

(EDITORS NOTE: Mel Smith has recently completed years of research on the very early history of various American intercollegiate football-type games. Following are two essays by Mel wherein he details some of the trials of pursuing such research, and at the end of the material is information on how to order his book dealing with the material he has developed.)

WHAT'S IN A GAME OF EARLY FOOTBALL?

By Mel Smith

Back in 1958, while attending Penn State, a friend came across the 1881 “football” game played by Penn State College against the University of Lewisburg (now Bucknell). This game was not accepted by Penn State, and was labeled “unsanctioned.” I remember sitting in on a discussion of the politics of whether a game should be accepted or not. This incident started me on a lifelong research project to find as many sanctioned and unsanctioned games as possible in the early period of football. When I tried to give information to the colleges, I found there were a myriad of reasons why games were accepted or not accepted. Turns out there are really no standards of acceptability in the early years. Nowadays, the colleges adhere pretty much to the “official” stamp for games as accepted by the athletic associations, like the NCAA and NAIA. Games have been accepted and listed by the schools in similar fashion since the early part of the twentieth century, and the only real games not accepted now would be when the American colleges play teams outside the country, such as Harvard University versus Kyoto University in March 1997.

Let's look at the “sanctioned” and “unsanctioned” games of some individual institutions before 1900. Princeton University accepts the 16 October 1895 football game with the Princeton Theological Seminary (PTS), and they also accept a 1913 soccer game between the two schools. Princeton University does not acknowledge the other games played between them in the 1860s and 1870s. The main reason given was that the PTS was considered athletically to be just a Princeton class team in the real early period. PTS has always been a completely separate and unaffiliated institution from Princeton University, and the school does NOT claim to have played any type of “football” game whatsoever. There is only one block of housing separating these schools. Looks like this might be a case of PTS being too close, too small, and too uninvolved.

Next, let us look at the official football lists of Washington & Lee University and the Virginia Military Institute (VMI). Both are also in the same town, but there is a longer walking space between the two colleges. Washington & Lee accepts all their early (1870s and 1880s) games with VMI, and has always accepted them in their official football listing. VMI, however, will not put them in their football list. Their reason is that these early games were the “kicking game (now soccer), not the game of ball control (now football).” It's not just in the East that schools don't agree on what games to put in their football lists. The University of Minnesota has always accepted their early soccer games of 1882 and 1883 in their football list, while the University of Iowa does not accept any of their early games (1870s and 1880s) in their football listing. Again, Iowa says: “These games were unofficial and were never considered really football.”

What about the “carrying” game or rugby style of football? It looks like that May 15, 1874 game between Harvard and McGill was the first “official” intercollegiate game labeled rugby football, played by an American or Canadian college. The May 14 game played in the “Boston Style” of football was the only one of that genre to be considered official. All the earlier “carrying and tackling” games played by Harvard and McGill have never been accepted. An interesting note is that Harvard and McGill played another rugby game in 1974 “to celebrate their one hundredth anniversary of American and Canadian football.” So now Harvard and McGill have the 1874 rugby game in their football lists, while the 1974 game is in their rugby lists.

The University of Maryland will not accept an early 1880 game on their football list because “it was a game of rugby.” So I guess the real reason Penn State should not accept the game with Bucknell in 1881 was that it was also a “carrying” or rugby-style game. However, Minnesota accepts all their early (1886 through 1889) rugby games as football games. Their excuse is that “if colleges like Yale, Princeton, and Pennsylvania in the East can include their early soccer and rugby games in their football lists, why shouldn’t we? Who is to say that soccer games can only be accepted on football lists between 1869 and 1876? The same argument goes for rugby. Why should rugby just be accepted on football lists between 1874 and 1882, or 1906 and 1917?” It should be noted that the 1906-1917 period has recently been deleted from lists.

The year 1882 saw the passage of the “series of downs” rule in America. A survey through literature seems to show a consensus of opinion that this one rule brought the real idea of ball-control into play. In both Canada and America, newspapers in 1882 began to announce that there were three forms of football: “the association game, the rugby game, and the American intercollegiate game.” However, this new concept of 1882 as the first year of American football is certainly up for discussion, and some knowledgeable group needs to tackle this debate.

Should the length of playing time be a factor in whether a game is accepted or not? Before 1894, all the teams of the Intercollegiate Football Association (IFA) – Harvard, Wesleyan, Columbia, Princeton, and Yale – played “exhibition” games before they played each other at the end of a season. The required time for a full football game was two 45-minute halves. There was an exhibition game in the early 1890s between Yale and Amherst that only had two 15-minute halves, but it is considered official at both colleges. About the same time there was a game played on the Princeton campus between the Varsity and the 2nds team. There were officials and a couple thousand spectators and it went the full distance in time. But this game does not appear on any official list of Princeton’s.

The shortest football game I’ve found so far took only 10 minutes to complete. It made the newspapers and was played by two high schools in Boston in 1864, and included carrying of the ball and tackling. These high schools do not count these early games as football, and these were five years before the time of the first “official” game of football on November 6, 1869. This 1869 date has been etched in stone by historians for a long, long time, but now, the date has also recently been labeled as the first game of soccer according to that game’s historians.

Teams composed of students who are not under the auspices of the colleges’ administrations come under the category of club teams. The first club team run by students in America was the Oneida Foot-ball Club of the Epes Sargent Dixwell Latin School in Boston between 1862 and 1864. In Canada, it seems the first club team was formed in 1867 by the Osgoode Law Society and law students from the University of Toronto. The students of the University College of the University of Toronto formed a football club team in 1868, and the team also had students from the Toronto School of Medicine on it. Students at Harvard formed the Harvard University Football Club in the spring of 1872, and lasted through the spring of 1873. Games of these club teams have never been sanctioned by any institution.

The 1892 to 1898 period for Columbia university is officially written as “no varsity teams.” That doesn’t mean the students didn’t play football; in 1892 alone there are at least 18 different games played by four different teams affiliated with Columbia. The club team called the Unions of Columbia played two other college teams (Brooklyn Polytechnic Institute and the General Theological Seminary). Luckily, these colleges do not have any official acceptance of ever playing football in 1892 either, Therefore, these games do not officially exist.

Perhaps you can understand some of the dilemma when the time came to put this information

into book form. Earlier books used accepted and sanctioned games only. Everything was conveniently called football. How do you put two very different types of games together, when they are both accepted and unaccepted at the same time? The only way I could see through this morass was to get basic and label all the games in my manuscript as just “reported.”

I split all games into three basic categories – the kicking game (soccer style), the carrying game (rugby style), and the ball control game (football style). The statuses of official/unofficial, sanctioned/unsanctioned, and accepted/not accepted were not considered; the length of time of a game was not considered. Controlled scrimmages are left out, but full scrimmages are considered. Exhibition games are also counted, as well as practice games if there were some kind of officiating. This way any person or institution can accept or not accept any game they choose to. The games also had to be reported or alluded to in some form of printed matter like periodicals, student newspapers, local newspapers, magazines, or books.

‘WE’RE NOT THAT KIND OF SCHOOL’

I have spent a few decades in libraries while doing research into the early years of “football,” looking at old-time local and student publications. With a lot of patience, I have managed to find a lot of interesting games, scores, and the stories that go with them. Reasons why games were not played, or why teams cancelled games or a season, were usually varied and interesting. The extreme cases are the few institutions that have never accepted playing any styles of “football.”

While checking the Toronto Globe, I ran across an article that described the hundredth anniversary of the founding of the Princeton Theological Seminary (PTS) in Princeton, New Jersey. The college was founded in 1812. The article kept emphasizing that there was no connection to Princeton University whatever. Up to this point I had not even considered this school in my data collection; what references I had come across showed that the school was considered just another class team of the University. I first went to visit Princeton and the Seminary in 1986. I met the Librarian of the Seminary, and he said that “there was no way he could help me because he didn’t believe the students had ever indulged in sports like football.” I showed him about the football game between Princeton and the Seminary in 1895, and that it was an officially accepted game by Princeton. The librarian did not seem to be interested.

By 1999, I was finishing my manuscript about the early years of football. I went to Princeton again to check on the possibility of some “football” games back in the 1850s. Lo and behold, there was reference to games between an all-college team of the College of New Jersey (now Princeton University) and the Seminary. So then I walked to the Seminary (they are separated by one block of housing). When I met with the archivist, he said the school was not interested in assisting me in any research about sports. A librarian told me that PTS was “not that kind of school that would indulge in research about sports. We cannot and will not help you in your endeavors.” I went back again in 2000, hoping to not be recognized, but the librarian happened to be right there when I walked in through the door. I tried to request the names of graduates of PTS in the 1850s and 1860s; this way I could check all those volumes of PTS Necrology that are located in the archives of Princeton University. Instead, she demanded I leave the premises.

Another major reason why this school never had any football records was the attitude of Princeton University toward the Seminary. The PTS students were looked down upon and called the “seminoles” during the 1860s and 1870s. All the games were considered to be “practice” games. PTS was athletically considered to be just another class team for the University, where in reality it was a totally different institution. There is one note that might summarize the relationship of these two schools in the early years: two members – Chambers and Martin – of the Princeton