

# Football entered the modern era in 1910

By Bernie McCarty

Like most football researchers, this writer enjoys studying the past and watching the present variety of the grid game on TV. We all have a working knowledge of the rules, and researchers in particular are aware of the important rules changes over the years. There is no lack of excellent books on the topic.

Recently, however, in reading old issues of St. Nicholas magazine, I realized there was one crucial rule change I had never bothered to pinpoint. In fact, after reading four 1910 articles on the subject published in the magazine, it became evident the new rules instituted that year drastically hustled the game into the modern era in one sweeping motion. Obvious consternation existed among coaches who literally had to teach a new way of playing football.

First, let's establish the five most important rules that make American football different from any other sport in the world.

In 1876 representatives from Princeton, Yale, Harvard and Columbia gathered at Springfield, Mass., formed the American Intercollegiate Football Association, and developed the first standardized set of rules. The initial important rule legalized running with the ball.

The next two basic rules created the line of scrimmage (1880), and a system of downs to determine possession of the ball (1882). And the next two key rules involved legalization of the forward pass (1906), and free substitution. (1941).

For the most part, however, it took years for the above rules to be fully understood and developed into the modern game.

It was a different story in 1910. The crucial rule change noted at the start of this article was the elimination of two passes behind the line -- the snap from center to the quarterback, and the quarterback tossing or handing the ball to another back. Suddenly, in 1910, the play started with the snap. Imagine what this would have meant during the Walter Eckersall era. A great runner, Eckersall rarely ended up carrying the ball from scrimmage because he first had to give the ball to another back.

Prior to 1910 the more imaginative coaches got around the double pass rule by shifting into punt formation where it was legal for the kicker to receive a direct snap. But only running plays could be developed from punt formation. The new rule not only permitted the quarterback to run, it permitted any back to receive a direct snap and run from any formation. There's more.

Elimination of the double pass, and a second 1910 rules change, permitted development of "new" formations, the double and single wings, and of course a formation still in use today, the shotgun. Between 1906 and 1909 a quarterback's second pass could be a forward pass. But the quarterback could only throw the ball from a position within a five-yard square area from the point he received the snap (directly behind the center). And the ball could not be thrown over the line within a five-yard area on each side of the center.

The five-yard-square restriction on the QB was wiped out in 1910, and the passer was now able to throw the ball from anywhere on the field, to any point on the field, as long as he was five yards behind the line of scrimmage. Instantly, in 1910, the deep receiver of a direct snap became both a runner and passer.

Other 1910 rules changes completely wiped out the "old" style of play. The rule requiring seven men on the line of scrimmage was finalized. No more mess formations starting behind the line.

Helping a runner by pushing or pulling him along, and interlocked interference were abolished. These changes may have caused the biggest initial headache for coaches. Modern blocking techniques had to be developed. Plays had to be run differently, and speedy, shifty ball carriers suddenly became important. Great old power runners who managed to keep their feet when hit, like fullback Ted Coy of Yale, or guards and tackles who shifted into the backfield, no longer could add five yards with the aid of teammates.

The flying tackle was eliminated. A defender had to have at least one foot on the ground when he made a tackle. A punt returner no longer was fair game for anybody who left his feet in a long, smashing dive a split-second before the returns caught the ball. It took a brave man to return punts prior to 1910. The punt end punt return rules were more complicated than this, but I'll even bore myself if I go into too much detail.

The final key rule change concerned substitutes. Before 1910, when a player left a game he could not return. It's one reason such huge scores resulted in the early days. The starters usually played the entire game. For the first time, in 1910, a player could leave the game and return in the following period. And there were yet other rules changes involving the onside kickoff and greater protection for the pass receiver.

Let's hear what Coy, a three-time All-American and Yale coach in 1910, said about the rules changes in St. Nicholas prior to the start of the season.

"This will be difficult not only for the players but for those who are to coach and instruct the players. There is such a new style in the play of this fell that we must start all over again and learn anew. It will be awkward to adopt ourselves to some things which are contrary to what have been fundamental principles as long as we can remember."

In midseason Coy commented, "The new rule as to pushing and pulling a runner is unfortunate. The game this year has been one of individual prowess. Teamwork, which used to be the glorious thing in a foot-ball game, is now practically done for. Each man can only do his best and work out his own salvation. Formerly, we would have several men attacking one tackle. Now we have several tacklers attacking the man running with the ball. We have protected the tackles by this rule, but we have neglected the runner, and made him the man subject to danger."

Coy seems to have misjudged the importance of the new passing rule. "By placing the present restriction (on forward passes), namely, requiring the passer to be five yards behind his own line, it seems the fangs have been drawn and the possibilities of the play lessened. It is no longer a play that can be worked successfully in the open. It is now a play of deceit, and it cannot be operated without concealing the intention and pretending an entirely different play. The rule protecting the receiver of the pass, in a feeble way, as it does, still allows the contact of two men running at great speed from opposite directions."

Coy concludes, "It is a shame that the public and newspapers demanded such radical revision. It is almost a certainty that the game will not stand another season as it now is, and never can we get a perfect game until the (rules) committee decides to utterly disregard public criticism and newspaper talk in their attempts to work out a game above all complaints. In many respects to-day's game is good, but it will take a lifetime to solve the many problems arising from it. It is in this respect that coaches this fall are at sea. Some team may surprise the world with an open game, full of passes of all sorts; that is the present English game, and it is believed by many to be the game which will ultimately be in vogue in America."

Coy's last sentence couldn't have been more prophetic. It's interesting to note, however, Coy did not dwell at length on the 1910 rule change which this writer considered most important.