

RUGBY UNION: the game comes to Scotland



An artist's impression of medieval street football. Played on feast days by enthusiastic students and other youths, it was abhorred by officialdom and other would-be keepers of the peace.

Leisure Play

Recreational pastimes formed part of the lives of the populace of early Scotland. It is known that Roman soldiers in Britain found relaxation in harpastum - a hard-ball game which, it is claimed in some quarters, led eventually to the Border Ba' games. Although conjecture, a strong case can be made for this belief when it is recognised that the main Roman route into Scotland was across the Cheviots, past Jedburgh and Ancrum, and on to Newstead near Melrose. The Romans were encamped there for more than a century and it is almost inevitable that local communities acquired and developed some of their customs.

Evolving Border Ba' games formed the basis of football in Scotland. Local people divided themselves into two sides - no maximum number being specified. There were few rules and no playing fields: the games were played in the streets. The divisions were usually along local geographical criteria - e.g. the 'uppies' against the 'doonies.' The object of the game was to carry the ba', mostly by sheer brute force, to touch some agreed target at the far end of the opposition's area. It would seem that kicking was not a sensible option: the mass of bodies ruled that out - and such folly of action would probably have resulted in the would-be kicker injuring himself. The ba' in these games was quite small, about the size of a modern tennis ball and, being made from leather, it was quite hard. Examples of Border bas can be seen in the Scottish Rugby Union's Library at Murrayfield. An annual symbolic game is still played in some areas - e.g., in Jedburgh.

Football taken up by educational institutions

In the early 19th Century such games were no longer considered to be a popular pastime. Following six long hard working days each week, the working classes had little time or energy for play. Football, as a nationally enjoyed game went into decline. It was saved from total extinction by being taken up in some schools, and in universities, as a recreation.

These educational institutions developed kicking and/or handling games along lines, and with rules, to suit their own needs. There is evidence of a handling game having been played at the High School in Edinburgh as early as 1810. Eventually, when they became former pupils and students, these gentlemen formed clubs and teams and organised and governed the game in its formative years.

The formulation of a handling game

Several new schools were formed in Scotland during the first half of the 19th Century, among them The Edinburgh Academy (1824), Loreto (1827), Merchiston (1833), Glasgow Academy (1845) and Trinity College, Glenalmond (1847). It is known that simple and crude forms of football were played at all of these schools, but it was in Edinburgh that the handling game first took root and spread to other areas of the country.

Two young men, Francis and Alexander Crombie, came from Durham School to Edinburgh in 1854. Francis joined The Academy as a pupil but Alexander had already left school. Apparently, neither brother had played football at Durham but they took with them a knowledge of the rules of football as played at Rugby School and this they passed on. Francis is recorded as having been the first school football captain and Alexander became actively involved in the formation of The Edinburgh Academical Football Club. He qualified for membership under a rule which allowed relatives of school pupils to become members. In 1858 he became the first captain of the Football Club - a position he held for eight years.

During the same period, a boy named Hamilton came to The High School in Edinburgh (in 1856) from an English public school and brought with him the 'Rules of Rugby Football' as he had known them in the south. This document was instrumental in the High School's adapting their existing game to this new form.

Click [here](#) to view the Laws of Football at Rugby School, 1846 and Edinburgh Academicals FC Rules, 1858.

The first-ever inter-school match recorded in Scotland was The High School versus Merchiston, played on 13 February 1858. However, the game suffered from lack of uniformity of rule and ball. In The High School, in the early 1860s, football was played with '...monstrous inflated globes of vast circumference and ponderosity...'. H. H. Almond,

a master at both Loretto and Merchiston and a founding father of the game in Scotland, describing an incident in a Loretto versus Merchiston match, wrote: '...but so little did any of us, masters or boys, then know about it, that I remember how, when Lyall ran with the ball behind the Merchiston goal the resulting try was appealed against on the ground that no player may cross the line whilst holding the ball. The previous rule at Merchiston had been that he must let go of the ball and kick it over before he touched it down. It must be said in excuse for this and other similar sins of ignorance, that the only available rules were those printed for the use of Rugby School. They were very incomplete and presupposed a practical knowledge of the game.'

Gradually, over several years, the game approached that then being played at Rugby. There were local variations which, inevitably, resulted in disputes. Almond again: '...well into the 1870s the only schools able to play each other on even terms were The Edinburgh Academy, Merchiston and The High School.'

From the mid-1860s, senior (former pupils) clubs started to appear in both the Edinburgh and Glasgow areas and these clubs, making good use of the then new railways, began to play each other. In those early club matches play was often halted whilst captains and umpires tried to settle some point of difference. Such disputes and mix-ups were frequent.

Such a state of affairs could not continue indefinitely and a group of men from The Edinburgh Academical Football Club convened a series of meetings and, in 1868, with the agreement of the other schools and clubs, set out and had printed rules for the game in Scotland. The resulting booklet *Laws of Football as played by the Principal Clubs in Scotland*, became known as *The Green Book*. Alas, no copy survives but it is worthy of note that neither the clubs nor *The Green Book* felt it necessary to include the word 'Rugby' in their title. Indeed, the Scottish Football Union, formed in 1873, did not alter its name to become the Scottish Rugby Union until 1924 - the year prior to the opening of Murrayfield.

The Scots issue a challenge



The newspaper notice advertising the very first rugby international match - inconspicuous by being slotted in between other items! (From *The Scotsman*, 27.3.1871)

In December 1870, following a series of England v. Scotland eleven-a-side football matches played in London (all of which were won by England), a group of Scots players issued a letter of challenge in *The Scotsman* and in *Bell's Life* in London, to play an England XX at the carrying game. The English could hardly ignore such a challenge and this led to the first-ever rugby international match being played at Raeburn Place, Edinburgh, on Monday 27 March, 1871. The Scots won the encounter by a goal and a try to a solitary try scored by England (a points scoring system had not then been devised).

The letter of challenge issued on behalf of the Senior Scottish Clubs:

Sir,

There is a pretty general feeling among Scotch football players that the football power of the old country was not properly represented in the late so-called International Football Match. Not that we think the play of the gentlemen who represented Scotland otherwise than very good - for that it was so is amply proved by the stout resistance they offered to their opponents and by the fact that they were beaten by only one goal - but that we consider the Association rules, in accordance with which the late game was played, not such as to bring together the best team Scotland could turn out. Almost all the leading clubs play by the Rugby Code, and have no opportunity of practising the Association game even if willing to do so. We therefore feel that a match played in accordance with any rules other than those in general use in Scotland, as was the case in the last match, is not one that would meet with support generally from her players. For our satisfaction, therefore, and with a view of really testing what Scotland can do

against an English team we, as representing the football interests of Scotland, hereby challenge any team selected from the whole of England, to play us a match, twenty-a-side, Rugby rules, either in Edinburgh or Glasgow on any day during the present season that might be found suitable to the English players. Let this count as the return to the match played in London on 19th November, or, if preferred, let it be a separate match. If it be entered into we can promise England a hearty welcome and a first-rate match. Any communications addressed to any one of us will be attended to.

We are, etc.

A. H. Robertson, West of Scotland FC

F. J. Moncrieff, Edinburgh Academical FC

B. Hall Blyth, Merchistonian FC

J. W. Arthur, Glasgow Academical FC

J. H. Oatts, St Salvador FC, St Andrews



1871, Scotland v England: The First Rugby International. The Scotland XX. Back Row: R Munro (St. Andrews Uni.); J S Thomson (Glasgow Acads.); T Chalmers (Glasgow Acads.); Middle: A Buchanan (RHSFP); A G Colville (Merchistonians); J Forsyth (Edinburgh Uni.); J Mein (Edinburgh Acads.); R W Irvine (Edinburgh Acads.); J W Arthur (Glasgow Acads.); W D Brown (Glasgow Acads.); A Drew (Glasgow Acads.); W Cross (Merchistonians); J F Finlay (Edinburgh Acads.); F J Moncrieff (Edinburgh Acads., Captain); G Ritchie (Merchistonians); Front: A Clunies-Ross (St Andrews Uni.); W J C Lyall (Edinburgh Acads.); T R Marshall (Edinburgh Acads.); J L H Macfarlane (Edinburgh Uni.); A H Robertson (West of Scotland)

The development of the game and new international grounds for Scotland

The development of the game saw the foundation of the Scottish Football Union in 1873, a change to fifteen-a-side (from twenty-a-side) in 1877, the formation of the International Rugby Football Board in 1886 and the instigation of a points scoring system in 1889. Changes to the laws of the game have been made at various times and this process still continues today.



Scotland v. England, Raeburn Place, 13.3.1886 From an original painting by W H Overend and L P Smythe. A mural reproduction of the original hangs in the Library of the Scottish Rugby Union at Murrayfield. The game ended in a scoreless draw. Note the mounted police who were in attendance at an international match for the first time.

In 1897 land was purchased, by the SFU, at Inverleith, Edinburgh. Thus the SFU became the first of the Home Unions to own its own ground. The first visitors were Ireland, on 18 February 1899 (Scotland 3 Ireland 9).

International rugby was played at Inverleith until 1925. The SFU had purchased land, belonging to Edinburgh Polo Club, at Murrayfield, in 1922. On the site they built the first Murrayfield Stadium which was opened on 21 March 1925. England were the visitors and a more fitting climax to the international rugby season could not have been scripted.

Scotland already had victories over France at Inverleith (25-4), Wales in Swansea (24-14) and Ireland in Dublin (14-8). England, the Grand Slam champions of the two previous seasons, already had a win over Wales (12-6) and a drawn game (6-6) with Ireland - both played at Twickenham; they were to go on to defeat France in Paris by 13-11 in April. The 70,000 spectators at Murrayfield were treated to a stupendously exciting match in which the lead changed hands several times before Scotland secured the 14-11 victory which gave them their first-ever Grand Slam.



Scotland 14 England 11, Murrayfield, 21 March 1925 The opening match at the new Murrayfield Stadium produced a spectacle of exciting fervour. The lead changed hands three times. England were leading by 11 points to 5 when 'Johnny' Wallace scored a try which was converted (10-11). As no-side neared, Herbert Waddell dropped a goal to win the match for Scotland. Victory also brought the Calcutta Cup, Scotland's first-ever 'Grand Slam' and the Five Nations Championship. Altogether an impressive start for the new stadium.

The Calcutta Cup

The Calcutta Cup was gifted to the Rugby Football Union in 1878 by the members of the short-lived Calcutta Rugby Club. The members had decided to disband: the cup was crafted from melted-down silver rupees which became available when the Club's funds were withdrawn from the bank. The Cup is unique in that it is competed for annually only by England and Scotland. The first Calcutta Cup match was played in 1879 and, since that time, over 100 matches have taken place.

The mythical 'Triple Crown'

There is no trophy for winning a 'Triple Crown.' This is achieved by one of the 'Home' countries defeating the other three in any one season of competition. Scotland first achieved the feat in 1891 and, up to the end of season 1998-99, have won the accolade on 10 occasions.

The equally-mythical 'Grand Slam'

As with the 'Triple Crown', there is no trophy for a country achieving a 'Grand Slam.' To gain this distinction a country must defeat France and Italy as well as the other three 'Home' countries. To date, Scotland have achieved this success on only three occasions: 1925, 1984 and 1990. The 'highs' of 1925, 1984 and 1990 were interspersed with many 'lows.' By far the most humiliating defeat (0-44) was that at the hands of South Africa at Murrayfield in 1951. Because of the present day points scoring system, this was a larger defeat than that handed out by New Zealand in 1993 (15-51). The 1951 match was the third in a sequence of 17 consecutive defeats beginning with match versus Ireland on 24 February 1951. Scotland were not to taste victory again until 5 February 1955 when they defeated Wales 14-8 at Murrayfield.

The Five Nations Series

When Scotland played France in the first official international match between the two countries in 1910, the foundation was laid for a Five Nations competition. France had already played the other three Home Nations: initially England in 1906, Wales in 1908 and Ireland in 1909. With the fixture against Scotland in 1910 was founded what was to become known as the Five Nations series of matches. Disputes and World Wars apart, the championship has seen continuous competition between the nations for over eighty years. Up until 1993, there was no tangible reward for winning the Five Nations championship: there was neither flag nor cup or any other kind of trophy. However, for season 1992-93, there was presented, for competition, the Five Nations Championship Trophy. France were the first winners, followed by Wales and then England. Scotland's first success came in season 1998-99; Ireland have never been successful.

Scotland was the last nation to win the Five Nations Trophy as such because, for season 1999-2000, the nations were joined by Italy. In this season England became the first winners of the Six Nations championship.

Inter-club competition in Scotland

Up to season 1972-73, Scotland's rugby clubs participated in what was known as an 'unofficial championship.' It provided very unbalanced competition: some clubs played more fixtures than others and some fixture lists provided stiffer opposition than others. The resulting league table at the end of each season gave a very unbalanced and difficult-to-comprehend set of results.

Starting in season 1973-74, the Scottish Rugby Union organised the full member clubs into six leagues. This suited some of the 'open' clubs but many of the older former pupils clubs found it difficult to compete successfully and were forced into going 'open' themselves to try to recruit some of the better players. In the first 14 seasons of league rugby the Division I championship was won by Hawick on 10 occasions.

Since the advent of the leagues, the Scottish Rugby Union have, from time to time, taken opportunity, more than once, to re-organise the competition and have added, in the mid-1990s, a sponsored knock-out cup competition.

SCOTTISH CLUB CHAMPIONSHIP 1972-1973
(the last season of the old 'unofficial' Championship)

	P	W	L	D	F	A	Pts
Boro'muir	25	22	2	1	639	166	90
Hawick	27	22	3	2	765	213	85
Gala	27	23	4	0	837	268	85
Jordanhill	20	16	3	1	482	140	82
Langholm	22	17	3	2	516	202	81
Edin. Wrs.	22	16	6	0	443	249	72
Watsonians	22	16	6	0	484	278	72
Gordonians	15	10	5	0	342	165	66
W. of Scot.	19	12	6	1	371	220	65
Dunfermline	22	14	8	0	383	275	63
Glas. HSFP	25	15	9	1	589	355	62
Melrose	26	16	10	0	421	312	61
Ayr	20	12	8	0	358	258	60
Leith Acads.	23	13	8	2	346	316	60
Hillhead FP	22	10	10	2	362	389	50
Glas. Acads.	22	11	11	0	369	368	50
Selkirk	25	10	13	2	346	474	44
Kelso	27	12	15	0	389	538	44
Trinity Acads.	25	10	15	0	374	506	40
Edin. Acads.	26	10	15	1	365	516	40

Jedforest	22	8	14	0	319	425	36
Hutchesons'	19	7	12	0	274	354	36
Broughton FP	15	5	10	0	149	267	33
Heriot's FP	24	7	16	1	446	481	31
Mussleburgh	24	6	16	2	220	435	29
Perthshire	12	3	9	0	159	304	25
Royal HSFP	26	6	20	0	263	635	23
Aber. GSFP	19	4	15	0	194	419	21
Kelvin. Acads.	19	3	16	0	176	479	16
Edinburgh Uni.	18	2	15	1	219	511	13
Stewart's FP	24	3	21	0	198	716	12
Glasgow Uni.	20	1	18	1	125	754	7

The last unofficial championship table showing Boroughmuir as champions for season 1972-73. A study of the table shows the confusions and uncertainties of the competition as then recorded.

Further Reading

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