



FOOTBALL'S 50 FOOTBALL'S MOST IMPORTANT MOMENTS

- From the writers of the Football History Boys blog -
BEN JONES & GARETH THOMAS
 @TFHBS

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1857–85

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Sheffield FC (1857)

There seems to be no better place to start than with the creation of football's oldest club – Sheffield FC. In 1857 football had seen a surge in popularity as public schools aimed to develop young men into physically fit and morally sound individuals. Seeing football as a perfect means to do so, amateur clubs began to appear across the country. Often comprised of public school alumni, Sheffield FC was no different. Amongst those to found the club were 'old boys' from the Sheffield Collegiate School. Originally introduced to the game by their college masters, these students included Nathaniel Creswick and William Prest, the co-founders and innovators of the 'Sheffield rules'.

Football had become a game played usually in the winter months. Called by some 'the winter game', it gave sportsmen a chance to put down their cricket bats and play a different sport more suited to all weathers. Indeed, in 1857 cricket was universally recognised as not just the national game, but the game of empire. Football was used first in Sheffield for these precise reasons, as a winter game for the local cricket club. It was the resulting Sheffield rules which would help create Britain's first footballing city. Described as a 'football boom', there is little to doubt the city's influence on the modern game.¹

¹ John Lowerson, *Sport and the English Middle Classes: 1870-1914*, (Manchester: Manchester University, 1993) p.82

In comparison to the version set up by the Football Association in 1863, the Sheffield rules defined *this* form of football. The list of 11 laws are at times similar and at others far removed from the game we watch today. In fact, when reading the rules it is almost reminiscent of rugby. The involvement of catching and passing the ball with the hands highlight where the initial problems in the game lay. However, the inclusion of only scoring via the foot and the removal of ‘hacking’ lends itself to a sport more at home with the Football Association’s later vision.

The side itself was made up of ‘young technologists, businessmen and future captains of industry’². Such players are far removed from the modern-day interpretation of footballers and their respective backgrounds. Despite this, the inclusion of ‘businessmen’ introduces the idea of a middle-class player in contrast to the gentrified game of the southern public schools. With Sheffield being the only proper club in 1857, games would usually be between rival XIs from within the institution. This could be ‘married vs singles’ or ‘professionals vs the rest’.³ Following the close of their first season, *Bell’s Life* reports that the Sheffield side hosted an athletic games at Bramall Lane.⁴ Football clubs were already proving to be more than just the players that represented it. The event would become an annual tradition in Sheffield and help the game to grow. For football to thrive it would need to embrace the community around it and encompass the wider society in which it was played. Soon there would be 15 clubs in the Sheffield area all playing under Creswick and Prest’s rules. Sheffield had become Britain’s football capital.

So what of the earliest fixtures? The beginnings of the ‘rules derby’ dominate most narratives as local club Hallam faced their rivals for the first time in 1860. Although fixtures had been played before between club members, the founding

2 In Derek Birley, *Sport and the Making of Britain*, (Manchester: Manchester University, 1993) p.258

3 ‘History – Sheffield F.C.’, *Sheffield FC*, <https://sheffieldfc.com/history/>

4 *Bell’s Life and Sporting Chronicle*, 11 April 1858

of Hallam FC and the resulting matches between the two has seen it dubbed 'the oldest fixture in football'. Still contested to this day, the first match was played at Sandygate Lane on 26 December 1860. Sheffield emerged as 2-0 winners. Two years later, the sides met at Bramall Lane in a brutal encounter which saw the game descend into violence more than once:

'At one time it appeared likely that the match would be turned into a general fight, Major Creswick (Sheffield) had got the ball away, and was struggling against great odds—Mr Shaw and Mr Waterfall (Hallam). Major Creswick was held by Waterfall, and in the struggle Waterfall was accidentally hit by the Major. All parties are agreed that the hit was accidental. Waterfall, however, ran at the Major in the most irritable manner, and struck at him several times. He also threw off his waistcoat and began to "show fight" in earnest.⁵

Although played for the love of their game, what this shows is that football was already an incredibly passionate pastime. It meant more than a kickaround. Indeed, it was about local pride, about bragging rights, and the presence of 'noisily jubilant' fans seems to confirm this.

The influence of Sheffield FC in the creation of the modern game cannot be understated. Indeed, Sheffield managed to create a genuine football culture in the wider local area and show how football could provide an identity to more than just the players on the pitch. Sheffield would become one of the most important institutions throughout the resulting 'sporting revolution'. Football's modern existence owes a great deal to the early pioneers in the 'Steel City'. There is no way that in 1857, when Nathaniel Creswick and William Prest founded the club, they could ever imagine just how influential it would become. Furthermore, they wouldn't have been able to predict the importance the founding of Sheffield FC would have on the 49 moments still to come. What they had achieved was the first chapter in one of modern history's greatest stories.

5 *Sheffield Independent*, 30 December 1862

The Formation of the Football Association (1863)

By 1863 football (in its various forms) had become the sport of public schoolboys and university students around the country. Despite Sheffield's popularity, a consensus on rules was still yet to be reached by the growing number of institutions who played the game. With an increasing desire, particularly amongst London-based sides, to play matches further afield, the difference in rules across the country caused confusion and needless disruption. It was not uncommon for teams to play matches that switched rules and codes halfway through.

The most influential institution with regards to rules, and particularly to the codified game which followed, was found in Cambridge. Indeed, the earliest histories of football credit Cambridge with the inspiration for the Football Association.⁶ The university had seen a number of rules published in the first half of the 19th century, before a more uniform and easily applied set was written in 1848 and again in 1856. The prime motivation for such laws was the confusion which spread throughout the university when students from different schools, with different football rules, came together. What sets Cambridge's rules apart from others at the time is the distinct

6 N.L. Jackson, *Association Football* (London, 1900) p.26

lack of handling. 'In no other case may the ball be touched with the hands.'⁷

To combat further uncertainty with the laws of the game, 12 clubs and schools met at the Freemasons' Tavern, London, on 26 October 1863. The aim was to discuss and agree upon a shared set of rules. Those involved were Barnes, Blackheath, Perceval House, Kensington School, Civil Service, Crystal Palace, Surbiton, The Crusaders, Blackheath Proprietary School, No Names of Kilburn, Forest and Charterhouse. It would be Ebenezer Morley of Barnes who proposed the formation of an association and the motion was carried by 11 votes to one. Charterhouse, although present at the meeting, declined to join the association.⁸

Following the acceptance of the codes of the game, the first match played under these rules took place in December that year between Barnes and Richmond. Despite being a 0-0 draw, the match drew particular praise for the simplicity of the rules and the excellence of each side in playing under them.⁹ Although a successful first trial, the game was still yet to be truly agreed upon as certain laws caused debate for the next few years. Most rules were ratified, but the inclusion or exclusion of 'hacking' posed the greatest threat to the FA's infancy.

'Hacking' was the practice of kicking an opponent's shins in order to trip them up and regain possession. For some clubs, most notably Blackheath, its removal was a threat to the game's 'masculine toughness'. On the other hand, Morley was vocal in his support for the removal of the 'barbaric practice', citing that if it were to be included, players would be reluctant to play the game after leaving school.¹⁰

7 *Cambridge Football Rules*, 1856

8 Matthew Taylor, *The Association Game* (London: Routledge, 2008)

9 *The Field*, 26 December 1983

10 Richard Holt, *Sport and the British* (Oxford: Oxford University, 1989)

The removal of hacking would lead to another rival code of 'football' forming – rugby. In the modern day, we often think of the two sports as completely different rather than two codes of the same game, as they initially were. It is here where we begin to see the first use of the term 'soccer' to help supporters of both codes distinguish which sport they were to discuss and debate.

The FA's early growth was modest, with the rival code in Sheffield holding greater influence over the sport.¹¹ In 1867 the FA only had ten affiliated members and its very future was under threat. Rules still posed a problem almost five years into the association. *Sporting Life* regularly covered meetings and their contents. Frequently the issue of rules and possible changes took centre stage as members tried 'with much energy and labour to establish a code which shall meet the views of all'.¹²

There is an air of negativity around the FA and articles are often seen to 'wish' them success. There was no certainty as to the association's future, but the energy and effort exerted were seen by some as ample proof that rewards were just around the corner. By 1871 the Rugby Football Union had been established and gained immediate popularity, with over 20 clubs joining initially. The association game would need something big to swing the sporting tide their way. The next decade would be pivotal to the shaping of the modern game.

Football's origins at the Freemasons' Tavern are difficult to ignore. It is clear that without this moment the game we watch today could have been totally different. The success, if not immediate, of the Football Association in creating a governing body around a codified sport would lead to other games being developed and innovated over the coming decades. The social and cultural change centred on sport is what historians now describe as a 'sporting revolution'.

¹¹ Matthew Taylor, *The Association Game*, p. 31

¹² *Sporting Life*, 23 January 1867

The First FA Cup (1871/72)

The FA Cup is huge. Modern-day football fans are becoming increasingly unaware of its importance as more and more tournaments are introduced to us through TV and social media. In 1871 football was still very much in its infancy – an amateur sport played by gentlemen and public school alumni. Commonly referred to as the oldest club competition in football, the tournament's construction owes much of its development to two factors: firstly, the promotion of rugby and the RFU into a more popular institution and, secondly, the success of the Youdan Cup in Sheffield.

The first Youdan Cup Final in 1867 saw football reach new heights. Although played under Sheffield rules, the match between Hallam and Norfolk saw a record 3,000 spectators, each paying 3d, cram into Bramall Lane Cricket Ground.¹³ These numbers offered unwavering proof of football's huge popularity.¹⁴ It also becomes apparent that despite the FA being four years old by the beginning of the Youdan Cup, the large numbers of spectators in Sheffield demonstrates that the association game needed something to improve its own reputation.

¹³ *Sheffield Telegraph*, 6 March 1867

¹⁴ Adrian Harvey, *Football: The First Hundred Years* (London: Routledge, 2005)

Following the success of the Youdan Cup, secretary of the FA Charles Alcock launched his own competition. With no official league, a cup was the only way in which it could be decided who the best team in the association game was. Starting in November 1871, the tournament's early response was modest. Most reports were limited to scorelines with very little detail found within. Nevertheless, by the turn of the year, attitudes began to change as the competition reached its final stages. The final itself was previewed extensively by a number of leading newspapers, calling it a 'great event in the football world'.¹⁵

The first edition of the competition was won by The Wanderers at the Kennington Oval in south London. Meeting them in the final was the Royal Engineers, a team comprised wholly of military personnel. Winning 1-0 in front of a reported 2,000 spectators, the match was 'perfectly one-sided', due in part to the excellence of the Wanderers' side.¹⁶ Attendance may have been bigger, but for the one shilling admittance. A year later, the Wanderers would retain the trophy at Lillie Bridge before the Royal Engineers eventually emerged victorious in 1875.

Despite its modern success, some commentators are quick to argue that we should not overestimate the initial success of the FA Cup – indeed, only 15 clubs entered the inaugural competition.¹⁷ *The Morning Post*, although writing with a genuine excitement for the final, deemed the upcoming match as 'unsatisfactory'. With the Football Association not representing half of the football clubs in the country, it wouldn't provide a definitive answer to who was the strongest in the country.

Competition did help the game to grow, however. By 1872 the FA had in fact become 'large, extensive and powerful'.¹⁸

¹⁵ *The Morning Post*, 16 March 1872

¹⁶ *The Morning Post*, 18 March 1872

¹⁷ Matthew Taylor, *The Association Game* (London: Routledge, 2008)

¹⁸ *The Morning Post*, 16 March 1872

Sport was no more about playing for the love of the game. The will to win would soon outweigh antiquated beliefs of morality and honour around football. Clubs would spring up across the nation, particularly in the Midlands and further north. The lack of violence from within football, alongside the progressive Elementary Schools Act in 1870, meant the sport was to eventually be played in new schools across Britain. A new generation of footballers were about to take centre stage in football's incredible history.¹⁹

It would take ten years for the FA Cup to truly represent the whole nation, but once it did it would continue to grow to this day. Now, we see over 700 entrants each season from the Premier League to the lowest levels of the football pyramid. Through the FA Cup, football had begun to become the national sport, overtaking rugby's initial popularity. Without it, it is hard to see the subsequent development of the Football League and the general spread of the beautiful game to all corners of the globe.

19 Derek Birley, *Sport and the Making of Britain*, pp. 267-8