

# “They Stooped to Conquer”: Rugby Union Football, 1895-1914

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Turn-of-the-century England was a period of anxiety, punctuated by the 1901 death of a monarch who had come to symbolize the era which now bears her name. This concern about the present had its roots as far back as the 1870s, according to those historians who argue that the mid-Victorian consensus was on the wane by that decade. As the new century approached, there were many who assessed the evolution of English society with fear and uncertainty in seemingly every aspect of everyday life.<sup>1</sup> The rise of Labour threatened political stability. Germany and America's growth as second-generation industrial powers created a sense that the once-unassailable manufacturing and steel-producing sectors of the economy were in decline. The South African War contributed to the sense of decline based on England's poor military performance and an estimated 60 percent of all males being declared unfit for service.<sup>2</sup> Social values at the turn of the century began to reflect a sense of decay in the art of Aubrey Beardsley and the writings of Oscar Wilde, not to mention the music halls and the conduct of Edward VII.<sup>3</sup> The public schools were coming under criticism from within for their misplaced emphasis on the games ethic.<sup>4</sup> While some middle-class women were demanding the vote, others were embracing the fashions of the continent. Middle-class birth rates were in decline. Church attendance was dropping and the city became a place to fear and distrust, as the middle-class suburban exodus heightened.<sup>5</sup> The “Bitter Cry of Outcast London” and the work of Charles Booth revealed the moral and physical despair of the nation's laboring classes. The causes for concern were everywhere. Paraphrasing the *Westminster Review*, French historian Francois Bedarida declared that there was a sense of “exhaustion of national energy,” and G. R. Searle claimed that

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1. R.C.K. Ensor, *England, 1870-1914* (London: 1985), p. 304. Francois Bedarida, *A Social History of England, 1851-1975* (London: 1975), p. 99.

2. Donald Read, *England, 1886-1914* (New York: 1979), p. 437.

3. Susan Pennybaker, “‘It was not what she said but the way in which she said it’: The London County Council and Music Halls,” pp 120-140, and Chris Waters, “Manchester Morality and London Capital: The Battle over the Palace of Varieties,” pp 141-161, in Peter Bailey, ed., *Music Hall: The Business of Pleasure* (Milton Keynes: 1986).

4. James Mangan, *Athleticism in Victorian and Edwardian Public School* (London: 1981), pp. 207-212.

5. Bedarida, *A Social History of England*, pp 110-112.

“the quest for national efficiency in the Edwardian period became a political issue of the first magnitude.”<sup>6</sup>

While those who historian Samuel Hynes refers to as the forces of the Old reacted with “arthritic resistance,” forces of the New were “brash and insolent.”<sup>7</sup> Solutions to the exhausted national vitality varied from Fabianism to school reform. Eugenics movements sought to create a better breed of working men, while syndicalism and the New Unionism sought to rescue the worker. The Boy Scouts movement offered a healthy and productive form of paramilitary leisure, not concerned with traditional games. Other solutions to the sense of physical deterioration included Swedish Drill and hiking. There were demands to abandon the Empire, and others called for the dismantling of *laissez-faire* economics, both at home and in international trade. Still others were simply content to see the end of a repressive era. No matter what the solutions to the sense of deterioration, the criticisms were focused on the failures of the middle-class nature of Victorian society.

In almost all aspects of daily life there was a growing sense of concern over the health of the nation. This concern was nowhere more obvious in the late Victorian and Edwardian eras than in the sporting world. For those who cared little about Empire or votes for women, who could ignore the shift in morality, or who thought nothing of the demise of the physical and intellectual health of the nation, the performance of England’s XIs or XV was not as easy to disregard (see Appendix 1).<sup>8</sup> In cricket, the colonies were bettering the Mother country. In track and field, the United States was establishing dominance, and on the continent Association footballers were as successful at the game as the English. In rugby football, the rebel “working class” Northern Union and the national teams of Ireland, Scotland, Wales, Australia, New Zealand, and South Africa were proving to be far superior on the paddock.<sup>9</sup> Charles Bright observed in 1906 that “The French, Germans, Hungarians and other Continentals, not to mention our American and Colonial Kinfolk, have been gradually taking to ‘sport’ in all its branches almost as ardently as we have . . . .”<sup>10</sup> There was a national fascination for sport, reflected in the popular press, which attracted both the Old and the New of the Edwardian age, and the country’s successes were often measured on the playing fields of the nation as much as they were in international trade, the Houses of Parliament,

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6. Bedarida, *A Social History of England*, p. 99; Westminster Review, June 1901; G. R. Searle, *The Quest for National Efficiency: A study in British political thought, 1899-1914* (Los Angeles: 1971), p. 106.

7. Samuel Hynes, *The Edwardian Turn of Mind* (Princeton: 1968), p. 8.

8. Charles Bright, “The Proper Sphere of Sport,” *Westminster Review* (September 1906): 277; “Some Tendencies in Modern Sport,” *Quarterly Review*, 99 (1904): 130.

9. E. B. Osborn, “New Zealand Football,” *Nineteenth Century*, XIX (1906): 107-108; John Arlott, “Sport” in Simon Nowell-Smith, *Edwardian England, 1901-1914* (London: 1964), pp. 450-451. For a recent discussion of the relationship between the sense of national decline and sport, see John Naurite, “Sport and the Image of Colonial Manhood in the British Mind: British Physical Deterioration Debates and Colonial Sporting Tours, 1978-1906,” *Canadian Journal of History of Sport*, XXIII (December, 1992): 54-71.

10. Charles Bright, “The Proper Sphere for Sport,” p. 277.

or the various Trade Union offices throughout England.<sup>11</sup> As a result of the *embourgeoisment* of English society in the nineteenth century, criticisms and concerns about sport were very much criticisms of the middle class.

In the years from 1895 to 1905 Rugby Union Football was as much the focus of the decline of the nation's energies as any other instrument of measurement. "With Germany and other countries closing in on Britain's position as a world power, sporting defeats coming on top of inefficiencies in war management in the South African War and dismal recruiting statistics, spelled impending doom for Britain unless drastic measures were taken."<sup>12</sup> That is not to say that the handling code of football was in any way as important as many other areas of perceived failure, but to the sports-crazed nation, the English XV's dramatic decline was symptomatic of the problems which plagued the middle-class hegemony in the years following 1895. Rugby Union Football was associated with the Victorian middle class, from the game's emergence in the public school of the same name, through the creation of the Rugby Football Union (RFU), to the amateur/professional debates of the 1890s. On the eve of the era of social change, English sports reflected a misplaced chauvinism toward middle class superiority concerning both "the warped sporting instincts" of the working classes, and the Empire. Historian John Hargreaves has observed that in this period "Sports did . . . unite dominant groups and mark them off from the working class. . ." <sup>13</sup> This was very much the case for Rugby between 1895 and 1914.

From 1905 until the Great War, the amateur code experienced a resurgence which confirmed the importance of Rugby Union to the nation, reaffirmed the middle-class nature of the Union, but at the same time conceded much to the forces of the New. It was the events of the 1895-1905 period which forced the amateur game to change on the pitch or face obscurity as yet another Victorian anachronism in an era highlighted by a broad social readjustment to the new century. The man credited with the change in playing styles was the Harlequins' halfback, Adrian Stoop. Ironically, however, while Stoop and others made dramatic changes at the playing level, the Rugby Football Union remained fanatically Victorian in its attitudes concerning amateurism. In fact, it was the case that the overt changes on the pitch allowed the RFU to cling to these Victorian sporting attitudes. Success on the field reaffirmed the sense of middle-class superiority which created the post-1895 disasters which almost relegated the handling code to the mythology of Victorian middle-class greatness.

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11. Tony Mason, ed., *Sport in Britain: A Social History* (Cambridge: 1989), pp. 1-3; Arlott, pp. 451, 486.

12. John Nauright, "Sport and the Image of Colonial Manhood in the British Mind," pp. 64-65.

13. John Hargreaves, *Sport, Power, and Culture* (London: 1986), p. 75.

## II

In 1895, 21 Northern rugby clubs seceded from the RFU to escape the London middle-class domination of the game and introduce limited broken time payments to players who missed work to play for their clubs. This payment, as well as badges, trophies, excessive travel expenses, training facilities, and other inducements to play were considered to be professionalism by Union rules. They were considered part of a “warped sporting instinct” which the middle-class Union officials believed to be destroying the idea of playing only for the sake of the game. This attitude was already outdated in 1895, as provincial entrepreneurs in the dribbling code introduced professionalism into soccer in the 1880s and their counterparts in Rugby practiced shamateurism for at least a decade prior to the split. Rather than being a purging of disruptive elements within the amateur code as the RFU had hoped, the loss of many of the country’s top players was an indication of just how dependent the RFU had become on working-class northern stars.<sup>14</sup>

This dependency was not simply the loss of talent, but proved to be much greater. The working men of the northern clubs introduced innovative styles into the game which allowed the RFU to compete favorably with the Irish, Scots, and Welsh XV’s. These tactics were often brought by shamateurs from Wales prior to 1895 who sought employment in exchange for play.<sup>15</sup> Many innovative tactics, such as passing and catching on the run, required training, a practice frowned upon by many amateur purists. There was a public school old-boy preference for defensive rugby which involved monotonous shoving matches between large ponderous forwards, while backs functioned primarily to return errant balls back into the pack.

In the case of the Rugby Union after the split, public school old boys were able to recapture their erstwhile dominance simply because the withdrawal of the Northern Union restored the virtual monopoly of the playing skills which public school attendance had previously conferred.<sup>16</sup>

In 1896, Thomas Hughes, author of *Tom Brown’s School Days*, complained that “Football has got quite beyond me . . . [it] has become too much of a carrying business—football ought to be football, not arm ball . . . .”<sup>17</sup>

It is difficult to ascertain exactly how greatly the removal of innovative players affected the national XV, but the defection of other Northern clubs to the Northern Union was immediately obvious to the RFU membership. The Northern Union could boast a confederation of 59 clubs at its first General Meeting.<sup>18</sup> It is safe to conclude that these members came from the ranks of

14. James W. Martens, “‘To Throttle the Hydra’: The Middle Class and Rugby’s Great Schism,” *Canadian Journal of Sport History*, XXII (May, 1991), *passim*.

15. Martens, “‘To Throttle the Hydra,’” pp. 59–61.

16. Eric Dunning and Kenneth Sheard, *Barbarians, Players and Gentlemen: A Sociological Study of the Development of Rugby Football*, London: 1979), p. 244.

17. D. R. Gent, *Rugby Football* (London: 1932), p. 17.

18. K. Macklin. *The History of Rugby League* (London: 1974), p. 17.

the amateur code, since in the post-bifurcation years the membership in the RFU dropped as the NU grew. In 1893 there were 481 RFU clubs and by 1903 the numbers had diminished to 244. The *RFU Handbook, 1899–1900* claimed 86 northern clubs, but prior to 1895 there were an estimated 150 Yorkshire clubs alone.<sup>19</sup> By 1904–05, 40 Lancashire clubs had defected to the “Business they call a sport.”<sup>20</sup> Those Northern RFU clubs which remained loyal had a difficult time competing for local talent with the professionals in both rugby and soccer. By 1902, for example, New Brighton (Lancashire) had only 19 players.<sup>21</sup>

The social makeup of amateur Northern clubs in the pre-1895 period was dominated by working-class players, but there was a discernible shift in the years following. English international Leonard Tosswill estimated that 90 percent of Yorkshire amateurs were public school old boys in the post-split era.<sup>22</sup>

The consequences of the loss of innovative working-class players were not conclusive in the five years following the 1894-95 season. The North dominated selection to the national XV, securing 101 caps, compared to the South’s 86, the West Country’s 25, and the 13 won by the Midlands.<sup>23</sup> There was no clear evidence on the field that the split alone was too disruptive. The English XV managed one win, two losses and two draws with the Scots: only a single victory to four defeats with the Irish: and three wins and two losses to the Welsh. This, however, could be explained in the short run by the ebb and flow of team fortunes over a period of time, and in itself was inconclusive as to the degree to which the Northern Union had cut into the quality of players available to the RFU. It was the continued poor showing of the English XV into the first decade of the twentieth century which would suggest the long-term effects of losing innovative Northern working-class players.

Coincidentally, as the RFU was experiencing the difficulties of Northern discontent prior to open rebellion, the West Country was embracing rugby football with tremendous enthusiasm. By the mid-1890s, West Country clubs were drawing crowds which outstripped the metropolitan area, and rivaled those in the North. In 1897, 8,000 punters came to Exeter to see the South-west County Championship between Devon and Somerset.<sup>24</sup> By 1911 there were 50 clubs in the Gloucester County Union, and 13 schools in Bristol

19. Rugby Football Union Handbook, 1899-1900. See also Club Lists and Dates of Joining the RFU (held at the RFU Museum, Twickenham).

20. *125-MFC, 1860-1985* (125th anniversary brochure of the Manchester Football Club). p. 27; W. B. Croxford, *Rugby Union in Lancashire and Cheshire* (Liverpool: 1950), pp. 48-94.

21. *New Brighton FC* (Centenary Brochure), p. 22.

22. L. Tosswill and Francis Marshall, eds., *Football: The Rugby Union Game* (London: 1925), p. 322.

23. All international selection and results come from John Griffiths, *The Book of English International Rugby 1871-1982* (London: 1982); and U.A. Titley and Ross McWhirter, *Centenary History of the Rugby Football Union* (Twickenham: 1970), pink pages.

24. A.B. Green’s Football Notes (Scrapbook of newspaper clippings concerning West Country rugby held at the RFU Museum, Twickenham).

embraced the handling code.<sup>25</sup> National team selectors were sensitive to the growth of the game in the area and began mining the region for strong forwards to replace those lost to professionalism.

Even though there was no hard evidence that the split would cause lasting damage to the amateur code, and there appeared to be an alternative source of forwards for the national side, by 1900 there were growing criticisms in the popular press. On October 1, 1900, the *Manchester Guardian* declared that the London style of play was boring and ineffectual and the paper predicted the ultimate collapse of the Union game.<sup>26</sup> Henry Grierson, a Public School Old Boy himself, was one of many who decried the insular and stagnant nature of metropolitan rugby.<sup>27</sup> Rumors abounded concerning clandestine meetings between the NU and West Country RFU players, and in 1899 the RFU anticipated an alleged professional recruiting drive into the West and Wales with offers of “fabulous sums.”<sup>28</sup> This failed to materialize, but indicates a concern for the stability of its code in the provinces.

The concern was not without reason as West Country clubs were plagued by the same type of shamateurism which was rampant in Yorkshire and Lancashire prior to 1895. There were those in the RFU who maintained that the split of 1895 had been a surgical procedure to remove the cancerous growth of professionalism.<sup>29</sup> If this was the case, the tumor was malignant. Shamateurism in the West Country was a product of the social makeup of clubs in the area, as it had been in the North. Small communities could not attract sufficient middle-class players to keep the game homogeneous and so recruited working men. The club structure was most often such that the community elites functioned as club leaders and officials. The working-class membership toiled on the pitch, reflecting the broader social relationship in the community. To maintain or achieve community and/or personal prestige, good players were clandestinely recruited with offers of employment, easier jobs, or high travel expense payments. It was seldom direct pay for play.<sup>30</sup>

The examples of shamateurism which arose in the West were very similar to those which had occurred in the North in the 1880s and early 1890s. Devonport Albion was accused of luring Welsh players, and in 1899 the Cornwall union suspended Torquay for paying players inducements. Bath was accused of paying playing expenses to an injured player.<sup>31</sup> Rather than “throttling the hydra” of professionalism, the RFU found that severing one head had only resulted in the creation of more.<sup>32</sup> Even in the North, the

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25. *Sports Times* (Bristol), Jan 28 and Oct. 14, 1911.

26. *Manchester Guardian*, October 1, 1900.

27. Henry Grierson, *Ramblings of a Rabbit* (London: no date), pp. 87-88.

28. *Athletic News and Cyclist's Journal*, January 23, 1899.

29. *Football Annual*, 1886, pp 160-161, Martens, “To Throttle the Hydra,” p. 69.

30. Marten's, “To Throttle the Hydra,” pp. 65-67.

31. RFU Minute Book 6/9/1894-3/1903; see February 4 and 26, 1898, January 26, 1898, and April 23, 1901 (held at the RFU Museum, Twickenham). For further information see A.B. Green's Football Notes.

32. This quote is attributed to Arthur Buff of the *Football Annual*, 1886, pp. 160-161.

practice continued after 1895, and became a growing concern of Midlands' clubs as well.<sup>33</sup>

If this was not enough for the middle-class dominated Union, its game, predicated upon gentlemanly amateurism and the proper sporting attitudes, experienced an upsurge in violence on the pitch in areas where working-class players competed during the 1890s. The Union blamed its problems of violence on the warped sporting instincts of the Northern shamateurs, but the four West Country Unions issued a joint circular to their clubs demanding an end to the chronic fighting. In 1904, Mosley players took their violence to the stands in an exchange with Coventry fans. The result was the suspension of players and a Union-imposed fine of £15 to the Coventry club.<sup>34</sup> As late as 1909, "The Unionist's" article "A Great Sport in Peril" decried the violence in the game and observed that the "Ill-deeds began in Wales . . ." and were imported to England by working-class players.<sup>35</sup>

Local support for the Northern Union was as strong as it had been for the clubs while they functioned within the amateur code, and the gate receipts confirm this. The 1896-97 NU Challenged Cup between Batley and St. Helen's attracted 14,000 supporters and earned £620. The following year, Batley and Bradford drew 27,941 people and realized a profit of £1506.<sup>36</sup> By 1903, the Yorkshire NU had 36 clubs playing in the two top divisions.<sup>37</sup>

The successes of the professional code contributed to the sense of decline being experienced by the RFU. At the beginning of the new century, the RFU, like the nation, appeared to be in disarray. Violence, endemic shamateurism, poor showings by the national XV, and the rise of the competing NU suggested that times had changed, and not for the better. Those middle-class pillars of the RFU who had dictated and directed the sport since the early Victorian years appeared to be losing control.

### III

The nation seemed to be splitting apart in the new century. Those things which had seemed so stable and secure less than a generation earlier were coming under the pressures of both internal and external forces of change. John Arlott has called these nervous years the "Golden Age of Sport," but not for the RFU.<sup>38</sup> The *Guardian's* prediction of the total demise of the amateur code seemed to be accurate by 1905.

Of 15 international matches against Scotland, Ireland, and Wales, the

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33. For example see *Yorkshire Sport*, March 28, 1903. The journal deals with the ineffective way the county union dealt with an incident involving Hull FC. *Yorkshire Sport* carried many such commentaries on shamateurism in the early years of this century. See also RFU Minute Book, 9/25/1902-5/28/1920; December 17, 1904, February 14, 1905, and March 17, 1905.

34. *Athletic News and Cyclist's Journal*, December 14, 1899; RFU Minute Book, September 25, 1902-May 28, 1920, see May 10, 1904.

35. *Observer*, February 28, 1909.

36. Macklin, *The History of Rugby League*, pp. 17-19.

37. *Yorkshire Sport*, May 7, 1903.

38. John Arlott, "Sport" p. 449.

English XV could only manage three wins and a draw. In 1905, they lost as well to the New Zealand All Blacks. In these 16 matches, 92 caps were secured by London and area players, while the number of Northern caps declined to 78. Much of this loss was made up by the 58 West Country caps.<sup>39</sup> Serious students of the handling code could claim to have seen a measurable decline in the success of the English XV since the split. Wales was enjoying an especially prosperous decade, but this alone could not account for the poor English showing. While some could blame the split, others argued the outdated playing style was the problem of the conservative English game.

Union spokesman Arthur Budd claimed in 1899-1900 that England's problems were at the forward position and announced confidently that the Welsh innovations at passing were a failure.<sup>40</sup> Five years later, *Sportsman* asked how much longer the split would be used as an excuse for the national side's performance.<sup>41</sup> The outspoken international from Old Merchant Taylors club, J. E. Raphael, asserted that England's problem was not the loss of players, but the misuse of talent, suggesting Budd had been wrong in his assessment of the Welsh passing game.<sup>42</sup> In fact, London Welsh RFC players were finding it increasingly difficult to make their national side since they were not exposed to the innovations of the game that were used to defeat England four times between 1901 and 1905.<sup>43</sup>

The most devastating loss in 1905, however, was against the colonials from New Zealand. The unheralded team arrived in England with 27 men to play 32 matches against English, Scottish, Irish, Welsh, and French sides, including the national XVs. The visitors scored 830 points and relinquished only 39. They lost only once, to Wales, 3-0. England was victimized 15-0. In spite of a grueling schedule the colonials employed innovative tactics and great fitness to establish the All Blacks as a world rugby power.<sup>44</sup>

New Zealand captain David Gallaher claimed players in his country focused on training to develop skills which would move the ball quickly between backs and forwards. The All Blacks employed specialized positions for the forwards and it was considered a matter of honor that a player be fit for the season.<sup>45</sup> He suggested that English sides played outdated styles and

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39. John Griffiths, *The Book of English International Rugby*.

40. *Rugby Union Handbook*, 1899-1900, p. 9.

41. Adrian Stoop: His Playing Days, vol. I, March 18, 1905. (This is one of the three Stoop scrapbooks held at the RFU Museum, Twickenham.)

42. J.E. Raphael, *Modern Rugby Football* (London: 1918), p. 23.

43. S. Jones and P. Berken, *Dragon in Exile; The Centenary History of London Welsh RFC* (London: 1985), p. 30.

44. John Nauright, "Sport, Manhood and Empire: the New Zealand Rugby Tour of 1905," *The International Journal of the History of Sport*, 8:2 (1991): 239-255: this is a very good discussion of tactics and styles employed by the visitors. See also James W. Martens, "Rugby Union Football and English Society, 1871-1914" (PhD dissertation, University of Manitoba, 1988), pp. 241-242.

45. D. Gallaher and W. J. Stead, *The Complete Rugby Footballer* (London 1906), p. 179; *Observer*, September 24, 1905.

were unfit, while the *Guardian* announced the All Blacks were “a team working together in one mind.”<sup>46</sup> The pushing and shoving of the English teams accomplished little against the attack-oriented style of the tourists (see Appendix 2).

Some critics of the colonial style claimed it was tantamount to cheating, since the visitors employed a back (wing-forward) to obstruct opposition players, allowing the ball to move more freely. International stars V. H. Cartwright and E. W. Dillion were among the critics who claimed the wing-forward made a farce of the game.<sup>47</sup> Ironically this was not a New Zealand invention, but was brought home by the Maoris touring team who had seen it used prior to 1895 by working-class Yorkshire players.<sup>48</sup> Critics aside, however, the quality of play and the entertainment of the visitors’ style could not be ignored.

Perhaps unintentionally, Gallaher and New Zealand premier Richard Siddon made an observation that was not new to the English. They claimed that England’s rugby problems might have been the result of urban degeneracy.<sup>49</sup> This was also a view held by those who attempted to explain England’s failures in the South African War, and those who saw Germany’s industrial successes in terms of England’s perceived decline. The loss of the English XV to the New Zealanders was, for those already worried over the nation’s demise, not merely a game, but further evidence of England’s plight. The old style of the Victorian period was no longer able to keep pace with modern innovations. The middle class, and public school old boys who defended it, were defending a way of play and a way of life which was unacceptable to those who embraced fitness, deception, specialization, and imagination. Some prominent players, including J. E. Raphael and Leonard Tosswill, both internationals, went against the traditions of the English game and called for increased training and fitness. Others such as H. Alexander noted that the enjoyment of the game never included training.<sup>50</sup> E. B. Osborn argued that the All Blacks’ success had little to do with fitness, but rather to England’s lack of “scientific” play and team concepts of attack. He did, however, claim that in five years the New Zealand style would be commonplace in England.<sup>51</sup>

Certainly as a result of the growing debate over training and England’s poor showings on the pitch, as well as the 1906 loss to South Africa, the RFU felt it necessary to encourage more public school boys to take up the game. In 1906, the Union sent letters to all public schools asking them to introduce the

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46. *Manchester Guardian*, December 11, 1905.

47. *Why the “All Blacks” Triumphed: Daily Mail Story of the Tour* (no author, no date), pp. 11-12 and p. 28.

48. E.B. Osborn, “New Zealand Football,” *Nineteenth Century*, XIX (1906): 108.

49. Gallaher and Stead, *The Complete Rugby Footballer*, pp. 177-198.

50. *Why the “All Blacks” Triumphed*, p. 30 and p. 49.

51. E. B. Osborn, “New Zealand Football,” pp. 110-113.

game in their institutions. The Union claimed that the sport provided a lasting social connection for middle-class boys, even beyond school. "The game of Rugby Football has always been at its best when good players were available from our Public Schools, and the more Public School men we get to play our game, the better we are certain it is for it."<sup>52</sup> This action, and criticisms of the new rugby style were evidence of a class-based sense that the country, or at least those symbols of the Victorian middle-class domination, were under siege from forces of the New.

One player who was on the pitch in 1905 when England lost to the colonists was Adrian Stoop, an innovator who would rescue the amateur code and preserve rugby's Victorian sporting values well into the 1980s. Stoop was in many ways typical of English players. He was a lawyer, who learned his rugby at Dover College, Rugby School, Oxford, and with the Harlequins which he joined while still at university.<sup>53</sup> Stoop was a reformer on the pitch, but by no means a radical off the field. He was a keen competitor determined to make those adjustments to strategy and playing style necessary to ensure victory, but as the thirty-second president of the RFU, he later displayed little of his flair on the field in the board room.

The Harlequins FC was a London club with a long history, but it never attained the status of Blackheath or Richmond which tended to attract the top players in the city. However, Stoop, halfback H. J. Sibree from the defunct Kensington club, and Bristol's J. G. Brikett chose to join the Quins when they relocated to the metropolis. These three would become the backbone of England's most dynamic team after 1905.

#### IV

In the decade between the All Blacks' triumph and the outbreak of the Great War, England's separation from its Victorian past continued to grow. The RFU found itself faced with growing criticism concerning its play at the international level, but too, those nagging challenges to its sporting ethos remained an area of concern. Shamateurism appeared at the highest level of play when it was learned that in 1909 E. J. Jackett of Falmouth signed a letter of intent with the NU. In a related incident, C. A. Crane, the RFU secretary, resigned as a result of innuendoes concerning the Leicester Tigers knowingly using professionals. In 1912, Newton Abbott's treasurer was forced to resign when he was found to have paid players for broken time. Twenty-seven West Country players, including international R. A. Jago (England, 1906-07), were found to have violated RFU professional bylaws: the area's top clubs, Devonport Albion, Plymouth Albion, Teignmouth, and Torquay were implicated. In March of 1913, the Union announced its intention to investigate allegations of professionalism throughout the West.<sup>54</sup>

52. RFU Minute Book 9/25/1902-5/28/1920, see January, 1906.

53. Titley and McWhirter, *Centenary History of the Rugby Football Union*, pink pages, see "Presidents."

54. *Observer*, January 31 and March 21, 1909, RFU Minute Book 9/25/1902-5/28/1920, January, 1909.

As the northern provincial clubs had done prior to 1895, those in the West Country and Midlands presented the Union with a serious problem. There was a need to draw on them for their high-quality players, but the persistent shamateurism created a dilemma. *Sports Times* of Bristol documented cases of shamateurism over 1911 and 1912, and on October 12, 1912, reported rumors that much of the West Country favored a shift to the Northern Union format of league play, and a month later suggested that if the RFU continued to attack shamateurism there would certainly be another split.<sup>55</sup> Could the RFU face the criticism for turning a blind eye to abuses, or must it act with the same “arthritic resistance” it had prior to the Great Schism? The RFU found itself in a fortunate situation. By 1914, it was once again the dominant power in international play. Thanks to the Harlequin-inspired resurgence in metropolitan rugby, the RFU was able to attack the malfeasance in the provinces, including the rejection of a request to establish league play for West Country clubs.<sup>56</sup> In the *Observer*, “New Broom” demanded a complete purging of professionalism.<sup>57</sup>

The Harlequins had come to be the leading lights of England’s new passing game as a result of the post-1905 efforts of Adrian Stoop who borrowed liberally from the open field attacking style of the Welsh and the All Blacks. Phillip Trevor of the *Daily Telegraph* applauded the Quins for blending the “speed and cunning of the new with the strength and courage of the old.”<sup>58</sup> *Sportsman* demanded that other clubs copy the Stoop method, and the *Athletic News* praised Stoop in poetry:

Well passed, well run, well passed again!  
That wing 3/4 in:  
“a rattling try!”  
Spectators cry:  
Stoop-endous Harlequin.<sup>59</sup>

*Sports Times* of Bristol praised the 1911 Quins for their “great pace” and the October 21, 1907, edition of *Sportsman* called their back line “brilliant.” On December 31, 1909, the *Morning Post* credited Stoop’s tactics to the Welsh art of attack which dated back to the 1880s.<sup>60</sup> Another supporter of the Harlequin style noted that “The ordinary spectator likes to see those sweeping combined movements which the Harlequin backs treat us to, especially when they have the master hand of Adrian Stoop to lead and direct them.”<sup>61</sup> Even

55. *Sports Times*, October 12 and November 2, 1911.

56. Martens, “Rugby Union Football and English Society,” pp. 269-274. RFU Minute Book, Sept. 25, 1902–May 28, 1920, see May 24, 1914.

57. *Observer*, March 21, 1909.

58. Adrian Stoop: His Playing Days, vol. II, see *Daily Telegraph*, 1910 and 1912.

59. Adrian Stoop: His Playing Days, vol. II, see *Sportsman*, October 21, 1907, and *Athletic News*, 1910.

60. *Sport Times*, October 14, 1911; *Sportsman*, October 21, 1907; *Morning Post*, December 31, 1909.

61. Adrian Stoop: His Playing Days, 1906/07–1909/10, vol. II, March 28, 1908. (Held at the RFU Museum Twickenham.)

the most limited survey of the Edwardian sporting press would indicate the importance of and interest in the Harlequins' game.

As the Quins' reputation grew, they began to attract disciples of the running and passing game who wished to participate in the club's single-minded emphasis on attack: missing out players with long passes, deceptive handling, switches, and cross kicks. Stoop converted a second team forward, D. Lambert, into an international back as he built a team concept where players could be fitted into the side as injury dictated without creating a problem.<sup>62</sup> Raphael claimed the Stoop system reflected "the proper civil spirit." It was anti-conservative, cooperative, and collectivist for the greater good.<sup>63</sup> Training ingenuity, and a de-emphasis on Victorian individualism made the Quins the nation's most followed side in spite of the *Times* and *Observer's* condemnation of the "Harlequin fetish."<sup>64</sup>

By the end of the first decade of the new century, the sporting press would suggest that some metropolitan clubs and the national selectors were slow beginning to embrace the more daring style of attack-oriented rugby.

For years past, England, trusting to obsolete methods, have vainly struggled to avert defeat with monotonous regularity by other countries, who were intelligently profiting by past experiences and studying new tactics. The English fifteen, on the contrary, rushed bull-like into the fray with no set plan of campaign. It was as though we were engaged in modern warfare having armed our soldiers with weapons of the Crimean period. We fairly courted defeat.<sup>65</sup>

In applauding the conversion of some London clubs to the Harlequin style, the *Daily Telegraph* noted:

We are at last penetrating the thick hide of unreasoning conservatism in our national life; and in cricket and in football in particular we are giving new men and new ideas more room.<sup>66</sup>

Harlequins soon found themselves representing their country in international matches. Prior to Stoop's cap in 1905, the club had earned only seven selections since 1871. Between 1906 and 1910, 40 caps went to players such as A. D. Stoop and his brother Tim, Brikett, Lambert, Sibree, and a young Oxford, star Ronnie Poluton (Palmer) (see Appendix 3). By 1907, players from other clubs were selected for their ability to fit with the Quin backs, the most effective of whom was Northampton's E. R. Mobbs. Bert Solomon of

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62. H.B.T. Wakelam. *The Harlequin Story: The History of the Harlequin FC* (London: 1954. pp. 34-35; Adrian Stoop: His Playing Days, vol. II. February 10, 1910.

63. J. E. Raphael, *Modern Rugby Football*. pp. 269-270.

64. *The Times* (December 21, 1910) called the Quins' style "unsportsman like." while the *Observer* (February 28, 1909) featured an article by "The Unionist" who called on public school old boys to drive these radical elements out of the game and reclaim the old playing style. It was "The Unionist" who coined the pun. "they stoop to conquer."

65. *Daily Mail*, September 20, 1910

66. Adrian Stoop: His Playing Days, 1910-1912, vol. III (see *Daily Telegraph* 1912).

Redruth and Cornwall added the final component to the national side, when he introduced the idea of forwards joining the backs in attack. England soon found it had a side which would attack at any time and from anywhere, providing hope for success on the pitch and entertainment for the fans.<sup>67</sup>

The early results of the new style were not spectacular, as England lost all five matches to Wales between 1906 and 1910. They managed only a single win over Scotland, and two victories to three defeats against Ireland. England's saving grace was its five successive wins over France which began playing international matches in 1906. Although there were new players, educated to the Stoop system of relentless attack, the *Observer* noted in 1907 that there were still too many old-style devotees on the English XV. This was echoed a year later by the *Morning Post*, when it called for even more players in the Stoop mould. The *Post* suggested selectors give up "ransacking northern centres" for working-class forwards.<sup>68</sup> In 1910, national team selectors broke up the Quin combination in the backs for the game against Ireland, and England could only produce a disappointing draw.<sup>69</sup> As late as 1913, Raphael noted that the conversion to the passing game was being resisted by some London clubs.<sup>70</sup>

It was in the final five seasons prior to World War I that England began to realize the results of altering its game. Stoop was gone from the English XV by 1914, but his legacy remained. England's successes were spectacular, with or without Stoop, from 1911 until 1914 when play was halted to support the war. The National side lost only once in four games against Scotland, Ireland, and Wales, and France failed to defeat the English XV (see Appendix 4). England won the Triple Crown in 1914 with no Harlequins, but Ronnie Poluton, who had joined Liverpool FC, remained from the famous Quin backs. Now there were new stars including W.J.A. Davies of the Royal Navy, who replaced Stoop, but these players employed the attacking styles of the Welsh and the New Zealanders brought to the English side by the Quins. There would never be a return to the ponderous, defensive, pushing matches that defined the amateur code immediately after 1895.

It was fitting that the Harlequins would make Twickenham, the grounds of the RFU, their home. The RFU's permanent site was purchased on October 3, 1907, and hosted its first international in 1910 with Wales as the vanquished guest for the first time since 1896, but its first match saw the Quins play Richmond on October 2, 1909, before 4,000-5,000 spectators.<sup>71</sup>

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67. John Griggiths, *The Book of English International Rugby*, *Observer*, February 28, 1909; K. Pelmeur, *Rugby Football: An Anthology* (London: 1958), p. 351; J. E. Raphael, *Modern Rugby Football*, pp. 269-270.

68. *Observer*, March 3, 1907; Adrian Stoop: His Playing Days, vol. II, see *Morning Post*, October 10, 1908.

69. Adrian Stoop: His Playing Days, vol. I, II, see *Morning Post*, December 17, 1909, and February 21, 1910.

70. J. E. Raphael, "The Development of Rugby Football," *Windsor Magazine*, XXXVIII (1913): 508.

71. Tillet and McWhirter, *The Centenary History of the Rugby Football Union*, p. 130. Papers and Documents Pertaining to Twickenham held at the RFU Museum, Twickenham.

Certainly Twickenham marked a new era in RFU history. but not only because it became the permanent site for all England home internationals, because it was the showplace for the Quins' spectacular style, and the site of the national XV's resurgence. The initial victory over Wales featured Stoop taking the opening kickoff and attacking immediately. Solomon described the first score for England: "there was a loose scrum from which D. R. Gent got the ball and passed to Stoop from whom I got it. I passed to Brikett who then gave it to Chapman who scored in the right hand corner."<sup>72</sup> The new attacking style gave England a lead in the first minutes and appropriately featured two of the three Harlequins selected for the match.

## V

In the years following the bifurcation of the RFU, the game, as played by the amateurs, was in a desperate condition. The loss of working class Northern players removed both the innovators and the desire for innovation on the pitch. The result was poor performances in international matches, highlighted by the defeat by the All Blacks in 1905. It could not have escaped the critics of the age that the handling code was an allegory for the nation's great sense of degeneracy. The losses on the pitch threatened support for the game, and confirmed any assertion that the middle-class sporting attitudes dictated by the Union seemed anachronistic. However, Stoop and those who adopted the innovative tactics rescued the game, and prevented it from being swept away by forces of the New. By 1914, amateur rugby was reasserting its position as the nation's preferred handling code, established prior to 1895.

It is difficult to speculate, but there is every reason to believe that had not Stoop and his followers gained ascendancy on the field, the middle class would have abandoned its game to a degree that it might have lost its national preeminence. There is an irony in the evolution of the game's revival on the pitch. As much as there was opposition and resistance to Stoop and the Harlequins' tactic by reactionary forces in the RFU, it was the case that the concession to the forces of the New on the pitch allowed the game to continue to function based on its Victorian amateur values even to this day. While there have been certain limited aspects of modernization related to the RFU's definition of professionalism, the game remains amateur at all levels of play.

Even though many of the social forces that evolved after 1870 eventually swept away Victorianism, some aspects of the age remained and prospered after their intent ceased to have meaning. Amateur rugby has been one of these Victorian anachronisms. The ability of the game to be predicated on such outdated sporting values was very much a consequence of the determination and success of Adrian Stoop and the "brash insolence" of the New.

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72. Griffiths, *The Book of English International Rugby*, see England versus Wales, 1910.

# The Topictator





Appendix 4

