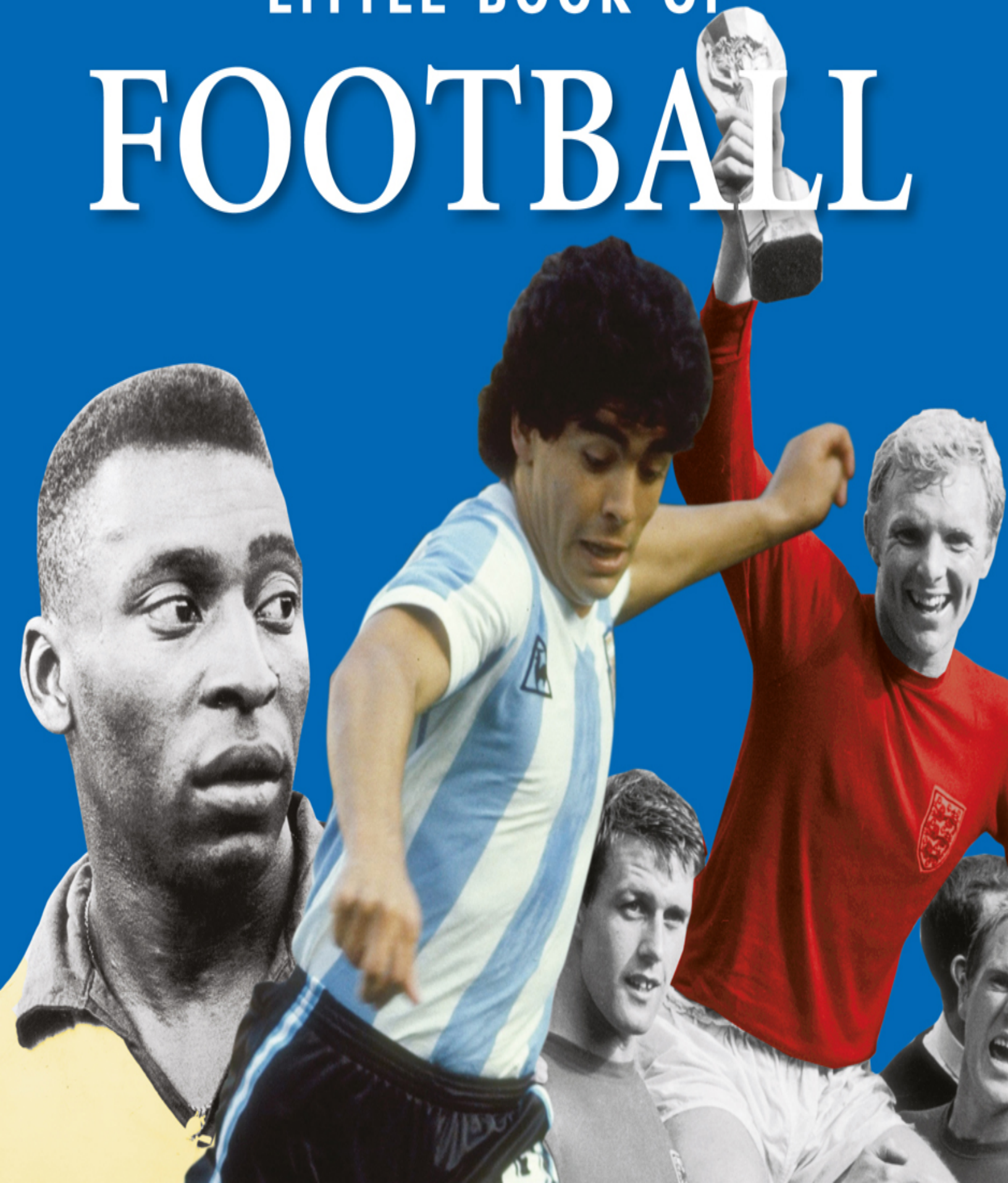


LITTLE BOOK OF FOOTBALL



THE LITTLE BOOK OF
FOOTBALL

Written by Michael Heatley

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Chapter 1

Origins of the Game

IT IS NOW WELL OVER A CENTURY since association football – also commonly known as soccer, to differentiate it first from rugby football, then American football – was first played in an organised fashion, much longer since the Romans played a ball-based contact sport. Yet here in the twenty-first century the game retains its position as the most popular in the world.

Its appeal is its simplicity. It can be improvised almost anywhere by any number of players, and requires a simple, spherical ball rather than a specially shaped one. It has been played by people of limited stature, five feet or less, and occasionally those of excessive height or weight. And with the objective simply to score a goal between two posts, rolled up coats or other markers, its rules are simple.

Britain can claim to have developed and formalised the rules of association football which, by and large, still hold sway the world over. Yet prior to its adoption by the gentry in the nineteenth century the game enjoyed a reputation as the sport of hooligans and rabble-rousers, with the participants in the average game outnumbering the crowds at many English lower-division games today. Several fixtures in the early history of football attained the status of annual rituals; Ashbourne, Derbyshire, Dorset's Corfe Castle and Scone in Scotland were among venues where an annual Shrove Tuesday fixture was observed.



Boys playing an informal game of football circa 1850

When Cambridge University introduced the game into the curriculum at the turn of the seventeenth century, even its detractors had to reconsider. But with a welter of different rules proliferating, these games were strictly intramural affairs. With the advent of the Industrial Revolution, few of the downtrodden working class had the time or energy to pursue such a physically demanding sport, and football passed into the hands of the leisured upper class.

Each school seemed to have its own special set of rules; at Rugby, handling (but not running in possession) was positively encouraged. Harrow played a recognisable form of today's game on grass, 11 players making up a team, while Winchester's goals extended the entire length of the goal line, like rugby's try line today. This situation would not last. The catalyst for change and standardisation was William Webb Ellis's legendary dash with the ball in 1823 that eventually gave rise to the game of rugby.



A group of boys playing football in the mid 1850s when few rules prevailed

The face of football has never been changed quite so radically as on 26 October 1863, when 11 southern English clubs each sent representatives to London's Freemason's Tavern in the west central district of Holborn. Their intent was to thrash out a commonly acceptable form of rules by which the game of football could be played.

An annual general meeting of the Football Association, as it was termed, was set for the last week in September, roughly setting the beginning of the traditional season.

The rules agreed by the FA included the maximum length and breadth of the pitch, the procedures for kicking off and defined terms such as a goal, throw-in and offside. Corners were effectively free kicks, taken 15 yards from the goal line opposite where the ball went out of play. The rugby tactic of 'making a mark' (catching the ball and making a mark with the heel to claim a free kick) remained. Passing the ball by hand was permitted if caught 'fairly or on the first bounce'. Yet the rules were strangely non-specific in such matters as number of players, the penalty for foul play or even the shape of the ball. Such matters were to be decided by agreement between the captains.

Rudimentary and incomplete as these rules were in themselves, they had the immediate effect of stimulating competition. An annual New Year fixture between Sheffield and Nottingham was inaugurated on 2 January 1865, Nottingham (now Notts County), the oldest current League club, having been founded three years earlier.

The game spread, no longer the exclusive preserve of the public schools yet by no means a working-class pastime. A crucial rule relaxed in 1867 was the provision that players in front of the ball were offside, thus reducing passing movements to lateral or backward directions. No wonder few goals were scored! This rule change took time to affect the pattern of play, which depended largely on individuals dribbling their way into a scoring position. Handling and catching the ball were soon abolished (save for the goalkeeper) and a tape was stretched between the posts (The first bar was introduced in 1882).

The first FA Cup Final was contested in 1872, before 2,000 paying spectators, by Wanderers and Royal Engineers. Wanderers managed just one goal, but it was enough. Within a few years, all clubs wished to take part – and by doing so accepted the FA rules of football which remain the basis by which the game is played throughout the world today. The dominant teams in the Cup's early years were the 'Gentlemen' or southerners, with Old Etonians (6), Wanderers (5), Royal Engineers and Oxford University (both 4) clocking up most Final appearances in the first dozen. Wanderers won the Cup in perpetuity after what remains one of only two hat-tricks of wins, between 1876 and 1878. The Cup was, however, returned to the Football Association on condition that no club could subsequently win it outright.



A drawing depicting opposing football teams sometime during the nineteenth century

The teams had settled to 11 players apiece – and it was accepted that only one player on either side, the goalkeeper, could handle the ball. Corner kicks from the intersection of touch and goal-line were generally introduced in 1872, although the Sheffield clubs had been using these for four years or so previously. As with children’s playground football, everyone wanted to be an attacker and the goalkeeper was typically covered by, at most, two defenders.



A goal is scored during an inter-university match between Oxford and Cambridge, around 1875

It was the Scots who first discovered the opportunities this offered, and their emphasis on team play saw them advance apace. They were also assisted by playing to consistent rules. The 2-3-5 formation evolved, with three of the forwards now dropping deeper as half-backs to provide an extra line of defence where necessary. The centre-half

acted as the supply route to the front line. This 'pyramid' style of play was employed by the Double (League and FA Cup)-winning Preston team in the League's first season, and their success spoke for itself.

One major problem with the offside rule was exploited by Newcastle defender Billy McCracken. He would move forward to play his opponents offside, knowing that there was still a covering man as well as the goalkeeper to foil the attacker even if he mistimed his run - which was not often. The law was changed so that players had to be between the man in possession and his opponents' goal line when the ball was played - a situation that left the defenders far less margin for error. In the season following the law change, the goal tally for the League's divisions rose from 4,700 to 6,373.

Penalties were introduced in September 1891 as a result of an incident during an FA Cup quarterfinal between Notts County and Stoke at Trent Bridge. County's Hendry produced an acrobatic goalkeeping save - unfortunately, however, he was the left-back. A free kick was awarded on the goal line, but goalkeeper Toone saved the point-blank shot. Since County's 1-0 win meant they reached the semi-final and later the Final, a public outcry provoked a change in the laws.



Football as played at Rugby school. The ball is round, but the goal posts are more reminiscent of rugby

While football was changing its rules and regulations, playing kit was undergoing its own metamorphosis. In the 1870s, for instance, a match programme was essential for player identification, the colour of stockings or cap being the only differentiating feature between men of the same team. Although numbering was not introduced until 1933, caps had long since fallen into disuse.

Stimulated by the 1866 game with Sheffield, the London-based Football Association determined to expand the game's influence into a wider area. Sheffield themselves joined in 1867, and other teams were quick to follow suit. The amazing expansion of the 1870s was due primarily to the effort of one Charles Alcock, elected at the age of 28 as Secretary of the Association. He devised the idea of international competition, inaugurating an annual England-Scotland fixture.

Meanwhile, Alcock had devised the ideal method of encouraging competitive play: the Football Association Cup, purchased for the princely sum of £20. Fifteen clubs entered for the 1871-72 competition, though one – Donington Grammar School in Lincolnshire – withdrew