



PART ONE 1869–1949

CHAPTER 1

THE BIRTH OF COLLEGE FOOTBALL 1869–1914

The year was 1869. It was ten years after abolitionist John Brown's infamous raid at Harpers Ferry in Virginia. It was four years after Confederate general Robert E. Lee surrendered to Union general Ulysses S. Grant at Appomattox Court House to end the Civil War. It was a year after the first all-professional baseball team, the Cincinnati Red Stockings, was formed. It was seven years before Custer's Last Stand and the publication of Mark Twain's most famous novel, *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*.

Eighteen-sixty-nine is an important year in the history of sports thanks in part to Rutgers athletes. On November 6, 1869, Rutgers played Princeton in New Brunswick, New Jersey, in the first-ever college football game. So began a sports tradition that has endured for more than 135 years.

Rutgers and Princeton share credit for kick-starting the sport of college football. Kick-starting is an excellent choice of words because American football's origin can be traced to two much older sports: soccer and rugby.

A game similar to modern soccer was played by the ancient Greeks and Romans. It was also played in a variety of forms by the Japanese, the Chinese, and the Aztec Indians. In 1823 English schoolboys at Rugby School converted traditional soccer into a new, exciting sport that adopted the name of the school where it was born. According to football folklore, the sport of rugby spontaneously burst on the scene when a youngster named William Webb Ellis tired of just booting the ball. Ellis scooped up the ball and began to run with it. Angry mates wanted the ball and tried to tackle Ellis to get it back. Thusly, rugby came into being.

In 1871 a football game that combined kicking and carrying the ball sprouted up on school and college campuses in the United States. Athletes at Harvard in Boston were the first college players to experiment with rugby-style football contests. Rugby-style football soon spread to Yale, Columbia, and Princeton. The first Rutgers-Princeton college football game was more like soccer than rugby. However, that didn't make the sports confrontation any less vigorous or violent.

The historic gridiron clash between the two rival New Jersey universities took place at the site of the Old Queen's College campus, which sits on banks rising high above the



A statue of an early Rutgers football player stands along the Scarlet Walk, the path players and coaches take into Rutgers Stadium before a game. (Courtesy Melanie J. Pellowski)

Raritan River. Originally, Rutgers was known as Queen’s College. It was renamed Rutgers in 1825 in honor of Colonel Henry Rutgers, a Revolutionary War hero, who served as a Queen’s College trustee.

The game was played on a field where the old Rutgers gymnasium (lovingly known as the “Barn” to Rutgers alumni) is located. Even though the field is now mostly covered by an asphalt parking lot, those who pass by should realize that the dirt beneath their feet is hallowed sports ground, because it is the place where college football was born.

What prompted the first college football game to be scheduled is a matter of conjecture. It was not the brainchild of a farsighted college athletic director who envisioned the vast financial rewards generated by modern gridiron competitions. The closest thing the Rutgers Queensmen had to a gridiron mentor in the late 1860s was the Reverend Chester D. Hartranft, the pastor of a Dutch Reformed Church in New Brunswick. Reverend Hartranft was a self-confessed sportsman who enjoyed football. He convinced a group of young Rutgers athletes to pool their funds to buy a communal football to use for practice sessions (even back then, outfitting a football team was expensive). Reverend C. D. Hartranft spent many hours working out with his energetic squad of young footballers. The Queensmen had already adopted scarlet for their team color. Their university mascot was a fierce fighting bird known as “the Chanticleer.” Reverend Hartranft’s enthusiastic Scarlet squad included Douwe Ditmars Williamson (class of 1870), John Henry Wyckoff (class of 1871) and William James Leggett (class of 1872).

The idea of a football match against Princeton University may have been sparked by a simple, compelling motive: Revenge! Princeton had defeated Rutgers 40 to 2 in a baseball game played between the two schools on May 5, 1866. It was a bitter defeat seared in the



Coach Greg Schiano leads players down the Scarlet Walk. (Courtesy Rutgers Athletic Communications)

minds of all loyal sons of Rutgers. The newly formed Scarlet football squad decided the time for sports payback had arrived. The members of Rutgers’ first football team held a meeting. The group, which counted Ezra D. Delamater (class of 1871), Charles H. Steele (class of 1872), and Abram I. Martine (class of 1873) among its ranks, voted William Leggett their captain and spokesperson. Leggett promptly composed a letter challenging athletes from Princeton to a series of three football games. The challenge was dispatched to Princeton without delay.

Princeton’s response to the Scarlet challenge was quick and decisive. The athletes from Old Nassau held their own team meeting and elected William S. Gummere (class of 1870) their captain. Gummere was an excellent choice to lead the Princeton squad. Later in life he became a New Jersey chief justice. Gummere sent a formal reply to Leggett’s challenge and the date of the two schools’ historic meeting on the field of play was set for November 6, 1869.

When the Princeton team arrived by train in New Brunswick on November 6, the squad was met and warmly welcomed by the entire Rutgers team. The Princeton footballers were cordially entertained by Rutgers players while the captains sat down to hammer out the rules for their game later that afternoon.

The base of the statue along the Scarlet Walk commemorates the first college football game, which was played across the Raritan River on the main campus of Rutgers College in New Brunswick, New Jersey. (Courtesy Melanie J. Pellowski)

