

Early (American) Football

1880-1920

By Brian Aldridge

pro-football-journal.com & chicagosportsjournal.com

Now...

How popular is football? TV cameras at the **NFL combine** focus on current pre-draft hopefuls run the 40-yard dash, perform the standing long jump, the vertical leap, or the shuttle. Weeks later, Round 1 of the **NFL draft** will be televised. Come August, thousands will show up for preseason **practices**. Why? Because *next year* starts now. And this is just weeks away from pre-game **tailgating**, where jersey-clad fans by the hundreds meet in stadium parking lots to eat, chat, argue, and drink hours before the opening kickoff. Once inside, they can be loud. How loud? In January 2014, the 67,000 Seahawks fans at Seattle's CenturyLink Field spiked the decibel level to 138 and made the ground shake. Questions, hopes, and doubts remain: Will their team make the playoffs? Will last year's AFC/NFC champions face each other again in the upcoming Super Bowl, which is often the most watched spectacle (game, commercials, and half-time show) of the year?

It certainly wasn't always this way. In fact, it took the NFL years to capture the fan's attention and respect. During the 1920s, when the NFL was just beginning, college games featuring Notre Dame, Michigan, Army, and Navy filled stadiums; pro contests on the other hand drew maybe two thousand. What was worse, before Red Grange came along in 1925, pro football players were seen as "dumb jocks," heavy-drinking brutes, or unsocial clods. Famous college coaches of the era claimed pro athletes made the sport less pure because they played for money.

With few exceptions, NFL games were played primarily on Sunday afternoons. That changed in a big way on 9/21/1970 when Monday Night Football officially began. Twenty-six years later, the NFL began scheduling games on Thursday nights. Detroit (1934) was the first team to play every Thanksgiving; Dallas (1966) was the 2nd. Beginning in 2006, a 3rd game was added. Despite two increases to the schedule (from 12 games to 14 in 1961, 14 to 16 in 1978, and **16 to 18** slated for 2020), the length of the football season remains the shortest of all major sports.

This violent sport led to several on-field deaths and severe injuries that almost led to football's banishment in 1905 (see below). Fast forward to today: over 500 former NFL players recently sued the league for withholding medical treatment during their playing days. Off-field tragedies forced the NFL to increase its scope from not only reducing broken bones, torn ACLs and twisted ankles but also preventing a post-concussion syndrome that studies have shown lead to brain injuries – a condition so serious that some former players either succeeded in taking their own lives or considered doing so. The result: greater attention is now given to the player leaving the field disoriented. If he is found to suffer concussion-like such symptoms, he is removed from further play.

If 2014's pre-Super Bowl "deflate-a-gate" has taught us anything – football is not immune from scandals. The 1920 Green Bay Packers almost lost their charter because they signed undergrads; from 1933-1946, blacks were barred from playing; in 1946, hours before the NFL Championship Game, the league learned that two NY Giants players were offered bribes. At least 9 Cincinnati Bengals made the police blotter in 2006; one year later, the New England Patriots were fined \$500K for videotaping NY Jets' defensive signals – a practice they allegedly began before the 2001 Super Bowl; in 2012, New Orleans Saints players and coaches were accused of offering a bounty for injuring an opponent. Presently, the NFL is addressing players involved in domestic abuse.

Stars come and go...a player's pay is now well beyond our scope...rules continue to evolve. See anything different here? But take note of this: unlike basketball, this game is played in short spurts - moments of action followed by a lengthy lull that often includes a huddle and a TV timeout. If each pro game averages about 160 plays (80 per team), and each play takes 5 seconds (some considerably less), *that's 13+ minutes of total action*. We don't complain. Just pass the chips and salsa and be quiet. Oh yes – and enjoy the game. And what a great game it is!

And Then...

So, when did football start? Historians point to a rough and tumble game played in ancient Greece called **harpaston** (later **harpastum**) that involved athletes running or throwing a small ball around in a rectangular field. Italy adopted a similar form of this game in the late 1400s called **calcio**. England too also had its own brand of football when one small town challenged another. There were no TDs in those days. The team that carried the ball to the center of the opposing team's town was declared the winner.

But this early form had its drawbacks. Since each town could field 50-100 players and rules were few (if followed at all) the game had the appearance of a small-scale riot. Damage to nearby property was not uncommon and on-field play led to fights and injuries. How rough was this game of **futballe**? Enough so that kings Henry II, Edward II and Henry VI tried to eliminate the game altogether. A few centuries later, a sitting US President considered the same thing.

One major change took place in 1823 when a rugby player *ran* with the ball. The play at the time was disallowed but it caught on, eventually giving the sport a new dimension. While purists (no-use-of-the-hands) kept to soccer, rugby was now distinctively separate. Forty years later, another change took place: rugby teams began to field 11 to a side.

Football in America:

During the 1840s-1860s, college freshmen could be seen kicking around an inflated pig's bladder against a squad of sophomores. But the game became so violent that Harvard dropped the sport for 12 years. But by 1869, universities such as Princeton, Rutgers, Harvard, and Yale began assembling teams to challenge each other. In 1876, Ivy League schools formed the **Intercollegiate Football Association**.

The playing field was large (140 yards x 70 yards) and crowded (25 to a side). Players wore heavy sweaters and grew their hair long to protect their skulls. To the spectator, though, the on-field play still resembled soccer and rugby.

In 1876, **Walter Camp**, the "Father of American Football," joined a rules committee while still a student at Yale. Colleges accepted these rules in the late 1880s and the **Rutgers vs. Princeton** contest was recognized as the first game. What Camp and the committee did was elevate game from what looked like an on-field brawl by having the field lined in 5-yard segments, change the point scale, and create a line of scrimmage that separated the offense from the defense (see 1880 below).

Early terms:

Oval (football), *Goal after touchdown* (point after touchdown), *aerial method* (passing), and teams were called "*The 11*." Earliest playing fields were often large misshapen lots with no lines, no hash marks, no sidelines, nor goal posts. Earliest ball was a soccer ball, followed by a leather rugby ball.

Geographically, the sport was most popular in the northeastern states such as Ohio and Pennsylvania. The players were much smaller by comparison to today's standards. Their height ranged from 5'10" - 6'2" and weight from 180 lbs. - 220 lbs.

1880-1885

1880: Colleges approved the following rules:

Both sides were to have 11 against 11.

Playing field was reduced from 140 x 70 to 110 x 53.

A line of scrimmage was added to eliminate the scrum.

Touchdowns were 0 points; points only came by kicking the point after.

As rivalries formed, and contests became heated, attendance rose.

1882: Since there was no passing, offenses were given 3 plays to gain 5 yards for a 1st down.

Instead of measuring chains, vertical and horizontal chalk lines marked the field in 5-yard increments, giving the playing area a “gridiron” appearance.

Each game was separated into (2) 40-minute halves.

1883: **Safety** = 1 point, **TD** = 2 points; **PAT** (point-after-touchdown) = 4 points, and **FG** = 5 points.

1884: TD was increased to 4 points; the PAT reduced to 2 points.

1886-1890

1888: Walter Camp signed on to coach Yale. Camp’s team included **Pudge Heffelfinger** (see 1892). The 1888 Yale squad out-scored their opponents 694-0.

Each game had 1 referee (today: 7).

1889: College rivalries like Princeton-Harvard eventually led to “objectionable practices” such as secretly paying players travel expenses to play. Such “ringers” played under assumed names. What was worse, athletes that turned pro were not considered trustworthy: how much would it cost for him switch to another team?

Colleges employed the Single-Wing offense with reverses, occasional passes, quick-kicks and punts. The forward pass was not considered a true offensive weapon until the 1930s. The football itself was still melon-shaped thereby too unwieldy to throw.

1891-1895

1892: Yale alum **Amos Alonzo Stagg** began coaching University of Chicago. Stagg was later quoted as saying that college football fostered “amateur principles, right ideals, proper standards, wholesome conditions,” and players would *play for the love of the sport*. He and his peers believed colleges graduated “educated gentlemen,” not men created for a brutal sport that included piling on, clotheslining, disorganized play, and brawling.

Meanwhile, Yale grad **Pudge Heffelfinger** (see 1888 above) signed on with a Pennsylvania club for \$500 plus expenses. YMCA out of Latrobe, Pennsylvania, signed and 16-year-old **John Braillier** \$10 plus expenses to quarterback their club. A year later, former Princeton HB **Lawson Fiscus** was paid \$20 game plus expenses to play for Greensburg.

Professional football (aka *Sunday Professional Football* or *Post-Graduate Football*) was viewed as inferior to the college game. Pro coaches were seen as crooked and managers were driven to “win at any cost.” Pro games allegedly included gambling and hiring of “tramp” athletes. Noted college coaches (Stagg and others) could not fathom the idea of paying players. Even sportswriters frowned on it. In the decades that followed, football was viewed as the distant cousin to the college game. While college football drew crowds in excess of 30-60K, pro games drew 800-3,000. But the game - college or pro, still had the appearance of a regulated fight than a sporting contest.

The trend to play professionally grew out of rivalries between local athletic clubs. Since these clubs did not want to be associated with losing, they lured players with cash or trophies to sign on or jump from another team. This was nothing new: Four years earlier, the American Athletic Union (AAU) AAU lured track and field athletes from the CA.

Football players often bought most of their equipment. Unlike today, there was little coaching from the sidelines. Their wages were about double that of the average worker, but they were not paid for exhibition games. Another oddity: since there were no benches, players sat in the grandstands with the fans.

1894: No more flying wedges during kickoffs.

1895: First all-professional game: Latrobe (PA) beat nearby Jeannette 12-0.
Players from both teams were paid \$10/each.

1896-1900

1896: Ball was narrower, making the drop-kick easier.

1897: The **TD** was now 5 points; the **FG** 4 points and the **Point after TD** (“Goal from Touchdown”) reduced to 1 point.

Three officials covered the game: the referee, the head linesman, and the umpire.

Goal posts: 18 ½’ wide with a crossbar 10’ above ground (same as today).

The football was made of leather (not pigskin) and was rounder with blunt ends.

Standard Uniforms:

No helmets. Players either wore long hair or flimsy skullcaps to protect ears and hair.
The folding leather helmet was not mandatory.

Jerseys were wool (today: 100% nylon), **shoes** were high-tops with screwed-on spikes.

Pants were of padded canvas – far from the lycra and spandex used today.

For protection, **shoulder pads** were sewn into the **wool jerseys**.

Some things remain the same: length of pants extended just below the knee caps and included belts and thigh pads.

Options for the Offense:

Flying Wedge introduced in 1884 and later 1892, was considered the most dangerous “mass momentum” play and banned in 1906. Offense was arrayed in an arrow or V-shape. Linemen, except for the center and guards, formed the wedge. As the wedge surged forward, the center snapped the ball. QB was crouched behind center; and the RB was behind the QB.

T Formation replaced the flying wedge. Four players stood in the backfield: the QB and 3 running backs. Once the QB received the ball, he pivoted to hand off or lateral the ball, then blocked for the running back. The QB was not to run or pass.

1898: Rubber nose guards were used.

1901-1905

1901: Michigan coach **Fielding Yost**'s Wolverines went 11-0, out-scoring their opponents 555-0. This was Yost's 1st of 8 undefeated teams.

1902: The 1st NFL: just 3 teams, all from Pennsylvania. No office or no bylaws, a 3-game season. Some well-known members of Major League Baseball played: **Christy Matthewson** (NY Giants pitcher) punted for the Pittsburgh Stars; **Rube Waddell** (Philadelphia Athletics pitcher) played for Connie Mack's team of the same name. Mack was also Waddell's baseball coach.

First professional **night game** was played at Elmira, NY: Connie Mack's Philadelphia Athletics beat the Kanaweola Cycle Club 39-0.

First **Rose Bowl:** Led by coach Fielding Yost, Michigan Wolverines beat Stanford 49-0. Due to the one-sided score, Rose Bowl games were suspended until 1916.

1904: Shelby Athletic Club (Ohio League) featured black HB **Charles “The Black Cyclone” Follis** (1902-06) - one of the few African-Americans that played pro football.

1905: From 1905-1910, 93 players died because of football injuries (18 alone died in 1905 and another 149 suffered severe injuries). Universities began dropping or suspended play.

President Theodore Roosevelt sought advice from athletic leaders and coaches from Harvard, Yale, Princeton, and Walter Camp. Goal was to reduce roughness, **or the game would be banned**. The leaders soon became the **NCAA Rules Committee**.

The committee put in place the following rules for 1906:

The forward pass was now legal. Passes had been previously limited to lateral tosses. A 15-yard penalty was assessed for an incomplete pass. If a pass touched receiver and fell incomplete, ball was treated like a fumble.

A 1-yard neutral zone between the offense and defense led to less pre-play violence.

- Distance needed for a **1st down increased to 10 yards**.
- **Blockers** could no longer link arms.
- No teammate could pick up a ball carrier to score.
- Mass-momentum plays (Flying Wedge) were outlawed.
- When the 4th down was added (1910), the 3rd down became the likely passing down.

1906-1910

1906: The ugly numbers continued: 11 more counted as football-related deaths.

Change: The forward pass was now legal. Passer had to throw the ball 5 yards *behind* line of scrimmage. Prior to this rule, ball was kicked to a receiver or lateraled to a running back. More creativity: center could hike the ball *through* the QB's legs to the half-back!

Scandal: Huge bets were placed on the Canton-Massillon (Ohio) match. Canton coach allegedly bribed his own players to throw the game.

New Offensive schemes:

Single-wing and **Double-wing** formations involved guards and backs shifting. Glenn "Pop" Warner would refine these options a year later.

Single-wing: With the QB, FB, Wingback and HB arrayed in a diagonal, the Single Wing was used most often until the 1940s. This formation allowed the center the option to snap the ball to any of the four backs.

Double-wing: Pop Warner placed the FB as wingback on the weak side of the line. Formation was still heavy to one side, but the backs were split wider in the backfield.

Notre Dame Box required the backs to rapidly shift in the backfield. The HB stood inside or outside one of the Ends.

New T Formation: This design allowed the QB to crouch directly behind center.

Modern T formation: The halfback went in motion.

1907: Glenn "Pop" Warner returned to coach the famed Carlisle (Pennsylvania) Indians.

1909: **Field Goal** was reduced to 3 points.

1910: **The forward pass** had to be thrown at least 5 yards behind line of scrimmage until 1933. Until 1912, the arc of the ball could not exceed 20 yards beyond the line. No more than 7 men could be on the line, and the **neutral zone** between offensive and defensive line equaled the length of the ball. Players could now return to play. Game was divided into quarters and time of play was reduced to (2) 30-minute halves.

1911-1915

1911: **Jim Thorpe** starred for Carlisle, a squad made up of American Indians. Thorpe made a name for himself by recording 25 TDs (198 points) for Pop Warner's 1912 champs. More than just a 1-sport star, Thorpe went on to win gold medals in both the pentathlon and decathlon during the 1912 Olympics in Stockholm, Sweden, and from 1913-1919 played OF for the NY Giants. Thorpe, however, had to return those medals to the International Olympic Committee in 1913 for receiving pay while playing baseball for a team in Rocky Mount (NC).

Thorpe's gold medals were restored posthumously in 1982.

1912: Changes to the game:

The playing field (100 x 53 1/3 yards) included 10-yard end zones.

Chalk lines marked the field in 10-yard increments.

A **4th down** was added.

Kickoffs were moved back 10 yards to the 40-yard line.

The **touchdown** was increased to 6 points.

Changes to the uniform:

Helmets (with head harnesses) were made of leather; shoulder pads were added, padded pants were of canvas or moleskin, and jerseys were no longer wool but cotton.

Bob Zuppke began his storied career as University of Illinois' head coach.

Zuppke led the Fighting Illini to 4 national titles.

1915: Professional contracts included the *reserve clause* – a contractual stipulation preventing players from jumping from one team to another. In short, the player was essentially the team's property.

Still carrying a big name, the Canton Bulldogs signed **Jim Thorpe** for \$250/game.

Major professional teams:

Strong pro teams formed in the US's northeast. Among them was the Providence (RI) Steam Rollers, the Staten Island (NY) Stapletons, the Rochester (NY) Jeffersons and the Frankfort (PA) Yellowjackets. Frankfort, a suburb of Philadelphia, joined the NFL in 1924.

Canton dominated the 8-team **Ohio League**. The OL included the Dayton Triangles, the Detroit Heralds, an Akron Indians squad that featured **Douglas "Fritz" Pollard**, and the Columbus Panhandles. The Panhandles were owned by **Joseph Carr**, later the NFL's 2nd commissioner and included the 8 Nessler – 7 brothers and a son. The last Nessler retired in 1931 after playing for the Cleveland Indians.

As pro football's popularity gradually grew outside the Ohio League, gaining strength and prominence and top players demanding \$100/game, the OL teams began losing money. The Ohio League folded after the 1919 season.

Teams from the mid-west: the Rock Island Independents, the **Chicago Cardinals** (formerly the Morgan Athletic Club), and the Hammond (IN) All Stars. The Hammond team played at Cubs Park and were led by **George Halas** and **Paddy Driscoll**. The Chicago Tigers included player-coach Paul "Shorty" Des Jardien and FB Ralph Bull Young. Football in and around Chicago was also known as "*prairie football*." Teams were made up primarily of town residents and/or company personnel.

Another mid-western team that formed during this era was first known as the Indian Packing Company (later the Acme Packing Company). By 1921, the team changed their name to the **Green Bay Packers**.

Since some venues had no grandstands, fans stood or watched games from on top of cars. Tickets ran 50c. Unlike many high-profile college games, about 2,000 or so attended pro games. Until 1920 – some college players played under assumed names – hiding their true identity from parents, employers, and the colleges they were attending.

1916-1920

1916: Rose Bowl returned after 14 years. Washington State beat Brown 14-0.

10/7: **Georgia Tech** beat Cumberland 222-0. Coach **John Heisman's** Tech team did not throw a single pass during the game. Instead, the Yellow Jackets rushed for 19 TDs on just 29 attempts.

1917: Football took hiatus during WWI.

1918: To prevent defenses from knowing the next play, colleges began utilizing **the huddle**.

Knute Rockne's Notre Dame Fighting Irish squad included **Earl "Curly" Lambeau**.

The **Great Lakes Naval Training** squad defeated Mare Island in the Rose Bowl.

Some of the Great Lakes players included George Halas, Paddy Driscoll, Jimmy Conzelman, and Wheaton (Illinois) coach Harvey Chrouser.

1919: With the backing from the Indian Packing Company, **Curly Lambeau** helped organize the **Green Bay Packers**, with Lambeau serving as team's kicker and QB. The Indian Packing Company played as an independent team until 1921.

Lambeau's coaching record: 212-106-21 included 6 NFL titles.

1920: A. E. Staley, owner of a large corn starch company out of Decatur, Illinois, offered **George Halas** a job if he would organize a company football team to for the purpose of advertising Staley's business. Halas had been playing for Staley's company baseball team that was managed by former MLB Hall of Famer (NY Giants) **Joe "Iron Man" McGinnity**. As part of the deal, Halas would conduct team practice on company time and receive extra pay for playing.

9/17: **The American Professional Football Association** (APFA) formed at Canton Bulldog manager Ralph Hay's Hupmobile showroom. Cities that were represented included Canton, Massillon, Cleveland, Dayton, Rochester, Hammond, Muncie, Rock Island, Decatur, and the Chicago (Racine Avenue) Cardinals.

Owners agreed to a \$25 fee to join and legendary **Jim Thorpe** was appointed League president. The league champion would be chosen by members, not determined by the final standings.

Early NFL:

- Playing fields were **without hash marks**. If a player ran out of bounds, ball was placed at spot where he left the playing field.
- Prior to 1933, if a player was downed near either sideline, the following play began at that site.
- It was not unusual to see the center snapping the ball a yard or two from the sideline. This often meant the offense had to waste a play in order to obtain more operating room. On occasion, some teams were forced to punt on 1st down if they were deep in their own territory; punting on 3rd down was also not uncommon.
Teams with the ball inside their own 40 would not attempt a forward pass.

- Even if the ball and the action were downfield, defenses could continue harassing the QB until the play was ruled dead.
- 1921: Pro teams now began using the huddle (see 1918 above). Until then, the QB called the play at the line.
- Teams were comprised of 18-20 players, and each was called to be a “60-minute man,” meaning each played both offense and defense. Substitutions were rare, and **free substitution** did not come into play until 1949. The purpose – to save money!

Substitution rule: once a player was taken out of the game, he could not return until the following quarter.

- **Money** was often raised by passing the hat among the fans. Pay: \$100-\$200/game. Player was paid right after the contest.
- There was **no player bench**. Instead, the players could be seen seated with patrons, and there was no coaching from the sidelines.
- Players bought much of their own equipment: shoes, pants, protective gear, and even their helmet. Some were even charged for using adhesive tape.

APFA’s first season:

- Each team was to set its own schedule
- Statistics were not well kept, and home teams, not the league office, provided the referees.

Through 1934, the game was **sparsely integrated**. One noteworthy player was **Fritz Pollard** (Brown University) who played for and coached the Akron Pros. Another standout player was Rutgers alum **Paul Robeson**. While organized baseball barred blacks from 1887 to the beginning of the 1946 season, the Chicago Cardinals featured RB **Duke Slater** from 1926-32.

Of the three blacks listed above, the 5’7” Pollard was the star. His resume at Brown included 144 rushing yards vs. Yale, and 148 rushing yards a week later against Harvard. Pollard was the 1st black to play in Rose Bowl and was later enshrined in the NFL’s Hall of Fame (2005).

- Chicago Cardinals’ **Paddy Driscoll** was the league’s highest paid player (\$300/game). Driscoll, like his counterpart, George Halas, struggled in the batter’s box while playing major league baseball. Driscoll hit .107 in 36G with the Chicago Cubs.

Until 1933, the NFL utilized the rules or rule changes as set forth by the NCAA.

© 2020 Brian Aldridge

Every effort has been made by the author and publisher to ensure that the information contained in this book was correct as of press time. The author and publisher hereby disclaim and do not assume liability for any injury, loss, damage, or disruption caused by errors or omissions, regardless of whether any errors or omissions result from negligence, accident, or any other cause. Readers are encouraged to verify any information contained in this book prior to taking any action on the information.

For rights and permissions, please contact:
 Brian Aldridge 520 Crest Wheaton, IL
 aldridgebrian@sbcglobal.net