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The Evolution of American Football Rules

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Abstract

Football, as we know it, has changed significantly since its humble beginnings in 1892. In its early beginnings, football was an all-out brawl. The first football game was played in 1869. It was an intercollegiate contest between Rutgers and Princeton universities, but the game was played according to soccer rules modified from the London Football Association (Riess, 2011). During the next seven years, rugby gained popularity over soccer and modern football was launched from rugby (Riess, 2011). In 1876, the Intercollegiate Football Association (IFA) was formed by Columbia, Harvard, Princeton, and Yale universities (Riess, 2011). IFA was dedicated to playing football according to rugby rules (Riess, 2011). Walter Camp, now known as the father of American football, helped establish many of the first rules and regulations of football (Nelson, 1995). Over the next 25 years, the rules of the game changed and transformed the soccer-rugby mix into American football (Nelson, 1995). The game itself has evolved from its early beginnings; thus, the rules of football had to evolve as well. Revisions to the rules have made football more fair, safer, and more entertaining—all in the name of improving the game.

Fatalities Directly Due to Football – 1931 - 2014

Year	Sandlot	Pro & Semi-pro	High School	College	Total Direct
1931 – 1965*	134	72	348	54	608
1966 - 1976	30	3	179	19	213
1977 - 1987	8	0	68	7	83
1988 - 1998	0	0	40	4	44
1999 - 2009	6	3	39	2	50
2010 - 2014	2	2	17	4	25
Totals:	180	80	691	90	1041
Percent	17.3%	7.7%	66.4%	8.6%	100%

Fatalities Indirectly Due to Football – 1931 - 2014

Year	Sandlot	Pro & Semi-pro	High School	College	Total Indirect
1931 – 2014*	116	23	509	122	770
Total:	15.1%	3.0%	66.1%	15.8%	100.0%
Percent					

*No study was made in 1942.

“Safety in Numbers”

Thanks to the *Annual Survey of Football Injury Research*, rule changes have taken place that have saved lives. As a direct result of this research, in 1976 a rule change made initial contact with the head and face illegal while blocking and tackling. The 1990 *Annual Survey of Football Injury Research* report was historic. It was the first year since the research began in 1931 that a direct fatality in football did not occur at any level of play (as cited in Mueller & Schindler, 1991).



Then: Yale University, late 19th century



Now: Eastern Washington University, present day



Fairness

The process to change rules comes from the Competition Committee, formerly the Rules Committee. The committee receives recommendations from owners, Coaches Subcommittee, Player Safety Committee, the players' union, officials, outside medical experts, teams, and the league's senior vice president of health and safety policy. League experts analyze statistics, dissect trends, review injuries, and scrutinize videos of plays and playing scenarios. After a new rule or a modification, the committee reviews the rule's impact with the help of statistics, video, and input from players, teams, and medical advisers to ensure the desired effect. If the NFL is unsure about a rule, the preseason is the testing ground.

Entertainment

The NFL continues to support changes that promote more scoring and more exciting plays. From the late 1930s to early 1950s, NFL consultant and statistician Hugh Ray found a direct correlation between high attendance and scoring. In 1974, the NFL implemented a package of rule changes to boost big plays, big points, and game attendance:

- Move the goal posts to the end line from the goal line (made kicks longer and less predictable)
- Make all field goals missed result in the other team taking possession
- Move kickoffs to the 35-yard line from the 40-yard line
- Forbid the offensive team from moving downfield until the ball is kicked
- Reduce holding, illegal use of hands, and tripping penalties from 15 yards to 10 yards for offensive players
- Allow a receiver to be chucked once by a defender after said receiver has gone downfield 3 yards



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