

Rugby Football in Australia: The Rules that Disproved the Exception

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The first recorded game of football in the colony of New South Wales was in 1829, whereas rugby football was played at Sydney University in the 1860s. In 1858, Thomas Wentworth Wills, Rugby and Cambridge-educated, though Australian born, wrote a letter to *Bill's Life in Victoria* which signalled the advent of the nascent form of Australian Rules football. By the late 1800s the new game was supreme in Melbourne, Adelaide, Perth and Brisbane.

In Brisbane the game of rugby football arrived after the indigenous game, and despite an increasing urge for state and national identity, the definitive Australian game was ultimately shunned in favour of a traditional English pastime, considerably rougher at the time. The middle classes, therefore, supported a patently more violent game, rugby football, against an intrinsically less violent one, Australian Rules.

However, this obvious contradiction of the hypothesis that the development of sport follows Norbert Elias' 'Civilizing Process' can be rationalised. The process, as developed by Dunning and Sheard, only proceeds when it is conducive to the socio-political needs of the controllers of the society in question. In the 1880s, the game of rugby football in Brisbane gamed the ascendancy over the indigenous game because its evolution was consistent with the acceptable standards and attitudes of the leading groups of the community of Brisbane and the colony of Queensland. The 'Civilizing Process', and development in general, were controlled by the broader social, political and economic factors that impinged upon Queensland society in the Victorian era, and in Victorian Brisbane the characteristic of society was loyalty to the Crown and to British heritage.

Thus, the debate and struggle for supremacy between these football codes was not between the followers of a more or less violent sport but between the supporters of the Mother country and of a fractious colonial off-spring.