
The History, Evolution and Diffusion of Rugby in the U.S.A.

by

DALE P. TOOHEY

California State University Long Beach

Rugby is a development of an ancient game "at ball." It can lay claim to being the most ancient of British sports. The French adopted rugby as early as 1870 and students at McGill University were playing it in the early 1870's and introduced it to the United States in 1873. Harvard University in 1871 started a game called the "Boston Game". Other colleges remained with soccer. Harvard organized its own football club on December 3rd, 1872. A proposal for a game was received from McGill University, a game to be played under Harvard's rules. A return game was to be played under McGill's rules which were the rules of the English game of Rugby. On May 15th, 1874, the game of Rugby was introduced to the United States at Cambridge. The first game at Cambridge, played under Harvard rules, resulted in a victory for the home team 3 goals to nil. The second under rugby rules ended in a scoreless draw. The significance was that Harvard liked the game so much that they adopted the rugby rules. Yale and Princeton in turn followed Harvard's action. Californians developed rugby at the high school and university level. In July 1933 a group of Hollywood sportsmen met at the Hollywood Roosevelt Hotel and formed the Southern California Rugby Football Union.

A group of Californian collegians represented the United States in Antwerp and Paris at the 1920 and 1924 Olympics. The Americans won the gold medal in 1920 by defeating France by 8 points to zero. The feat was repeated again in 1924 for another gold medal when the French were again beaten by 17 points to three. The depression caused a decline in the game. Small groups did keep the game alive and in Chicago and New York, the Mid-West and Eastern Rugby Unions were formed in 1932 and 1934, respectively.

The outbreak of war in 1939 again curtailed any further development. Following the war, the game developed at a steady rate. In Chicago on June 7th, 1975, the formation of an American National Rugby Union was realized. The official title being the United States of American Rugby Football Union. At this meeting, it was determined that the United States be divided into four territorial unions, namely: Pacific Coast, Mid-Western, Western and Eastern. Since the formation of the National Union, the American team in its International

Rugby debut, played the Australians at Glover Stadium, La Palma Park, Anaheim, California, January 31st, 1976. The Australians were the victors, 26-14.

This International was followed by a game against France in Chicago on June 12th, 1976, and Canada in Vancouver on May 21, 1977. The first international tour by an American team was to England in September/October 1977, and culminated with a match against an England XV at the famed Twickenham ground. Rugby for the forty years and over age bracket is rapidly developing in the United States as is Women's Rugby.