



# MICHIGAN OLDE BLUE RUGBY

## **The Transformation of Rugby into Football at Michigan**

by Michael Lisi - August, 1987

The rugby played by Michigan's first intercollegiate rugby team in 1879 was a slower, less elegant form of rugby, but it was rugby nonetheless. Wolverine sports historians tend to regard the rugby years (roughly 1876-1883) as, at most, the clumsy period before true gridiron football came to Ann Arbor. I, for one, regret that rugby ever gave way to football. With a little help from the collections of the Bentley Historical Library at U of M it is now possible to describe how and why rugby became football here at the University of Michigan.

Rugby first took hold in the U.S. in the 1870's but by the end of the 1880's the game, although still called "rugby" in some places, was unmistakably gridiron (i.e. American football). How does one distinguish between the two games? Rugby has several unique features. First, only rugby has that strange formation of straining bodies known as a scrum. Next, and this is usually a surprise to new players, blocking, or obstructing access to the ball carrier, is strictly forbidden in rugby. Third, as in soccer and hockey, an offside rule prohibits players downfield from the ball from participating in play until put on-side by their own retreat or the advance of another member of their team. Finally, play is continuous-- possession changes only when one team wrests the ball from the other, or after a team scores or there is an infraction of the rules.

Each of these features disappeared in the U.S. game by 1883 to be replaced by several new features, the hallmarks of gridiron football. The line of scrimmage replaced scrums. Offsides and obstruction penalties were abandoned and blocking and down-field interference were allowed. Teams were allowed three, and then four "downs" to advance the ball ten yards or be forced to surrender possession. Even player positions changed, so that a "quarterback" emerged as the primary ball handler.

Rugby at U of M changed each time the Michigan team traveled east to play eastern universities or colleges. Rugby was first played here in 1876, when intramural sports teams began playing by British rugby union rules, as published that year in *The Michigan Chronicle*. Harvard adopted the same rules (the rugby union rules were first codified in England in 1871) after playing McGill University at Cambridge in 1874. Columbia and Princeton also adopted these rules, but each school gave them a slightly different interpretation. As a result, matches between the three eastern schools were marked by constant conflict. In 1876 the three eastern schools formed the Intercollegiate Foot Ball Association (the "IFA") for the purpose of clarifying the rules. Yale was admitted to the IFA in 1879.

Michigan's first intercollegiate rugby match actually took the team west to play Racine College in Chicago in May of 1879 (the complete story appeared in the last newsletter).

Rugby of that period must have been much less dynamic than today's game. Scrums were conducted on the British model and it was not unusual for one scrum to last several minutes. The object, after the put-in by the referee (not the scrumhalf-- the ball belonged to neither side) was for each pack to drive the opposing pack off the ball, or to wheel the scrum and somehow steal the ball. Heeling the ball backward, called "shirking" by the English, was forbidden. The ball's emergence from the scrum was, at best, unpredictable.

Tackled players were not required to release the ball. A premium was placed upon kicking, both for goal and field position, with a kick for goal counting four points versus one point for a try. Most of the time the ball was kicked from the ground, while in motion or when dead, and without touching it with the hands.

Michigan played its second intercollegiate rugby match against the University of Toronto on November 1, 1879, in Recreation Park, a private sports park located one mile north of the Detroit River on Woodward Avenue in Detroit. The closely contested match ended in a tie. Michigan dominated overall, but according to *The Michigan Chronicle*: "Toronto played a strong game, and in almost every individual point seemed to excel; Gwynne and Woodruff can hardly be equaled by us in running and dodging; it was all Chase could do to take care of the big-boned MacDougal in the scrimmage; while when tackled, they have a sly way of passing the ball to a player behind them. They do not throw it, but hand it back, and in close play, owing to their familiarity with the Association game, they are quicker with their feet and work the ball ahead better."

One year later, on November 6, 1880, Michigan defeated the University of Toronto at Toronto, one goal and one try to nothing. Already *The Michigan Chronicle* lists one of the Michigan players as a "quarterback" (the position was a Yale innovation), but still recounts the occurrence of scrum upon scrum in the match. Both teams played 11 men, as was done in their earlier match and in Michigan's first match in 1879. The 1876 IFA rules set the number of players at 15, but in 1877 and 1878 several IFA matches were played with 11 players per side, the usual complement in Association football (*i.e.*, soccer).

When the Michigan rugby team went East in November of 1881 they were playing a more traditional rugby game than their eastern counterparts. Michigan lost three relatively close matches, all played under the 1871 union rules, as modified by the IFA. In the space of six days, Michigan was defeated by Yale 11-0, Princeton 13-4, and Harvard 4-0. The offside and obstruction rules remained in place, but were honored only in the breach by the eastern teams. An 1878 IFA rule change required a tackled player to release the ball. Under an 1880 IFA innovation, the ball was put back into play by a player standing over the ball and using his foot to "snap-it-back." The fellow who first received the ball from the "snap-back" was called the quarterback. Princeton pioneered a running game off of the snap-back in which the ball carrier was trailed closely by a teammate on either side, presenting an attacking wedge which discouraged any would-be tacklers. Although the practice was a violation of the rules, it was tolerated and soon the trailing teammates caught up with and moved in front of the runner. True blocking was born.

Between 1876 and 1878 scrums among the IFA teams changed completely. The American packs, lacking a tradition in rugby and with little regard for the British rules, reached out for the ball with their feet and tried to kick it backward to their backs. With all 16 forwards thrashing at the ball with their feet, the practice of binding together to form a scrum made little sense. The scrum was abolished altogether by the IFA in 1878. Forwards soon spread out across the field along a "line of scrimmage" to cover on defense, bunching together on offense to shield the snap-back of the ball to the quarterback.

When Michigan returned east in 1883, the IFA rules had changed even more radically. Wesleyan defeated Michigan by a score of 14 to 6. Yale trounced Michigan 42-0! The account of the Yale match in *The Michigan Argonaut* complains that Yale played an "off-side" game, taking every advantage of the rules which the referee would allow. The ball was a new "livelier" ball, smaller and blown-up much more tightly than the large "balloon" ball to which Michigan was accustomed. The livelier ball gave an edge to the eastern teams, who played a pop-kick and converge style of game, as opposed to the traditional running, punting game favored by Michigan.

More significantly, an 1882 IFA rule change threw out the old possession rules and instituted a new series of three downs of possession for each side. Unless a first down was acquired by advancing the ball forward ten yards within three attempts, possession was surrendered to the other side. This most striking of innovations came about as a result of widespread public protest about tactics which were used for the first time in two matches played between Princeton and Yale in 1880 and 1881. The matches are known as the "block games".

In the first block game, Princeton exploited a gap in the rules which became apparent after scrums were abolished. The new snap-back and line of scrimmage rules allowed for retention of the ball, but not its surrender. In both 1880 and 1881, Princeton found itself in the position of needing only to tie Yale in order to claim the IFA championship. In the 1880 game, with Yale threatening to score, Princeton went into its infamous "block-defense." A Princeton player in his own end would toss the ball backwards to a Princeton man standing in goal, for a "safety." Princeton was then entitled to bring the ball out to its own 22 meter line and to put the ball back into play by toeing it through the mark. Princeton would pick up the ball and run, but when threatened with losing the ball, the pass backwards, safety, and 22 meter plays were used repeatedly to retain possession. The result was a boring match lacking any offensive action. The ball stayed in Princeton's end the whole time, yet Princeton was crowned 1880 IFA champion after a final score of 0-0 in the match.

To combat the Princeton block tactics, at the next IFA rules meeting safeties were assigned a penal value. In the event of a tie, the team with the fewest safeties would be declared the winner. However, Princeton immediately recognized a further gap in the rules. The playing area of the rugby pitch originally included imaginary extensions of the goal lines and the touch lines, creating a square at each of the four corners of the pitch running on into infinity. These squares were known as "in goal", and although they

were behind the goal line, they were not part of the goal area. When the ball was passed into one of these areas, it was called a "touch in goal" and was treated similar to a safety, except that a touch in goal was not subject to the new safety penalty.

Princeton went into its block defense again in the 1881 IFA championship match by passing the ball into the in-goal area. This time however, Yale countered with identical tactics. The game ended in a scoreless tie, with the ball being kicked or run forward only six times during the entire match. Much to Princeton's surprise, Yale was awarded the 1881 championship on a technicality.

Returning to Michigan's 1883 tour of the east, after the 42-0 loss to Yale, Michigan caught on to the new rules and style of play and succeeded in holding Harvard to a scoreless tie. The Harvard match was followed by a 17-5 victory against Stevens Institute. Success under the new gridiron rules and the prospect of being left behind in the forward progress of collegiate football caused Michigan to drop rugby union rules.

Michigan fielded strong gridiron teams in 1884 and 1885. In 1884 Michigan played Albion for the first time, taking an easy victory. Other conquests were the Peninsulars of Detroit, the Windsors of Canada, and a strong select-side team from the Chicago area. The 1886 team won all of its games. Adoption of the new rules led to nothing but success for the Michigan team for the next decade. There was no turning back.

Born in 1876, first tested against another college in 1879, Michigan rugby was all but discarded by Michigan intramural and intercollegiate teams by the end of 1883. However, rugby was reborn here in 1959, and continues to flourish today. The modern game is faster, more action-packed (the ball is actually in play anywhere from 15 to 30 minutes in an average rugby match, as opposed 3 or 4 minutes in the average football game) and more exciting to watch than football.

In an upcoming issue the story of the 1959 return of rugby to U of M will be told.