

Rochester Youth Rugby

Rugby History

While playing Association Football (do any of you know that soccer comes from this term; Association football?) at Rugby School of England in 1823, William Webb Ellis picked up the ball in his hands and ran with it.

This simple move sparked the creation of rugby. Cambridge University immediately adopted the game, popularized it and made local rules. The game grew at area schools and in 1871, ten years after the common rules of soccer were set, the first Rugby Union was founded in London and firm rules of the game were established.

In 1895 rugby clubs in northern England called for compensation of lost wages for players. The Rugby League was founded as a result and a 13-player game with altered rules was created for professionals.

Rugby spread across the globe and competition emerged between countries.

In the United States, the game emerged primarily on the West Coast. However, the lack of precise rules, ambiguities in the game and the complexity of the sport drew a lot of United States players away from the game.

In 1880, the United States replaced the scrum with a line of scrimmage, drawing emphasis from the free-running characteristic of the rugby game. The modified game continued to be played with rugby rules until 1905 when the publication of photographs from a harsh game between Strathmore and Pennsylvania created a stir. President Theodore Roosevelt insisted on reform to lower the brutality of the game. He threatened to abolish the game by government edict if changes weren't made. In 1906, with the introduction of the forward pass, United States rugby died being replaced by the birth of American football.

Rugby continued to flourish elsewhere, especially in Great Britain, New Zealand, Australia and South Africa. Although a handful of clubs remained in the United States, rugby did not begin to reemerge until the 1960s. Students on college campuses returned to the sport because it was one where many could play without having to pass the rigid tests required to play at the professional level that had become inherent in college football. Minimal costs, constant action, opportunity for frequent play and a primary emphasis on fun attracted many. The number of clubs grew from about 80 to over 1,000 between 1964 and 1980.

The United States of America Rugby Football Union (USARFU) was formed in 1975, creating added recognition for the sport and providing a measure of organization for developing clubs. The sport continues to grow today. The rules of rugby continue to evolve worldwide. Amateurism remains the dominant characteristic of the game in the United States although the game turned semi-professional in 1995 with the formation of the National Super League, a 2-division league made up by 14 clubs from all parts of the country. Not sanctioned by USARFU, the league split into East and West Divisions, and now has 16 members, continuing to provide top quality competition for the clubs involved.