

THE GROWTH OF RUGBY FOOTBALL.

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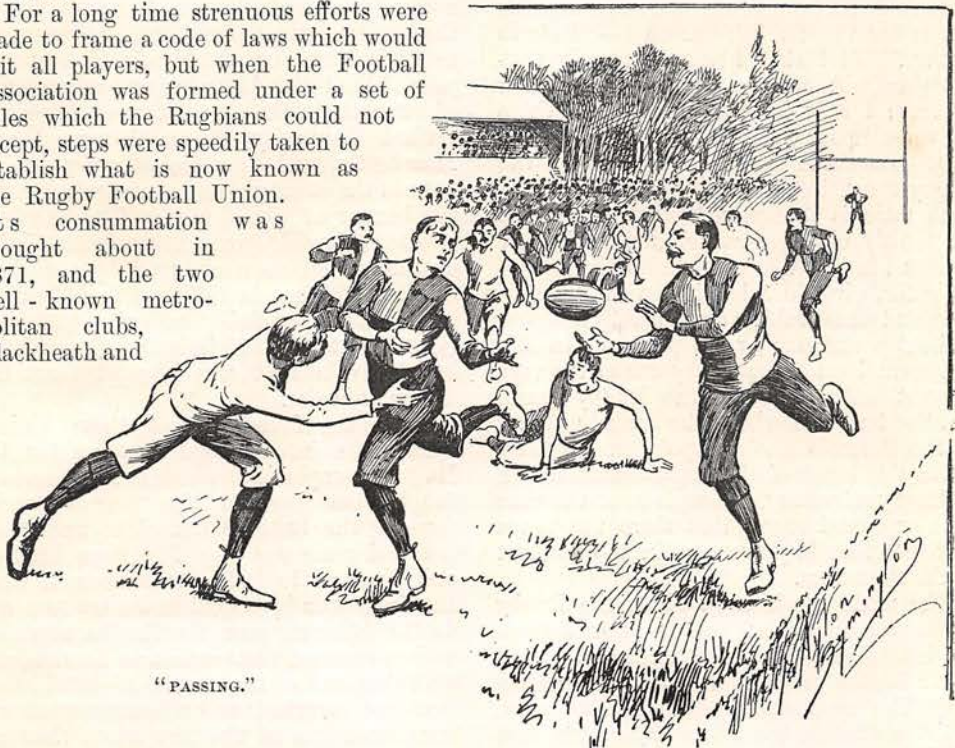
If it can be demonstrated—a task I attempted a month or two ago in the columns of the WINDSOR MAGAZINE—that Association football has become a great national pastime, it is as equally easy to prove the same thing with regard to the Rugby game.

Which is the most popular code need not be discussed within the limits of this article, but it can easily be seen that whereas football under Association rules is held in high favour in some towns, Rugby is equally popular in others, while in some cases we can find the rival codes flourishing side by side. It would probably require a plebiscite to ascertain which game commanded most supporters in Lancashire. Yorkshire, although considered the hotbed of Rugbyism, is almost solely given over to its great rival pastime in the neighbourhood of Sheffield, Rotherham, Barnsley, Doncaster, and other towns on the southern side of the county, and in the metropolis we find each code very much followed.

For a long time strenuous efforts were made to frame a code of laws which would suit all players, but when the Football Association was formed under a set of rules which the Rugbians could not accept, steps were speedily taken to establish what is now known as the Rugby Football Union. Its consummation was brought about in 1871, and the two well-known metropolitan clubs, Blackheath and

Richmond, had the honour of taking the initiative steps. From that time the gulf between the two games has gradually widened, and in spite of the prognostications of some people, it has been found that there is plenty of room for both, as both have prospered.

It would be invidious to draw a comparison between the two games. Public opinion on the merits of each is clearly divided. On the one hand you can be informed with emphasis that "there is only one game of football, and that is not Rugby," while on the other a similarly emphatic statement can be had from equally trustworthy sources with regard to the Association code. One remark may however be made on the subject. The rules of the Rugby game are more difficult to understand thoroughly than those of Association, and a Rugby match is much more difficult for the novice to follow. This is not an unmixed evil. The apparent simplicity of the Association game has led many thousands of people to imagine that they are fully conversant with all the nice points of the code





after witnessing two or three matches, and perhaps without even taking the trouble to read the rules. In the same way I am of opinion that there are many Association referees even whose knowledge of the rules is most superficial, and these causes have led to most of the scenes which have disgraced the Association football field during past years and enabled the cynics to coin another phrase for the English language—"Referee baiting." Not that I wish to imply that there are not many competent Association referees; I only wish to remark that there are several poor ones.

Of course the same slur is cast on the Rugby game, but not in anything like the same ratio is it deserved. Rugby referees are mostly old players, gentlemen in fair positions in life, who officiate for the love of the game, give their decisions with promptitude, and whose rulings are generally accepted without a murmur by the players. In this statement I am supported by one of the very greatest authorities on the Rugby game, Mr. Rowland Hill, who at the annual meeting of the Referees' Society spoke in distinctly favourable terms of the improvement shown in Rugby refereeing, although he at the same time expressed regret that there was not a corresponding improvement in the conduct of the spectators.

The modest fashion in which the Rugby Union was established can be gleaned from the first balance-sheet. The income amounted to £7 for the year and the expenses reached £5. The membership comprised 33 clubs. What a change has taken place since that

time! There are now about 460 clubs on the membership list, and although the Union disburses some hundreds of pounds per year in charity a substantial sum has been invested in Consols.

Naturally at the commencement most of the clubs were London organisations. Amongst the number were Blackheath, Richmond, Marlborough Nomads, Clapham Rovers, Epsom, Civil Service, and the Wasps. Three distinguished Scottish clubs also joined, viz., the West of Scotland, Edinburgh University and Glasgow Academicals, but naturally, on the formation of a Scotch Union, these organisations transferred their support to their home organisation. The second year of the Union brought forth an accession of strength in the shape of the Harlequins, Oxford University, Wigan, Liverpool and Manchester, and soon almost every club of note in the country had been enrolled under the banner of the Union. The excellent results achievable from an association of this character were soon observed by the sister countries. Thus in 1873 we find Scotland combining her clubs under one central government; in 1875 Ireland followed suit; and lastly, in 1880, was brought about the Union of Wales.

From the foundation of these Unions sprang the international matches for the Rugby championship which is now annually fought out between the four countries forming the British Isles. The first international game was played between England and Scotland in 1871, at Edinburgh, when the Scots won by a goal and a try to a try. In the following year the English representatives reversed that verdict in London, and up to the end of the season of 1895, when Scotland surprised us by beating what was considered one of the best teams that had

been put into the field for England for years, the record of the Rose against the Thistle was eight wins against seven, with seven draws.



"A DROP KICK."

During the years 1888 and 1889 no international matches of any description were played owing to a dispute arising from a difference in the rules of the different countries, which has since been settled by the formation of an International Board.

On the establishment of the Irish Union in 1875 annual matches were commenced between Ireland and England, of which England has won sixteen, Ireland two, and one has been drawn. It is only fair to say that although generally beaten the Irishmen have always come up smiling and played a good forward game, their weakness being mostly apparent at back. They scored their first victory in Dublin in 1887 and their second at Blackheath in 1894. In the latter year, for the first time, "the wearers of the green" were champion nation, as they also beat both Scotland and Wales.

The matches with Wales were instituted in 1880, and beyond the season of 1882, when "the Taffies" were opposed to a team selected from the North of England only, and the two years of the dispute before referred to, the struggles have been kept up annually, England securing nine victories to two, with one drawn game. The Welsh, like the Irish, have had one great year. It was that of 1893 when they defeated the three other countries by a new development

of back play, which has since been generally adopted all over Great Britain.

In 1874 were inaugurated a series of annual games between picked teams of the North and South. In these contests the Southerners have shown a marked superiority on results, having secured fourteen victories to eight, while three matches have been drawn. These contests are regarded as trial games for the selection of the English team of each particular season, and the results probably do not give a fair representation of the strength of the North. In the South nearly all the good men have hitherto been connected with few clubs, and this has enabled the Southern Selecting Committee to put into the field year after year teams of men who thoroughly knew one another's play. On the other hand in the North there are many more clubs who have undeniable claims to be represented, and the result has been that the Northern fifteens, as compared with the Southern combinations, are essentially scratch ones, however good the players may be individually.

The annual struggle between Oxford and Cambridge at Rugby football has always been one that has attracted considerable



"TACKLED."

attention, and more often than not the result has upset all previous calculations. Still the balance of victories has not been great to either side, seeing that the Dark Blues have

only won eight matches to seven, with seven drawn. From 1881 to 1884 Oxford secured four victories. This was largely due to the adoption of an improved style of play, which enabled what was known as Vassall's team to maintain an unbeaten record for nearly three seasons against the best clubs in the country. In the following season (1885) Cambridge came to the front again, and they in turn claimed victories in four successive years. Another interesting series of games, which were commenced in 1870, are those between Yorkshire and Lancashire. These afford another instance of the closeness usually shown in such contests, as up to the present Yorkshire only claim ten successes as against eight by Lancashire.

Cup competitions are the exception rather than the rule in Rugby football, although Yorkshire County hold one of the largest contests of that description in existence, beyond the Association Cup. There has been instituted however in England a County Championship, in which the counties, within certain areas, are pitted against each other, and afterwards the group winners play for the honour of champion county. In 1889, when no international matches were decided, a match, Champion County *versus* the Rest of England, was inaugurated and has been kept up ever since. During those years Yorkshire have been champion county six times, and on four occasions have beaten the Rest of England team.

In Rugby football, as first played in public schools, the sides generally consisted of an indefinite number of players, while in international and club matches, twenty men aside took part. The change from 20 to 15 (the number now played) occurred in 1877 at the request of Scotland. The alteration was desired because club secretaries often found a difficulty in putting a full complement of players into the field. A more open style of play naturally followed. At one time it was customary to have merely one three-quarter back. The decrease in the number of players, with proportionately greater chances for fast individual play, led to the introduction of two three-quarter backs, principally for defence, and two full backs. Subsequently we saw the introduction of three three-quarter backs and the reduction of the number of backs to one once more. These were the positions of four players, with the remainder of the team made up of two half backs and eight forwards, until 1893, when Wales, who some time previously had introduced what is now known as the four three-quarter back system

—reducing their forwards to eight in number in order to carry it out—managed to win the championship by beating all the other countries. This led at once to the introduction of the system by the other countries into their club, county and international games. In making this hurried change no doubt many clubs were too precipitate, as in several cases, except in the way of defence, this extra man behind the forwards was wasted. This was very noticeable in the London Scottish, a club who can on occasion command the services of many of Scotia's best international players. Yet with four three-quarter backs it was a common sight to see those players attempting the old style of attack—a long punt up the field into touch, with the idea of giving the forwards a chance to show their scrummaging powers. Still many clubs and players are rapidly learning the lesson taught us by the Welsh, and good three-quarter backs will probably be much more plentiful in the course of a season or two. The work of the half-back has also undergone a change. With a big pack of forwards in front of him he had many more opportunities of getting the ball and making a run for the opposing goal line. But the new condition of things has led to the introduction of rather lighter though faster forwards, with the result that the half-back nowadays has to confine himself largely to the task of getting the ball when it leaves the scrum, and passing it out to the three-quarters. When his side is being beaten forward that is a task of

no small difficulty, as he is very often colared before he has the opportunity of completing his task.

The forwards in the first instance were merely looked upon as so many pushers. Weight and strength were required to drive

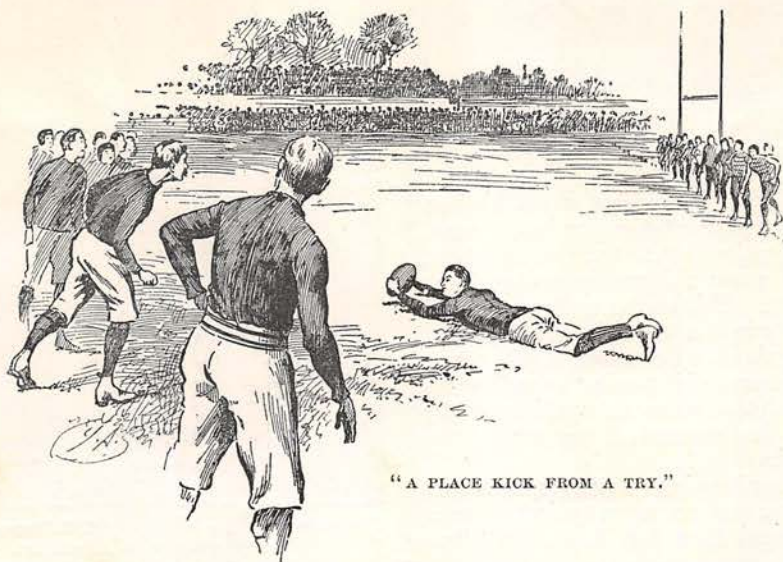


"A MARK."

the opposing side back. In those days the game was not nearly so attractive as it has since become. A system of short passing was first introduced amongst the forwards. This innovation was brought to perfection by Blackheath and a few other clubs. Then we had developed a system of long low passing by Vassall's famous Oxford team, which enabled them, as we have before remarked, to defy defeat for three seasons. Ireland has generally shown us some fine forward play in the international matches. Their forwards are usually of the tall, lean and wiry type, who are useful both in the scrummage and in the open. In 1894, when they secured the championship, they gave a display of both feet and hand work, when they beat England at Blackheath, that simply upset all the English back play. Last season the English team promised to give us an exhibition of forward play which had never previously been excelled. They were all selected from Southern clubs because of the splendid fashion in which they utterly routed the Northerners in the North and South match. They continued this form against both Ireland and Wales, but on meeting Scotland showed an awful falling off, and the Scots, in something like the old style, with a good solid pack and safe work by the backs, gained a meritorious victory.

It is generally considered in Rugby football circles that the game is now going through a crisis. It has been an open secret that for some years many of the Northern clubs have been making payments to their players for loss of time through playing in matches, and

offering inducements to good players to leave small clubs and throw in their lot with those whose coffers were larger and better filled. The Rugby Union legislated for the prevention of these practices, whereupon a large Northern section of the members of the Union two years ago attempted to pass a resolution legalising the payment of players for loss of working time. In this they failed, and this year, the Rugby Union Committee having framed more searching laws for the suppression of professionalism, some twenty-two of the larger clubs in Yorkshire, Lancashire and Cheshire resigned their membership of the Union and formed what is now called the Northern Union, in which payment for the loss of working time through playing football is allowed. The Rugby Union promptly branded them as professionals, but up to the present the new Union has not attempted to go beyond the modest lines on which they started out, although they have radical changes on hand in other directions, such as the further reduction of the number of players on a side to twelve and the introduction of a round ball instead of the egg-shaped one at present used. The new Union as at present constituted is only a small body, and is not likely to grow fast. Whether they have enough vitality to live and thrive remains to be seen, but at present they do not threaten much harm to the Rugby Union, so that no fear need be felt that the County Championship will not be played, or that England will not be able to make a respectable show in the international matches.



"A PLACE KICK FROM A TRY."