trophy. In 1998, the Super Bowl drew a viewing audience of more than 13 million people. This figure has increased in the last decade especially due to the increased female viewership. In addition, past Super Bowls are credited with ten of the top twenty television ratings of all time.\(^1\) These figures reveal that football replaced other sports, becoming an American obsession.

Although the twentieth century marked the true explosion of a sports culture, sports were popular during the 1800s. For example, boxing and baseball already had a good following of fans before the first football game, which was in 1869. Furthermore, basketball was created in 1891 and it too had an impressive fan base. Track and soccer were also popular especially at the collegiate level, where sports were first popularized. However, it was football that changed how Americans viewed sports, and this was in part largely due to the violence associated with it. There was great debate about this violence from its earliest days, perhaps never more prominently than by President Theodore Roosevelt in the White House. It seemingly had it all when one considers that there were amazing plays where players could make daring runs up and down the field, while at the same time providing plenty of violence as the players made tackles with seemingly no regard for the well being of their own bodies. It was the unique fusion of traditional sporting elements combined with violence that set football apart

from other sports and in turn what catapulted football to the forefront of American sports. As the twentieth century approached, the nation was at a turning point and in few places was this more evident than with the development of American football, which led to the rise of a true sports culture.

North Central College was very much a part of this sports culture. It was one of the colleges and universities where football helped transform college athletics. Before 1900, sports were primarily a means of exercise and colleges were viewed solely as places where one would pursue higher education. As time progressed, students at North Central became aware of the development of sports programs like those that were present at Ivy League schools such as Harvard and Yale, and decided to follow in their footsteps. Beginning in 1892, North Central students demanded an expansion of sports programs, as well as the construction of a gymnasium, which interestingly enough would become the second building erected on North Central’s campus. Their wish was eventually granted and Nichols Gymnasium was completed by 1901. This put North Central on the same track as other local colleges, as well as Ivy League schools in their pursuit of sports, especially football.

3 Ibid., 9.
5 It is important to note that North Central was not on the same level as Ivy League schools in terms of their sports development timeline. Ivy League schools had sports programs and
North Central’s football program provides insight into the importance of football to a small liberal arts community. When this evidence is compared to that of programs at Ivy League schools, it becomes clear that football was truly a national movement. Football evolved from rugby and gave American audiences violence which both fascinated as well as shocked them, ironically almost causing it to be banned nationwide. In response to the critics of violence, however the game was modified numerous times, which created a game that was uniquely American and that would change how Americans viewed sports. Football also transformed college athletics not just at Ivy League Institutions, but at colleges and universities across the country. North Central was one such college.

**Evolution of Football**

One cannot understand the game of football and its evolution without considering rugby, its European predecessor. The creation of rugby is credited to William Webb Ellis, who attended the Rugby School in England from 1816-1825. According to legend, Ellis was playing soccer, which was and still is called football in Europe. He became frustrated, picked up the ball and ran, which had never been done before. Although this accomplishment alone did not begin an entire new sport, it is considered the starting point. In fact, William J. Baker, a scholar of British studies, notes that the creation of rugby was, “hardly the product of a single, isolated feat of a nonconformist individual.” However, he does believe the game began in, “the second half of 1824.” There is some consensus that the game began to take a recognizable form sometime between the mid 1820s-1830s, when William Webb Ellis picked up the ball and ran.

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athletic development before North Central. In fact most Ivy League schools had flourishing programs by the 1880s. However these time differences do not negate the fact that schools across the country developed and emphasized sports programs especially heading into the nineteenth century. Also, each school has its own unique athletic story which reveals the chaos associated with the development of football, but there are common themes that reveal a shared story of how football captured the hearts of millions of Americans.

Some would argue that football, as well as rugby, was actually a product of soccer. Gerald Gems rightly references the Ellis legend when he argues that soccer led to the formation of rugby.\textsuperscript{7} He argues that soccer was a popular game in the rural parts of England played by schoolboys and farmers who would use anything they could find, most commonly animal heads and bladders, as a ball in order to compete with each other.\textsuperscript{8} There are parallels between football and soccer. Both games require a ball, although in entirely different forms, and are played on similar fields. However, there is no tackling in soccer, except for the occasional slide tackle, and there is certainly no allowance for touching or passing the ball with one’s hands in soccer, in contrast to football. One can certainly argue that soccer indirectly led to the rise of football because it was the foundation for rugby, the sport from which football truly evolved. However, there are also links between rugby and football.

The game of rugby is relatively simple, with few rules. In its earliest forms, rugby was quite literally a battle. It was common for over one hundred men to be on each side, and they would use any means necessary including tackling, kicking, punching, and shoving in order to get the rugby ball across the try line. This has been modified and now each team can have

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=0.8\textwidth]{rugby_player.jpg}
\caption{This is one of the earliest photographs of a North Central football player. Note the thin pads on his legs and shoulder as well as the size of the ball, which is larger than modern standards and appears more like a rugby ball.}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{7} Gems, \textit{For Pride}, 11-12.
\textsuperscript{8} Ibid., 11.
only fifteen people on the field at any given time. The basic objective is for a team to score as many trys as possible, which requires one to go over the try line, the equivalent of a football end zone, with the ball and then place the ball down. This is worth five points and a team can earn an additional two points by kicking a conversion kick in between the uprights.  


Note both the presence of the uprights and conversion kick, which is equivalent to field goals in football. Also note that in both sports the best one can usually do at a given time is score seven points. In addition, in rugby one can run or kick the ball forward, but may only pass laterally or backwards. When one is tackled and brought to the ground, he must immediately release the ball, which then allows the two teams to contest for its possession. 

Rugby players traditionally do not wear pads, however recently international players have begun to use shoulder pads. They wear rugby boots, which are very similar to football cleats, and they use an oval ball made of leather, which is about the size of a watermelon. 

It is unclear when rugby playing began in the United States, but it appeared to be present almost immediately after its creation in Europe. It was initially only seen on college campuses. In the late 1820s, Princeton played a game called balldown, which was very similar to rugby. In contrast, North Central did not appear to have any form of rugby until around the 1890s, just a few generations after its humble beginnings.

10 There is the potential in a modern football game to score eight points at one time. This can be done by either passing or running into the endzone after the touchdown from a few yards away instead of kicking for the single extra point. For the most part though most football teams will only score seven points at time, just like rugby.

11 Carroll, “Codes.”


Emergence of Football

By the late 1890s American students were playing a different game from rugby. The 1870s are the first years when most scholars conclude that rugby shifted to the modern game of football. There was a meeting in New York in October of 1873 where delegates from Princeton, Yale and Rutgers met in order to discuss official rules, so that teams from different colleges could compete fairly with one another. This meeting was protested by Harvard and considered a failure for the most part because the colleges in attendance could not agree on a common set of rules. Instead, most schools simply decided to establish their own set of rules for the evolving sport. Despite its failures, the meeting in 1873 led to the formation of the Intercollegiate Football Association (IFA), which was the first association to be established in order to govern the game of football. There was a second IFA meeting in 1876 which was much more successful, as well as more widely attended. In contrast to the meeting in 1873 where college representatives could not agree to a universal set of rules, the result of this meeting was the establishment of sixty-one rules. Twenty two of these original rules are still used in modern college football games, but the major rules set the playing field size to be 140 by 70 yards. The game was to consist of two forty-five minute halves played by two teams consisting of fifteen players each. Other rules were made in order to define how to tackle, kickoff, lateral pass, and punt. Overall, by 1876 football was beginning to take a more recognizable form, but it was still a young game that was heavily based on rugby.

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14 It is important to note that although the students were writing “rugby” it is clear from the pictures and descriptions of the games that they are really referring to football in its early stages of development. For example, pictures from North Central yearbooks depict clear offensive and defensive lines, as well as a quarterback. Those are two distinct positions that are unique to football.
16 Ibid., 9-10.
17 Ibid., 11.
The years between 1880 and 1900 marked monumental changes to football, and this included two major rule changes. The first rule change reduced the number of men on the field for each team to eleven instead of fifteen. The second rule change established a line of scrimmage, based on the rugby word "scrummage." Instead of fighting for possession of the ball every time a player was tackled, the new rule allowed one team to maintain possession. The men from one side would rush to the ball and the first one there would kick the ball back. What this rule did was to create the action of snapping the football as well as creating the position of quarterback, because the person to receive the snap had to be a quarter of a yard behind the snapper.\textsuperscript{18} Smaller rule changes followed including not allowing the quarterback to run, making high tackles illegal, and establishing specific rules for offensive linemen.\textsuperscript{19} Clearly American football was a work in progress as the turn of the century approached, but this was the first time when football was beginning to take on the form of a sport unique from rugby.

**North Central & Early Football**

By the mid 1880s, there were articles in the *New York Times* reporting on games between teams from Princeton, Harvard, and Yale. Although much smaller in comparison, North Central’s *Chronicle* editors were also reporting on football games across the country as the popularity of football increased. For example, it was noted that, “Chicago Univ. will play Michigan on Thanksgiving Day,” and, “the Harvard-Yale game, Saturday,

\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., 17-18.
\textsuperscript{19} Ibid., 36.
November 13, resulted in a tie, neither side scoring.”20 These early reports revealed a new game, one that was well attended and growing in popularity.21 The violence in particular drew quite a crowd. For example, one sports writer commented in 1895 that, “I rejoice at every dangerous sport which I see pursued.”22 North Central also began to glamorize sports and the dangers that they held. For example, one North Central student submitted a poem that included a line reading, “boys who play the rugby game thus to win an athlete’s fame; boys who woo to win a wife, as oft they do in college life; should know that their success depends how each of his subject comprehends.”23 The significance of this poem is first and foremost that football is beginning to be written about on North Central’s campus. The other important part is the actual content. Right away one can see that in order to gain athletic fame, one must be good at violent sports, such as the ever evolving game of football. Football was becoming a bigger part of college life, and this is reflected in the writings from newspapers both large and small across the country, including at North Central College. North Central played its first football game in 1898 and began its football program with a victory.24 The game rapidly became popular on campus, and by 1901 students were beginning to demand a coach in order to develop a more serious football program.

22 Ibid., 38.
23 Unknown Author, Poem, The Chronicle, December 1, 1894.
24 Unknown Author, 75th Anniversary, 50.
In 1901 the college celebrated its first winning season.\textsuperscript{25} 1901 was a monumental year in North Central’s football history and the sport only continued to grow at the college. Its popularity was evident because after 1901 football scores were regularly broadcast in the school newspaper. The football team made rapid strides and was becoming a premier program in Illinois. In 1904, in a, “sunset of glory,” North Central’s football team won its first championship.\textsuperscript{26} North Central developed a respectable football team, even though they were late to the game by Ivy League standards, and this demonstrates that football was no longer limited to elite students at elite schools. If football was this popular at North Central, then clearly it was rapidly becoming a national pastime, which was being enjoyed at all types of colleges around the country.

Football transitioned from an Ivy League sport to a game played throughout the country by the beginning of the twentieth century. In particular, football developed a strong following in the Midwest. For

\textsuperscript{25} Ibid., 60.
\textsuperscript{26} Ibid., 78-79.
example, the University of Michigan and the University of Chicago were considered two of the strongest programs in the country at the turn of the century. Any time these two teams met they drew major crowds as well as national press coverage. Eventually Midwestern colleges formed their own college football league, which they called the Big Ten. It included Michigan and Chicago as well as other prominent football programs such as the University of Minnesota and Northwestern University.\textsuperscript{27} Sports historian Raymond Schmidt even concludes that it was during this period that the, “Midwest was the first region to begin regularly presenting serious challenges to the dominance of eastern football.”\textsuperscript{28} Football was also becoming prevalent in the South as well. For example, in 1904 Vanderbilt and Georgia Tech both made national headlines when they hired Dan McGugin and John Heisman respectively as head coaches.\textsuperscript{29} Clearly, football was no longer confined strictly to Ivy League schools. By the turn of the century, football’s expansion had become a national movement and eventually had well respected programs throughout the country, especially in the Midwest and the South.

**Football Ban of 1905**

The appeal of violent sports such as rugby and football was not lost on students at American universities, who were just beginning to develop and fine tune their sports programs. In the late 1800s schools played a chaotic sport characterized by violence. It was neither fully rugby, nor yet fully football.\textsuperscript{30} Despite the lack of unified rules and regulations, by the 1840s, these violent games were being played between colleges for the


\textsuperscript{28} Ibid., 9.

\textsuperscript{29} Ibid., 9.

\textsuperscript{30} It is important to remember that the first official football game was not until 1869, so it is likely that these games were quite chaotic especially when one considers that each school had its own interpretation and style of playing these games.
first time, and in particular, between Harvard and Yale.\textsuperscript{31} Shortly thereafter other colleges such as Princeton and Rutgers began fielding teams.\textsuperscript{32}

North Central was no exception, and the appeal of a violent sport soon caught on, although significantly later when compared to the Ivy League universities. In the 1890s, the college newspaper began publishing articles insisting that North Central create a football team. For example, B.F. Elfrink wrote in a direct fashion that, “we ought to have a rugby team at N.W.C.”\textsuperscript{33} Also, C.F. Schuermeier wrote in 1897 that, “there is an unusual interest manifested among our students in Rugby football.”\textsuperscript{34} This was a result of North Central students being bored with soccer and, “agitation began for [a] rugby team.”\textsuperscript{35} Also, students were shocked to see after a weekend in 1894 that a North Central professor, “while playing rugby seriously perverted the Pauline doctrine inasmuch as he first saw ‘face to knee’ and now sees through dark glasses.”\textsuperscript{36} Interestingly, the students had to argue for over two years for the college to allow an early version of football to be played, mainly because the administration initially deemed the sport to be too violent.\textsuperscript{37} Eventually the administration had heard enough of the students’ cries for football and allowed for the establishment of a team in 1898.

Although North Central was late by some standards in their football development, in 1905 they were also part of a national movement to end football in the United States. There had been ongoing debate over whether or not football should continue to be legal, and in 1905 football critics enjoyed victory. Some argued that the development of football was taking away from the educational element of college life. Others argued that the violent nature of football encouraged violence and rivalries on college

\textsuperscript{31} Mark F. Berstein, \textit{Football: Ivy League Origins}, 5-6.
\textsuperscript{32} Ibid., 8.
\textsuperscript{34} C.F. Schuermeier, “Athletics,” \textit{The Chronicle}, October 1, 1897.
\textsuperscript{35} Unknown Author, \textit{75th Anniversary}, 44.
\textsuperscript{37} Ibid., 29.
The most compelling reason, and ultimately the main reason why football was banned beginning in 1905, however, was that football was dangerous, and sometimes even fatal for the athletes. It was common for players to be at the point of, “combat near the point where the ball was put in play,” and when downed players tried to get a few extra yards it often ended with, “opponents jumping on them to prevent their progress.”\(^{39}\) The violent nature of football eventually led to some fatalities. For example, in November of 1894, the Georgetown quarterback, George Bahen, was severely injured by players from the Columbia Athletic Club, a rival football club from Washington D.C. Players from the Columbia Athletic Club broke parts of Bahen’s spine, resulting in paralysis, and eventually his death.\(^ {40}\) Furthermore, in 1897, a game was played between the University of Georgia and the University of Virginia in Atlanta. Richard Gammon from the University of Georgia was killed during a struggle at the line of scrimmage.\(^ {41}\) Football was gaining a reputation for being violent and in some cases fatal.

In response to numerous injuries as well as some deaths, colleges around the country adopted more specific rules which outlawed certain acts of violence on the football field. By the 1890s players were forced to wear padding, including helmets.\(^ {42}\) These reforms did not stop violence and unsportsman like conduct during the games, and soon the debate over football reached the national level. In October of 1905, President Theodore Roosevelt held a meeting with the presidents from Harvard, Princeton, and Yale in order to discuss, “brutality and the lack of sportsmanship in college play.”\(^ {43}\) Football was becoming so popular that even the President of the United States was involved in deciding its fate, and eventually many schools across the country terminated their football programs.

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\(^{39}\) Ibid., 59.

\(^{40}\) Ibid., 36.

\(^{41}\) Ibid., 36.

\(^{42}\) Ibid., 60.

\(^{43}\) Ibid., 64.
The White House was not the only place furiously debating the future of football. After a losing season in 1905, North Central was also debating whether or not to continue to have a football team. In the end North Central decided to ban football from campus, much to the fans’ dismay.\textsuperscript{44} For a couple of years it seemed that football was gone from North Central permanently, and this was more apparent when the school sold all of its football equipment in 1907 for a grand total of twenty six dollars.\textsuperscript{45} 1905 proved to be a difficult year for football fans as schools across the country, including North Central, banned the sport.

Despite colleges’ efforts to ban football programs, students were still interested in both watching and playing football. There is no doubt that before its banning, football was a hugely popular sport. For example, after a winning football season in Kansas, one sports reporter wrote that the, “influence and result of our football victories can hardly be estimated … it has advertised the University more than an outlay of a thousand dollars could have done in any other way.”\textsuperscript{46} Football was becoming so popular that it was beginning to be used as a recruiting tool for colleges. It was so influential that it was also helping to develop other programs such as journalism. For example, college newspapers began to, “take their cue from the city dailies and filled at least one page and sometimes more with football.”\textsuperscript{47} Football had taken college campuses by storm, and it was changing everything from recruiting practices to newspaper publications. At North Central the craze associated with football was labeled a type of “fever” and one that students joked had no cure.\textsuperscript{48} Despite being banned in 1905, football clearly had become a huge part of college life and it touched everyone from the faculty and administration to the students, and even prospective students.

\textsuperscript{44} Unknown Author, 75\textsuperscript{th} Sports Anniversary, 87-89.
\textsuperscript{45} Ibid., 92.
\textsuperscript{46} Watterson, College Football, 45.
\textsuperscript{47} Ibid., 44.
\textsuperscript{48} Unknown Author, “Freshmen Hospital,” The Chronicle, December 1, 1901.
In 1906, some sweeping football reforms passed, including the use of the forward pass, which would encourage colleges including North Central to lift their football bans. Fans across the country made their voices heard, while at the same time businessmen pointed out the folly of banning football programs. Even at North Central it was noted that, despite its banning, “interest in American football [was] apparent.”\(^{49}\) While it was apparent that people wanted football back, there had to be reforms to protect players’ health. On April 14, 1906, the American Football Rules Committee officially passed twenty six rule revisions. The most important development was that of the forward pass. Other important reforms included the use of the onside kick, making a six player offensive line, outlawing the use of hands while blocking, and finally creating a neutral zone, which prevented encroachment.\(^{50}\) It was agreed that all of these reforms would create a much safer environment for the athletes, although many coaches cringed at the idea of changing how they coached. These reforms undoubtedly gave football a second chance, which was all it needed in order to regain its former status as the country’s obsession.

**College Football Matures**

The reforms of 1906 once again catapulted college football to the national spotlight, and the result was that once again college football programs were thriving. The reforms silenced football’s critics and even one of its harshest critics, Harvard president, Charles Eliot stated in 1906 that, “today football [has] improved immensely [and does] not possess the same elements of brutality and unsportmanship as seen in previous years.”\(^{51}\)

North Central College shared in Eliot’s sentiments and they made this evident by lifting the football ban in 1909, when they decided to host a freshmen versus sophomore football game. The game drew a huge crowd,

\(^{49}\) Unknown Author, *75th Sports Anniversary*, 117.


\(^{51}\) Ibid., 80.
and for the next few years the school permitted football to be played as an intramural.\textsuperscript{52}

By 1912, North Central had become accustomed to the football reforms, and this was the year when students demanded more. After numerous petitions, the administration finally gave way in 1913 to the reinstatement of football as a varsity sport.\textsuperscript{53} The sport regained its massive following.

Immediately after its reinstatement, it became the most popular sport on campus, rivaled only by basketball.\textsuperscript{54} The reforms of 1906 made football safer, and schools with football bans like North Central were encouraged to lift those bans. The result was that once again football became a collegiate sport that had gained a national following.

At the turn of the century, college football swept the nation by storm. It created a national frenzy over a new violent sport, which had evolved from rugby. Shortly after rugby’s introduction in the United States, collegiate men began to change the game, marking the beginning of football. The violence offered a drastic contrast to other sports that were also being played by colleges, and this in turn created a large fan base, including students at North Central College. There were various meetings that addressed rule changes to football, and each one was aimed at making the game safer for the athletes. After several years, programs everywhere around the country, like North Central’s, were shut down due to the game’s

\textsuperscript{52} Unknown Author, 75\textsuperscript{th} Anniversary, 117, 129.
\textsuperscript{53} Ibid., 138.
\textsuperscript{54} Ibid., 147.
violent nature and its reputation for killing athletes. After protests and more rule revisions, football was once again brought back by schools that had ended their programs in 1905. North Central’s football story offers an important case study that reveals how college football took a hold over Americans. It also reveals that football was not limited to Ivy League schools, and in fact the presence of a strong football program at a small liberal arts college reveals that the popularity and spreading of football was a national movement. By the arrival of the twentieth century the United States was changing, and nowhere is this more evident than with the evolution of football from a college pastime, to a national obsession whose creation forever changed sports in American society.

This graphic from the 1910 Spectrum shows athletics as a crucial component of campus life, with the athlete holding depictions of the three academic buildings on campus at that time: Old Main, Goldspohn Science Hall, and Carnegie Library.
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