



Australian Rules football is a very long way from the ritual game the early Toltec warriors fought to the death a thousand years ago at El Tajin in ancient Mexico. A game in which warriors proved themselves by fighting to put a ball in a hole high up in a giant stone wall. Often the games were scoreless because whole teams were killed. The last surviving players left standing were the winners, and they were rewarded with riches, royal wives and glory – as spectators betted their wives, their children, and even themselves into slavery on the outcome of these matches.

Footy is still a long way from Harpastum, a game the Roman legions developed from the ancient Greeks. Harpastum was a war-game with a ball, played upon a rectangle of flat land between two teams – the aim being to force the ball across a line defended by the other team. This ancient football **is actually very similar to today's American Football. Since Roman times, games involving kicking** around small objects, usually leftover livestock bladders, had been played all over Europe, probably spread by the Romans themselves.

And Aussie Rules is still far from the Middle Ages, when the Romans introduced a development of Harpastum to England and challenged the locals. Supposedly the earliest record of it is the now traditional Shrove Tuesday game at Derby, in 217 A.D., when a Briton team defeated a local garrison of legionaries. There is some argument that rather it was a skirmish between a tribe of Danes and a tribe of Saxons, but nevertheless:

“... a Frenchman watching the game at Derby exclaimed that if Englishmen called this playing it would be impossible to say what they would call fighting.”

– Laurence Montague, Encyclopaedia Britannica

Long after the Romans left England, the Britons imitated the game and continued to play derivatives of it. In the British Isles, these games evolved into the village mellays of the Middle Ages (hence the resemblance to the French and English word melee), annual brutal contests that vaguely resembled **today's soccer.**

The game developed into parish contests, and by 1175 it was accepted by the clergy. This early football became a festival custom, games were played on holidays, and the church even anticipated **today's professionalism by paying men to play for their parish.**

It was a wild and often brutal game, in which whole villages and towns took part. Entire populations of townships took to the field – sometimes occupying the miles between their town greens – as opposing sides. Games went on for days and nights, the ball was chased no matter where it went – through houses, in rivers, and there was a goal at each end of the town, usually a gate or a water wheel. First goal usually won, and the injuries themselves would probably have limited them to an annual event.

The Celts took this game back with them to Ireland. In England the game began to develop into an early form of soccer, but in the 14th, 15th and 16th centuries it became anti-social. During the time of Henry the Eighth, the game continued on the streets of Edinburgh and London with clubs and knives, so it was declared a major crime in 1349. Edward the Second continued to outlaw the game, while his successor Edward the Third also forbade it as a matter of state – **in that “it interferred with the proficiency of archery”** – so it remained banned until 1608.

In England the mob game waned towards the end of the 18th century. By the early 19th century, increased leisure time due to the Industrial Revolution led to more regular and less violent sport, and thus born a demand for standard rules for football.

However, these rules took most of the century to work out, especially since students at various **“public” schools (private boarding schools for gentry-in-training)** such as Rugby and Eton developed games of their own to play on campus. No one seems to have thought of picking up the football until William Webb Ellis ignored the rules at Rugby in 1823, but it then caught on fairly quickly.

Meanwhile back in Ireland, the Cornish Hurling game had flourished. Cornish Hurling is very similar to modern Gaelic Football. Unlike in England, the Irish were never prohibited to play the early football styles. Inter-village skirmishes between the descendants of Gaelic and Viking peoples became huge matches between Celtic settlements. The clan of one castle would take on the clan of another castle in a football clash.

As time went by, the game became the common man’s pastime, played on farmland. In the early 19th century it was called Caid. Caid was played between parishes, with teams of unlimited number, wherever the ball fell, and from whenever until sunset. Along with the various football styles played by the English private schools, these early Irish games eventually made their way to Australia.