

# Oxbridge: Forgotten Forcing Ground for the Modernization of Football

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The public schools, and in particular Rugby, have been accorded the primacy of influence for the development and modernization of football in its transition years from approximately 1830 to 1890. The argument has been made that it was these schools which formed the social locus for this transition primarily because they were not subject to the general process of decline which overtook the traditional pre-19th century folk forms of football. And while the effects of urbanization and industrialization on the decline of the folk forms of the game have been widely discussed, the important part played by the universities of Oxford and Cambridge in the incipient modernization of football, has, I believe, been somewhat surprisingly neglected. This paper is an attempt to redress that imbalance by focusing on the role of Oxbridge in the organization, codification, standardization and ultimate modernization of football.

The games played in the public schools were as many and varied as the schools themselves. Each school had its own code and rules. Oxford and Cambridge acted as crucibles for practices from a wide-range of schools. They were both the “forcing grounds” from which the two major codes of football emerged, and the contact points for diffusion of the ‘modernized’ form of football. In contrast to Dunning’s (1975) hierarchical view of diffusion from Rugby to other institutions, I suggest both contagious and hierarchical diffusion as well as parallel innovation as mechanisms fostering the development.

For football to flourish at Oxbridge it was necessary to codify rules that were ‘fair to all schools’. This was the major motivation for such efforts at Cambridge in the late 1830’s and Oxford in the early 1850’s. The rationale behind this was that it was the only way in which those who had learned to enjoy football at their schools could continue at the universities.

Dunning (1975) has posited that the bifurcation of football into the two codes of Rugby and Association was a form of status rivalry between Rugby and Eton. And while this argument is both powerful and subtle, it fails to take account of the development of football at Eton where both handling and non-handling codes were played, and the fact that it was only at Oxbridge that direct contact between the schools made bifurcation through status rivalry a likely outcome.

Lest the role of Oxbridge be overstated, bifurcation took place as much because of the effects of public schoolboys who had not been to Oxbridge, and to their views of manliness and morality, as it did to status rivalry between Rugby and Eton. For status rivalry was directed at 'hacking' while the two forms of football emerged over differences of opinion with regard to 'handling', the major distinguishing feature of the two codes.

The importance of Oxbridge was that it provided a forcing ground for the development of rules which were 'fair to all schools'. However, despite its influence it could not prevent the continuation of two separate forms of football, the handling and non-handling games.