

IAIN MACINTOSH

**EVERYTHING
YOU EVER WANTED
TO KNOW ABOUT**

Rugby

(BUT WERE TOO AFRAID TO ASK)



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Author's note

As this book is written with the primary aim of telling people how mind-bogglingly wonderful rugby union is without baffling them with jargon, you'll have to forgive me always referring to the players as 'he'. I know that I shouldn't do it, but I feared that if every hypothetical situation became 'and then he/she will pass the ball out to his/her team-mate', it would swiftly become a nightmare.

Rugby is, of course, open to women as well and the level of their game, and the interest in it, is improving all the time.

Throughout the book 'rugby' will refer to rugby union, and not rugby league, unless otherwise stated.

Anyway, what are you doing still reading this? There's a beautiful game to discover.

Iain Macintosh



1

Why you should like rugby

‘Any sport played with a ball that is shaped like an egg can only ever be inherently random.’

I used to say this rather a lot when I was younger. As a devout football fan, my rabid hatred of rugby was well known among my friends and family. I saw it as a game for public schoolboys, an unsophisticated and unlovable mess of bruised limbs and swollen ears. Where was the finesse of football? Where were the moments of genius that lift you from your seat? I might have felt differently, however, had I actually bothered to learn a bit about the game.

My first experience of rugby was, like most men’s, entirely against my will. As a pitifully skinny eleven-year-old in his first year at comprehensive school, I was led out on to a quagmire of a pitch and, without even a cursory guide to the laws of the game, a ball was thrown, a whistle blew and the biggest boy in the class jumped on my head. I decided there and then, as I vainly searched for feeling in my legs, that I wanted nothing to do with this so-called sport.

A succession of kindly friends and relatives tried to cure me of my prejudices, but it wasn’t until I approached adulthood

that it all started to click. You see, something is always happening on a rugby pitch. There *are* moments of genius, there *is* finesse, you just need to banish the nightmares of comprehensive school and know what you're looking for.

The atmosphere at a rugby match is completely different from any other sport. It's boisterous, but it's friendly. There's banter, but it's benign. There's a deep understanding of the game because most fans have played it at one level or another.

In 2007, I wrote a book about football that involved a great deal of travelling, especially in taxis. Almost every driver, on finding out that I was a football writer, said the same thing.

'Football writer, eh? I used to love football, but it's not the same game now, is it? Too much money. You can't relate to teenage millionaires, it costs the best part of a week's wages to take the kids and that's only if you can get the tickets. Besides, they've taken out all the tackling. It's not really a man's game anymore.'

The sport that they were looking for, the entertaining, affordable, honourable game that they mourn, is in perfect health. It's just that these days we call it rugby. No bling-encrusted millionaires, no ludicrously expensive season tickets. Just unadulterated sport.

Rugby, at least at club level, is a physically democratic game. While other sports tend to be geared to only the tall or the lithe, there is a place on the rugby pitch for pretty much every body-shape. Are you as wide as you are tall? Wonderful, there's a place for you in the scrum. Do you have both the pace and the build of a whippet? Then you'll be welcome on the wings. But it isn't just a game for the players.

Watching rugby can be a glorious experience. At its best, the game is an astonishing spectacle to behold. It has been



described by some as being rather like watching a war, which isn't strictly true of course, as people are very rarely killed and no government has ever had to concoct a pack of lies to start a rugby match. But the strategic intricacies and the close-up blood and thunder make the analogy worth pursuing.

It requires bravery, but not foolishness, and not only composure and common sense, but also the willingness to step out into the firing line. It is not a game for the timid.

The ex-England player Brian Moore, perhaps unwittingly, captured the ethos of rugby perfectly in a training video for the BBC's Sport Academy website. Using a young team of rugby players to demonstrate the finer points of the game, Moore proceeded to show how it was possible to unbalance a scrum by the position of your elbows at the bind, something which you'll find out all about later.

'What I'm trying to do,' grunted Moore from the inside of a worried-looking scrum, 'is put the loosehead prop in a really difficult position, because if he wants to lift up here, he'll have to do it when he's bent and twisted.'

'But ... erm ... is that not illegal?' asked Jeremy Guscott nervously.

'It's totally illegal,' confirmed Moore happily, 'but it's very effective!'

And that takes care of the one remaining obstacle to the enjoyment of rugby: the laws. Rugby is cursed with an ever-evolving law book, already too heavy for its own good, but as Moore so charmingly displayed, the laws are not integral to the understanding of the game. In fact, most rugby fans are still ignorant of many of them.

This book will make no effort to explain all of them, for there are far more comprehensive tomes on the market for

that purpose. Instead, it is an attempt to demystify the game for anyone who has ever considered the possibility that it might be worth a look, but has been beaten back by an ignorance of the basics.

Here you will be given a crash course in how the game works, why it works and, perhaps most importantly, what you need to know to sit in a pub and get happily bladdered with complete strangers, roaring your approval at a maelstrom of muddy men. Rugby is a game that welcomes newcomers with open arms, even if those arms can occasionally be wrapped around your kneecaps. Come join me.

Crouch ... touch ... engage.





The history of rugby

Rugby, like Association Football, evolved from the mangled remnants of the traditional village football games of the Middle Ages. For centuries, the greatest form of organised leisure in the UK was for the entire community to wage open warfare over a pig's bladder filled with sawdust, battling like animals in the dirt for supremacy. The rules were vague at best and the violence was widespread. With the exception of murdering your opponent, which was still very much frowned upon, you could get away with almost anything. Indeed, if you're unfortunate enough to find yourself in the front row of a scrum today, you'll find that this is an aspect of the game that has been well preserved.

There was no single, official version of this primitive football. The rules, such as they were, differed from region to region. Most of them shared the aim of getting a ball from one marker to another, but some included goalposts for the ball to be kicked through, under or over. Some games allowed the use of hands, others just the feet. All were repeatedly banned by a succession of monarchs, although the people rarely paid attention to things like that, some of

them going so far as to arrange secret games as a means of political dissent.

As industrialisation spread across Britain, these playful outpourings of competitive bottom-kicking and eye-gouging began to fade out with the green belt. Towns and factories started popping up and life in the inner cities became rather more regimented. Oddly, it was the public school system that stepped up to revive the game of the commoners.

As anyone who has ever raised a son to adulthood will know, adolescent boys are a bubbling cauldron of hormones. Wracked by a heady brew of new and conflicting chemicals, the sweet and tender young cherubs metamorphose into raging, spotty dervishes with far too much energy and bum-fluff moustaches. Putting hundreds of them into an enclosed space like a public school and reading Latin to them for hours on end was, in retrospect, a bad idea. Posh fee-paying schools in the 19th century were beset with civil disorder as pimply students went completely loco and started taking over the classrooms by force, seizing control of entire wings of the buildings. Some riots got so out of hand that soldiers were forced to enter the schools to quell the resistance.

Eventually some enterprising teachers, young enough to remember what it was like to be a teenager, figured out the cause of the restlessness and scheduled physical training sessions to work the aggression out of their pupils' systems. It soon became apparent that organised team sports were a good way of developing character as well as fitness, and a new form of football began to develop amongst the cloisters, with an emphasis on kicking, both of the ball and of other players.

Rugby, we are meant to believe, might never have evolved had it not been for the blatant and unashamed cheating of



one William Webb Ellis at Rugby School in 1823. The official story is that Webb Ellis picked up the ball and ran with it, sliding in to touch down the world's first try. Amazed at his derring-do, his schoolmasters realised that this was a game far superior to football and so the world was changed. This delightful tale is probably not true for two reasons: firstly, that an act of skulduggery like that would have been rewarded with a sound beating rather than with congratulations, and secondly, that there is no record of this actually happening.

An 1895 inquiry into the origins of rugby found no conclusive evidence of the incident, bar a few sketchy stories, none of which were first hand. The real Webb Ellis left school, played cricket at Cambridge and became a clergyman, dying in France in 1872, entirely unaware that he would be credited with the birth of a sport.

Regardless of his efforts, this proto-football spread across the public schools of the land, changing slightly as it went. But as anyone who has ever played a game of pool during Freshers' Week will know, regionalised rules can cause great confusion. What is acceptable in the south might be a sin in the north, and students struggled to organise games at university because every player had a different idea of what was supposed to be happening. By the 1860s, there was a desperate need to settle upon some universal rules and codify the game.

Two key factions had emerged. The first, the largest of the two, wanted to eliminate 'hacking' from the game entirely, arguing that working men, who really rather relied upon their legs, would not be able to play if it was maintained. There was also a strong feeling that carrying the ball should be eliminated, but on this concessions were offered. It was