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From Public Schools to the Pampas: Elements for an Atlantic History of Rugby

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Created at around the same time as football/soccer, rugby spread out from England along the pathways of British cultural imperialism. However, it met with a cooler reception than football on both sides of the Atlantic.

In the area of cultural transfers, it is usually impossible to locate a "point of origin" from which a process of geographical dissemination emanates. The model for this process, which could be pictured as concentric circles spreading outward from an epicenter, would be excessively ethnocentric and overlook the interactive and dynamic dimension of contacts. But the roots of "modern sport", in the sense used by Allen Guttmann, or of the "sport system," can be traced back to a precisely identified place and time: Great Britain from the late eighteenth to the early nineteenth centuries. Whether other countries, notably the United States and France, followed this pattern, either by inventing new sports or codifying them, is immaterial. Most of the foundation was already there, creating a formal, practical framework into which the new sport could be easily inserted. The point of origin is crucially important because it rather precisely shaped the cultural features of sports that spread around the world, particularly through british imperialism.

The spread of rugby fits this pattern perfectly. But rugby features another characteristic that makes it especially interesting: not only is its inception inseparable from soccer's, [1] but the emergence of both sports in the same place at the same time played a key role in the rise of the sport system that spread across the globe.

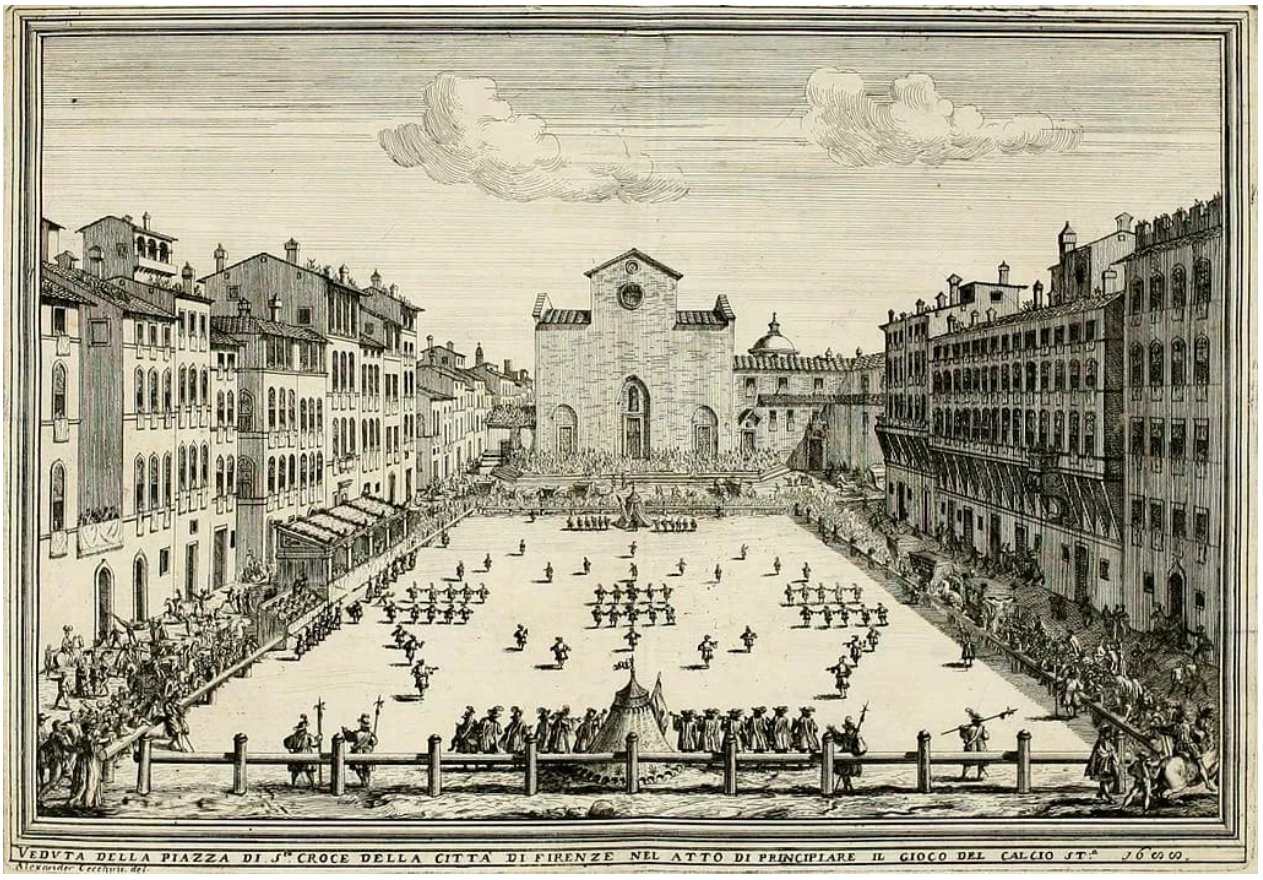
Nevertheless, rugby did not enjoy the same degree of success as soccer around the world. While soccer became the national sport in most countries, few welcomed rugby with open arms. Whether the reason is seen as a consequence of historical contingencies or a mismatch between some of rugby's formal properties and certain cultural features of the host countries (it is probably a combination of both), rugby outside the British Isles has had a lasting and substantial presence in just two European countries (France and, to a lesser degree, Italy), one in Latin America (Argentina), one in Africa (South Africa) and five in the South Pacific (Australia, New Zealand, Fiji, Samoa, Tonga). Outside the British Isles, the Atlantic zone of cultural dissemination is limited to France, Argentina and South Africa. [2] However, this analysis will take the intriguing cases of the United States and Canada into account, despite rugby's low profile in their sports landscape, because it allows an issue to be addressed that is often overlooked by historians but matters to anthropologists. When a sport such as rugby, soccer or cricket is one of the cultural "objects" that English settlers brought with them but does not take root in the host country despite a historic opportunity, historians tend to ignore it: if there is no event, there is nothing to say. Anthropologists, on the other hand, consider absence worth exploring because they focus on dimensions of cultural compatibility (or incompatibility) between host countries and the sport's formal properties. A case in point is the unpopularity of rugby in India and among the population of Indian descent in Fiji. In the United States and Canada, it seems clear that both types of interpretation, historical and anthropological, are closely linked and provide a textbook case for grasping the cultural processes involved in the dissemination of sports.

The Place of Origin: The British Isles

To understand how rugby passed on specific cultural values, the conditions surrounding its inception and development are worth recalling. While cricket already had deep roots in the English countryside by the eighteenth century, with formal properties that have remained basically unchanged to the present day, it existed alongside another, highly uncodified and unorganized ball game called "football". From the Middle

Ages to the eighteenth century, similar versions of this quite simple game (two teams battle over a ball) were found in many European countries: *knappan* in southern Wales, *hurling* in Ireland and Cornwall, *calcio* in Italy, *soule* in Brittany and Normandy and folk football (or mass football) across the british Isles. There could be notable differences between them, especially with regard to the number of players (in *knappan*, for example, thousands of individuals could participate in a single game), or whether contestants rode horses or hit the ball with a stick, but they had several basic features in common:

- The places where the games took place looked very different from today's standardized playing fields designed for one sport only. They were communal areas (meadows, forests, rivers, streets or village squares) that changed with each game, which could last several days, and usually took place on religious and folk holidays.
- The modern idea of equality between protagonists was virtually unknown (possible participation of women or horsemen, unequal number of players on each side).
- In contrast to modern sports, the rules were based on unwritten, and therefore highly flexible, local conventions and customs.
- No representative institutions (clubs, federations) governed the sport.



Playing *calcio* on Piazza Santa Croce in Florence, 1688

Source: Pietro di Lorenzo Bini, Memorie del calcio fiorentino tratte da diverse scritture e dedicate all'altezze serenissime di Ferdinando Principe di Toscana e Violante Beatrice di Baviera, Firenze, Stamperia di S.A.S. alla Condotta, 1688

How did these informal practices evolve into modern rugby? At the risk of excessively simplifying a highly complex process, it is worth recalling the leading role played by the English educational system, especially public schools and universities. Throughout the eighteenth and in the early nineteenth centuries, students at many colleges played the forerunner of modern football in an educational setting specific to Great

Britain, where field sports were an integral part of the curriculum. Pupils were free to organize games, with support from teachers or headmasters–and often the parents themselves–who saw them as an ideal way not only to channel the boys' violence or indiscipline, but also instill them with "values" deemed essential (strength, courage, endurance, etc.), all in a general context where the idea of "muscular Christianity" gradually took hold. In this favorable environment, each college developed its own version of folk football, depending in particular on the space available for playing it. Increasingly precise rules emerged (the first for rugby date from 1845). Universities and clubs sped the movement's momentum. Two main codes ultimately emerged: the "handling game" played in Rugby, where under certain conditions players were allowed to grab the ball by hand, and the «dribbling game," which was favored by other public schools, including Harrow. They became rival sets of rules; when clubs or schools met on the playing field, first they had to settle the issue of which ones to use. After many trials, soccer took a major step towards autonomy when the Football Association was created, followed in 1871 by the Rugby Football Union (RFU). This is when the conflict over whether or not the players should be paid erupted, which led to two different results. While soccer averted an internal crisis by becoming professional, rugby's governing bodies chose to keep the sport an amateur endeavor. The decision was opposed by some clubs in northern England, which split off from the RFU by creating the Northern Rugby Union (1895), giving rise to a new professional sport, 13-a-side rugby (rugby league). The southern clubs remained loyal to amateur rugby; 15-a-side rugby did not become officially professional until 1995.



A folk or mob football game in London, 1721

Source: Wikimedia

In the wake of English imperialism, 15-a-side rugby spread to a number of Atlantic zone countries in the second half of the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth centuries.

France

While rugby is not the most practiced sport in France–the Fédération française de rugby (FFR) has 272,000 members, compared to over two million for soccer–it is nevertheless popular. Indeed, France has more players than any other country in continental Europe. To understand why, three explanations can be put forward.

First, as was the case in most countries, the English themselves, rather than the French, played the first «football" games and set up the first clubs in France. Businessmen and traders, mostly from Oxford and Cambridge, tried to reproduce abroad the games they enjoyed at public schools and universities. That is what they did in Le Havre in the early 1870s, just after the Football Association split off from the Rugby Union. The sport was called *combination*, a cross between the handling game and the dribbling game. F. F. Langstaff (after whom France's first sports stadium was named) founded the Le Havre Athletic Club, which had two sections, one for rugby football, the other for football association. [3] In 1877, English fabric and wine merchants, respectively, created two more clubs: the English Taylors (in Paris) and the Bordeaux Athletic Club. While at first these were English initiatives intended for English residents, they increasingly appealed to Frenchmen. For example, writer Pierre Mac Orlan and composer Arthur Honegger (who wrote a symphonic movement called *Rugby* in 1928) took an interest in the Le Havre Athletic Club's rugby section.

VIDEO

View online: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ETa58z3dzYg

> *Rugby* by Arthur Honegger, 1928. Performed by the Orchestre du Capitole de Toulouse under the baton of Michel Plasson
>
> **Source:** YouTube

Second, rugby's early rise in France owed much to the involvement of upper-class students, especially in Paris. The 1882 founding of the Racing Club de Paris stemmed from an 1877 game between students from the Lycée Condorcet and the École Monge, on the one hand, and English players on the other. Likewise, in 1883 students from the Lycée Saint-Louis and other Left Bank schools formed the Stade Français. Many prestigious Parisian *lycées* followed suit, and a student championship took place in the 1890s. The provinces jumped on the bandwagon, with the creation of Stade Bordelais, Stade Nantais and Football Club de Lyon, for example. Rugby was clearly an elite sport. However, the movement quickly became part of a specifically French context of conflict, with the proponents of "French games" and "English sports" pitted against each other. The former, represented by Paschal Grousset, founder of the Ligue nationale de l'éducation physique (LNEP) in 1888, promoted a patriotic, popular, anti-elitist and anti-aristocratic vision of sport. They also campaigned for girls' participation–something unimaginable to sporting gentlemen. The latter were led by Georges de Saint-Clair, who had spent his teenage years in England and became general secretary of the Racing Club de France in 1884, soon joined by Pierre de Coubertin, founder of the modern Olympic Games. De Saint-Clair's efforts led to the adoption of English sports, an amateur ethos–and rugby instead of soccer. In 1889, he federated various associations under the Union des sociétés françaises des sports athlétiques (USFSA), the forerunner of today's sport federations. With Racing, the USFSA would become the leading promotor in France of English sports in general and rugby in particular. Its new ally, de Coubertin, tirelessly campaigned to promote "English" sport and the "values" (strength, courage, composure, fair play) rugby allegedly conveys.

French rugby's third specific characteristic is its uneven distribution within the country, which is related to the upper classes' gradual loss of influence on the sport's overall organization. It initially caught on across France, especially in the North (Bourges, Rouen, Le Mans, Béthune, Saint-Quentin) and Paris (in the first championships, which took place in the 1890s, Parisian teams invariably triumphed until 1903). However, towards the late nineteenth century, rugby became more established in the South-East (the Perpignan region) and especially the South-West (Pau, Bayonne, Agen, Bordeaux), where the many English

residents–bankers and merchants–played the sport, coached players, founded or led clubs and imported techniques and methods from home. The Anglomania of the Bordeaux bourgeoisie, to which writer François Mauriac bemusedly bore witness, did much to help rugby take root in Gironde. Spreading along major lines of communication, especially rivers like the Garonne, rugby put down roots in smaller towns and attracted players from more modest backgrounds. The Ligue girondine d'éducation physique, founded by Dr. Philippe Tissié from sports associations supported by radical notables and republican and secular networks, was an important ally. Its aim was to develop sports at school, but in their English version, especially rugby. The socio-professional make-up of French rugby today reflects this shift towards the middle and lower classes, although the share of workers was very low. Unlike soccer, players of North African or African descent remain under-represented, and women's rugby did not really take off until the 1960s, joining the Fédération française de rugby only in 1989.

In 1910, France joined England, Scotland, Wales and Ireland in the Four Nations Tournament but was excluded from 1931 to 1947 for excessive roughness and the payment of hidden remuneration in breach of the rules of amateurism ("shamateurism"). Italy, which received French aid, joined the competition, now called the Six Nations Tournament, in 2000. A women's version has existed since 1996.

Argentina

Unlike the situation in most Latin American countries, the main influence in Argentina was not American, but English. This was seen in the adoption of many sports, including three that are emblematic in the country: soccer, polo and rugby. They appeal to very different segments of the population. Cultural transfers relating to the spread of rugby cannot be analyzed without briefly mentioning those involved in the dissemination of soccer and polo.

In the 1830s, Argentina began to enjoy remarkable economic growth fueled by large-scale immigration and an export-driven food industry. Most immigrants, especially starting in the 1860s, came from Latin Europe: by 1914, there were already around one million Italians and 800,000 spaniards, while the number from France and Central Europe was less than 100,000. Vastly outnumbered in this environment, the 40,000 British were never able to significantly change the essentially Latin or Mediterranean character of the population or its political culture. However, they had the most influence on Argentina's economic and commercial development. In 1914, 60% of foreign investment in Argentina (400 million pounds) came from Great Britain. The aim was not to occupy land, but to exploit a market and ensure an outlet for British products and a source of grain, beef and lamb by imposing the rules of free trade and a strong capitalist presence. To achieve those goals, the English built a large-scale rail network fanning out from Buenos Aires. Traders who had been established in the capital since the early nineteenth century gradually found themselves leading a kind of informal empire, with direct ownership of most of the major companies, the construction of the railroads and the importation of numerous engineers and technicians. Admittedly, in cultural terms, English influence remained fairly weak compared to that of France in particular, but it was very strong in the area of sports.

As was the case in many countries in the mid-nineteenth century, the beginnings of rugby in Argentina are difficult to distinguish from those of soccer, insofar as neither had yet acquired its own identity. Historiographical data on Argentinian rugby is very sparse and not always reliable, and when the word "football" is used in administrative documents or the press, it refers to ball games whose rules had yet to be officially defined both nationally and internationally. Moreover, the same clubs often offered both rugby and soccer, when this is mentioned. Most of them were older organizations created and led almost

exclusively by the British that also offered cricket, tennis and rowing. This community of expatriates was the starting point for the dissemination of team ball sports in Argentina. The best known include cricket clubs, like the Buenos Aires Cricket Club, which emerged in the early 1860s, and the Rosario Cricket Club, which also offered soccer and rugby. A number of key figures gave the necessary impetus to develop these activities. Thomas Hogg, whose father founded a cricket club in London in 1819, contributed in various ways: by founding Latin America's first golf club, setting up the Buenos Aires Football Club (BAFC) with his brother James in 1867 as part of the upmarket Buenos Aires Cricket Club and organizing rugby matches. The first rugby game within the BAFC seems to have taken place on May 14, 1874 according to rules laid down three years earlier by the Rugby Football Union: "Señor Hogg's team" went up against "Señor Trench's team," and all the players were British. Other matches opposed equally ephemeral teams the same year ("Bancos" vs. "Ciudad", "Inglaterra" vs. "Mundo") with the number of players varying between 11 and 13. When Rosario faced off against Buenos Aires in June 1886, each side had 15 players: one fullback, three "center fullbacks", two halfbacks and nine forwards. The classic configuration (1-4-2-8) was not adopted until 1894. The Rosario vs. Buenos Aires match took place every year, but this regularity was still an exception. Clubs invited each other depending on circumstances.

Rugby developed much more slowly than soccer. The first championship was not held until 1899. Planned by a BAFC committee in order to organize properly the yearly matches that still only took place between a handful of clubs, it was called the River Plate Rugby Union Championship because the Montevideo Cricket Club team participated. The earliest title-holder was the Lomas Athletic Club, which had already become Argentina's first soccer champion in 1893. The first division dates from 1899, the second from 1906 and the third from 1925. Then the game spread to the hinterland, giving rise to a regional body called the Santa Fe Rugby Union in 1928, later replaced by the Unión de Rugby de Rosario. [4]

The education system's role was as fundamental to rugby's early days as it was to soccer's. But while it quickly dwindled in the case of soccer, it increased in the case of rugby. The efforts of the Liga Atletica Intercolegial allowed many non-English educational institutions based on the British public school model, notably the Buenos Aires English School, Belgrano Day School and St. George College, to join English ones. With support from the Club Universitario de Buenos Aires, the league spread rugby's rules and statutes far and wide. The first championships between schools were a formative experience for many players who later joined higher-level teams (the Old Georgian team was made up of St. George College graduates) or even the national selection. Rugby and soccer players hailed from very different respective backgrounds due to the recruitment drive's particular nature. At first, soccer players came from the English middle class. Then, most were recruited from the working classes, drawing on a very large, continuously replenished immigrant population. Conversely, rugby players came from elite backgrounds, and when the sport caught on in "non-British" spheres, it appealed more to aspirational middle and upper-class populations. Unlike soccer, which quickly became a professional sport, an idea that the high society membership of Anglo-Argentinian clubs found repellent, rugby remained fiercely attached to its amateur roots (officially until 1995).

Is that why, unlike soccer and polo, rugby never became a strong expression of "Argentinian identity"? Soccer was not only a professional sport; it was also closely associated with *barrios* and local politics, developed a "typically Argentinian" playing style based on improvisation and creativity (as opposed to a "typically English" style considered stuffier and more mechanical), built its image in reference to gauchos and the pampas and came to express a "creole" identity excluding the British and their education system. Polo, necessarily the exclusive domain of the most privileged classes given the cost of maintaining a stable of ponies, was enhanced by contact with the culture of the pampas, but based on another form of cross-

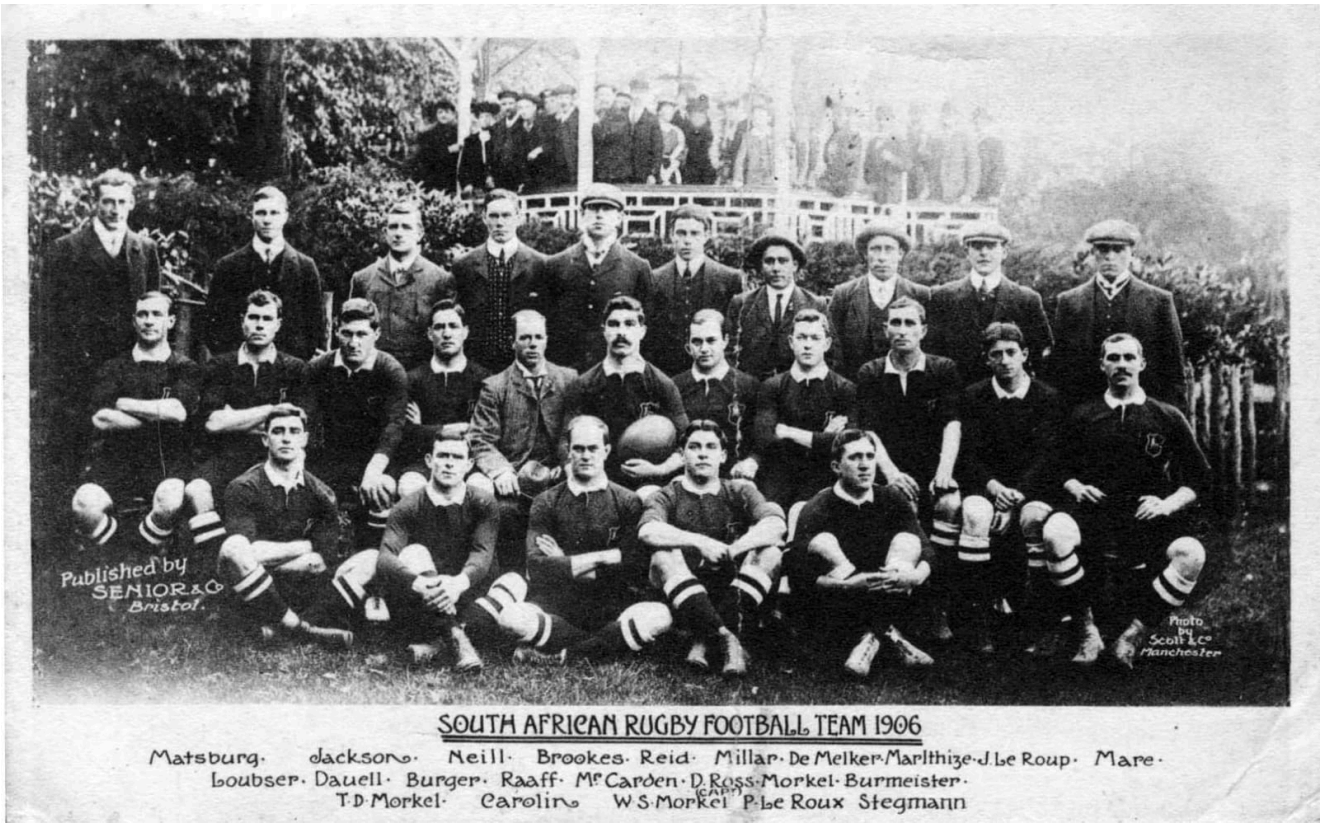
fertilization, which found itself materialized in the person of Anglo-Argentinians–british nationals living in Argentina–who learned to ride horses like gauchos and became steeped in their culture, a sort of mix between "wildness" (whose virtues are all that they retained) and the "civilized" depository of English culture.

These types of identity stereotypes do not exist in Argentinian rugby, as rules on the players' origin interestingly attest. In 1907, "any player born in South America" was considered Argentinian, and "any player born under the British or North American flag, or British or North American nationals not born in South America," British. The following year, the idea of *extranjeros* was introduced: Argentinians were "men born in the country" and foreigners "born in any other part of the world." The last game an Argentinian and a "foreign" club played was in 1939. "Argentinian-style rugby," if the term makes any sense at all, seems to have been mostly influenced by the highest level of international playing, all the more so since Argentina took part in the Four Nations Tournament alongside New Zealand, Australia and South Africa.

South Africa

In South Africa, rugby spread along the usual pathways of british imperialist expansion. Like cricket, it was played by settlers and for settlers anxious to maintain their cultural ties with England. Afterwards, prodded along by the action of missionaries and schools for blacks from privileged social classes, the sport gradually expanded to the local elites, more or less consciously and concertedly fulfilling a "civilizing" function aiming to instill the indigenous population with what were considered to be the right social and moral values. But the bitter conflict between the British and Afrikaners [5] had strong repercussions for rugby and its cultural acceptance by the populations concerned, especially compared to cricket.

As was the case in many other countries, the first "football" games, which took place in the 1860s, did not have any well-defined codes yet, but traces of rugby's influences can be found early on. For example, one of england's first international players, William Henry Milton, introduced the type of football practiced in Rugby when he arrived in Cape Town in 1878. What happened next was fairly classic: the military played a role in spreading the game, public schools based on the English model influenced the sport, clubs founded by alumni in the 1880s played a part and administrative bodies were set up to organize formal competitions. The first federal body, the Western Province Rugby Football Union (WPRFU), was created in 1883, and the South African Rugby Board (SARB) organized tours in 1899, inviting British teams to visit this patch of empire to glorify links with the mother country. South Africa won its first test match in 1896, which was the first time the national team, later called the Springboks, wore its distinctive green jersey. In 1906-1907, the Springboks undertook a victorious tour of the British Isles and gradually became the world's best team, at least until 1956, when the New Zealanders dethroned them.



South Africa's team in 1906

Source: Wikipedia

Afrikaners took up rugby with a passion and spread it widely in the Cape Town area, especially at Stellenbosch University in the 1890s. At the beginning of the twentieth century, most teams were in the Transvaal and the Orange Free State. Rugby went from being an "imperial" to an increasingly "national" sport. After the traumatic Boer War, the triumphant 1906-1907 tour tightened links between whites: Afrikaners and British played side by side, the captain was Afrikaner and sometimes players communicated in Afrikaans to keep their tactics secret.

Many reasons account for the rise of Afrikaner rugby, and they are sometimes hard to pin down without lapsing into excessive essentialism. But by and large they can be grouped together around a symbolism combining nationalist demands and a particularly assertive form of masculinity. Stellenbosch University played the part of a counterweight to anglophone Cape Town University: it was long a special place with a large pool of middle-class male players who had enough leisure time to practice a physical activity combining the values of "muscular Christianity" and nationalist ideology. Rugby became a cultural marker on a par with folk dancing (*volkspele*) and Afrikaner folk music (*boermusik*), aggressively disseminated throughout *Afrikanerdom* by way of tours in the provinces, where teachers brought up in the cult of rugby in Stellenbosch spread the good word. In the 1930s, Pretoria University (Transvaal) picked up the torch when it was transformed into an overtly nationalist institution (it was initially bilingual). This nationalism had its roots in the bloody Boer War, which continued by other means with attempts to confine Afrikaners (the "doctrine" espoused and applied by Cecil Rhodes). But to this must be added the effects of vibrant capitalist development and anglophone domination in the most important economic and cultural areas, which led to closer ties between Afrikaners centered around identity (revitalization of a common history, a shared language and culture) and complex networks of overtly nationalist economic and cultural organizations.

Why did rugby occupy such a prominent place when, like cricket, [6] it was the embodiment of british imperial hegemony? In addition to the fact that no other sport was available on the basis of which a strong afrikaner identity could be developed (attempts to revive traditional practices–*jukskei*–remained limited), it was easier to take a British sport, add features considered specifically afrikaner and try to beat the English at their own game. But what does "specifically Afrikaner" mean? This is the question which introduces the risk of an essentialist interpretation. However, it must be mentioned, with all due caution, that certain "values" promoted by rugby's formal properties as a team combat sport (strength, courage, valor, etc.) aligned with a pioneer ideology of conquest forged by a painful history; violence, brutality, even cheating were more associated with Afrikaner rugby than good sportsmanship, gentlemanliness and fair play. Moreover, while in Australia and New Zealand its (English-speaking) practitioners had the impression of taking part in a much vaster entity (the British Empire), Afrikaners represented no one but themselves, adopting a nationalist ideology with a significant anti-imperialist dimension. Springboks fans were often members of the national Party.

However, focusing on the British/Afrikaner dichotomy must not obscure the fact that there was also a "black rugby" in South Africa, which excluded Indians. [7] In the early twentieth century, rugby became the leading sport played by mixed-race people in some parts of Cape Town, where Muslim and Christian communities were mixed. This had to be taken into account at the level of federal representation: the Western Province Coloured Rugby Football Union (WPCRF, 1886) was mostly Muslim, without, however, formally excluding non-Muslims. On the other hand, the City and Suburban Rugby Union (CSRU, 1898) did not admit Muslim players, at least until 1960. "Mixed-race rugby" was famous for developing a particularly virile version of "muscular Christianity": clubs frequently had relationships with organized gangs, cheated, intimidated opposing teams and bullied referees. In general, a carnival-like atmosphere surrounded the sport, not dissimilarly to cricket in the Caribbean. But in South Africa, rugby never had the unifying force between non-whites that cricket did in the Caribbean. In response to rugby's vitality, white sport promoters implemented a policy of separation and segregation, which proved all the more effective since the black community was itself divided, as the splintering of its representative bodies shows. Black women were not allowed to play at all, suffering from double discrimination. Discrimination ran, and still runs, through every strata of South African society.

The apartheid system set up after the Second World War extended, amplified and systematized measures that had gradually been introduced beforehand. Blacks were confined to inferior social, political and economic positions, prohibited from voting, forbidden to own land and banned from certain professions. Sports were no exception. There was separation between whites and blacks, who were deprived of material resources. In the area of rugby, whites viewed the good results achieved by black teams, despite all the challenges they faced, as a threat, which only led them to intensify segregation. From this point of view, the Afrikaners, who in the 1960s managed to increase their presence and power in south African rugby's governing bodies, found themselves objectively allied with the anglophone population, all the more so since their position on apartheid was even more radical. No one should be fooled by the highly symbolic and widely seen image of Nelson Mandela in a Springbok jersey handing François Pienaar, the national team's Afrikaner captain, the 1995 Rugby World Cup: the place of non-whites in south African rugby is far from secure.

VIDEO

View online: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2S6YYDbjUu8

Nelson Mandela and François Pienaar at the 1995 World Cup rugby final

Source: YouTube

North America

Rugby is a marginal sport in North America, lagging far behind baseball, football (the American and Canadian versions), basketball, lacrosse and even soccer in popularity. Its proponents do not demand any particular recognition. However, the sport's very marginality raises interesting cultural issues.

Rugby appeared in Canada in the 1860s in the wake of British immigrants, garrisons (Quebec and Ontario) and the Royal Navy in the coastal areas of British Colombia and the maritime provinces (notably Halifax, Nova Scotia). The organization of the earliest games in Montreal, publication of rugby rules for the first time in Canada (1864) by Trinity College in Toronto and creation in 1868 of the Montreal Football Club demonstrate Quebec and Ontario's leading role. In 1875, teams from the two provinces played the first inter-provincial game, and a match between McGill (Montreal) and Harvard in Cambridge, Massachusetts kicked off exchanges with American universities. [8] Although rugby caught on in British Colombia much later–its regional Union was not formed until 1889–it gradually turned out to be the most dynamic province. Other regional federations joined the movement: the maritime provinces, Alberta and Saskatchewan in 1890 and Manitoba in 1892. Lastly, at least initially, Canadian teams compared favorably to American ones during the games they played at home and away on the East and West coasts. After an interwar lull, Canadian rugby made a comeback and diversified by developing seven-a-side rugby, women's rugby (organizing regional championships in 1983 and a national championship in 1987) and youth rugby leagues (especially in British Colombia). [?]

From this brief historical review, it would be reasonable to assume that English influence should have been strong enough during this period to have led to rugby becoming established in most of North America. It should not be forgotten that cricket was the most popular sport in the United States before baseball dethroned it. Why did rugby meet with the same fate?

The specific features of Canadian geography are often mentioned: Vast stretches of sparsely and spottily populated wide spaces and harsh winters limited the possibility of bringing together large numbers of players. In Canada, winter sports dominate. Rugby became better established in British Columbia due to its relatively temperate climate and longer seasons. But this explanation soon proves its limitations, as lacrosse, for example, does not seem to have suffered from these constraints.

It is more interesting to draw a comparison between Canadian rugby and sports from south of the border featuring relatively similar formal properties, which manifested itself two ways: first, with the growing influence of american football, which itself is a local adaptation of rugby (*see above*); second with the creation of "Canadian football," another adaptation of rugby, but this time by Canadians. In the 1870s, there were attempts to establish various forms of "football" throughout the country, adopting different sets of rules from British rugby or soccer, depending on the area concerned. It became increasingly difficult to organize games between Montreal, Toronto, Quebec City, Ottawa and Halifax. In this patchwork context, Montreal and Toronto were the only cities to adopt a more or less similar form of football based on a particular interpretation of rugby rules, making it possible to organize games on a regular basis. McGill

University (Montreal) and Harvard forged links that spawned cross-influences: American football, still in its infancy, adopted features of Canadian football, which adopted solutions that gradually transformed the Canadian sport into a sort of hybrid between British rugby and american football. In Toronto, rugby and football influenced each other even more, but the encounter with American football produced results similar to those in Montreal during the same period: the creation of Canadian football, which stood out from both British (rugby and soccer) and American influences (football) and had a distinctly Canadian identity. In this context, rugby, too marked by its origins, stood little chance of becoming a major sport.

In rugby's earliest days, the situation in the United States was very similar to Canada's, and essentially reproduced the pattern inherited from Great Britain: schools and universities played a leading role, students organized games and teams had different rules (football or rugby). On this last point, the distinction was particularly clear between Yale and Columbia on one hand, and Harvard on the other. Harvard initiated contacts with McGill in 1874 to break out of its isolation. At the time, rugby was criticized for being too rough (which is quite rich, considering what football became) and, especially, not "American" enough, whereas football was a creation that owed nothing to the former colonial power (which tended to forget what it owes to rugby). Generally, football replaced rugby as a university sport, except on the West Coast, where Berkeley and Stanford had links with British Columbian teams. But this was an isolated case, especially as changes to the rules designed to mitigate the violence in football restored some of the sport's legitimacy. [7] Despite efforts to build ties with East Coast schools and universities, rugby tended to become marginalized. Against this unfavorable backdrop, the characteristics that made rugby an "alien", "different" sport were reinforced–which, unexpectedly, gave it a certain visibility during the cultural upheavals of the 1960s.

These features, already present in the early twentieth century, allowed rugby to be more clearly assimilated into student culture, especially since it was organized and funded by the students themselves, and not universities. This characteristic still exists: in the late 1990s, about 95% of American players came from colleges (50% had degrees) and two thirds earned $50,000 a year or more. Moreover, rugby is seen as "different" because of its ability to resist the general trend in American sport towards commercialization, professionalization and hyper-rational organization (the role of statistics and coaching), in short, what some have called the replacement of play by work. By asserting its amateur nature, self-organization, alcohol consumption and rowdiness during "third halves," rugby was in step with "the sixties spirit" as manifested at universities, notably Stanford and Berkeley, where the aspirations of the "counter-culture" were most clearly expressed. It was during this period that women's rugby emerged, reaching such a level of excellence that the US team won the first Women's Rugby World Cup against England in 1991.

VIDEO

View online: https://tracs-prod.s3.rbx.io.cloud.ovh.net/assets/records/l-atlantique-ovale-ou-les-transformations-du-rugby/resources/la-premiere-coupe-du-monde-de-rugby-feminin-en-1991.mp4

The first Women's Rugby World Cup in 1991, from *Retour vers l'info*, October 7, 2022

Source: INA

In the 1970s, American rugby's governing bodies, worried about the negative image likely to be conveyed by practices deemed excessively transgressive, attempted to introduce more planning and control by founding the USA Rugby Football Union (1975), setting up a national team (the Eagles played their first match against Australia in 1976, then against France and Canada), promoting university competitions (the first university championship took place in 1980) and creating a club championship. This exacerbated the

antagonistic relationship with football, with both sports competing more fiercely for financial resources and playing fields. The success of women's rugby, and above all the arrival of professionalism in 1995, seemed to be arguments that rugby could use to enhance its image in a country where the commercial and media dimensions of sport, as well as hyper-rational organization, were so firmly established. But this did not happen. Despite its "progress," rugby has remained a "different" sport in the eyes of most people. It certainly suffered from its imported nature compared to football, which not only became more and more firmly rooted, but also succeeded in becoming, with baseball, a specifically American sport that owes nothing to foreign influences. That is the irony of the story. Football would probably never have existed without rugby, nor baseball without various derivatives of cricket, which illustrates what is at work in this form of cultural appropriation, whose main function is to strengthen national identity.

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NOTES

1. In this text, the term soccer (as the international sport of football is called in North America) will be systematically used. Football will be used for American football.
2. If the more restrictive criterion of "countries where rugby is the main sport" is used, the list is limited, for the Atlantic zone, to Wales, Ireland and South Africa.
3. Football association would eventually prevail.

4 Historical data on the development of Argentinian rugby is sorely lacking, but one reliable source is *Cien años* de la Union Argentina de Rugby, Edición oficial de la UAR, Buenos Aires, Manrique Zago Ediciones, 1998.

5 The Boer War (1899-1902) was the bloodiest conflict in British colonial history.

6 South African cricket did not assert its international superiority until 1935, whereas the Springboks had won fame decades earlier. This is likely one reason for rugby's symbolic pre-eminence in South Africa.

7 A precision is necessary here. South Africa's population was labeled and divided into four main groups: indigenous Africans (approximately 75%); mixed-race South Africans and descendants of slaves from present-day Malaysia, Indonesia and Sri Lanka (10%); descendants of indentured servants from India, most of whom lived in Natal and were later joined by "free" Indians (2%); and whites of European origin, comprising descendants of Dutch (Afrikaners) and British settlers.

8 It is worth noting that the Canadians transmitted the rules of rugby to their American counterparts on this occasion. [^9]: The federation now representing Canadian rugby has been called Rugby Canada since 1974; in 1929, it replaced the Rugby Union of Canada, which itself replaced the Canadian Rugby Football Union created in 1884. [^10]: Berkeley eventually dropped Stanford and returned to football.