

How the laws came to be written

There were two main reasons for the founding of the Rugby Football Union on 26 January 1871 - a chronic problem, and an acute one.

The latter came from a challenge by 5 leading Scottish clubs to an international rugby match. This was published in the press on 24 December 1870. Somebody had to accept, and select the team.

However the grumbling appendix of the game had been the wide variety of rules in use across the country. In 1863 the Football Association had been founded, which, after some hesitation, banned both running with the ball, and hacking ie kicking a players legs as a means of tackling him. Rules existed to say that this should not be done above the knee, nor from behind, nor with the heel, and that projecting plates etc on the boots were not allowed; but every club had its own version of these, and some had dispensed with the practice altogether. Other variations abounded, so it was high time to create one agreed body of rules or laws (the terms were used interchangeably at that time). The first attempt at this had been by Arthur Pell at Cambridge University, back in 1839, but now, in 1871, the time was ripe for some surgery.

The RFU delegated this job to three Old Rugbeians - AE Rutter, the newly elected President, EC Holmes, and LJ Maton. Progress was slow, and they were nowhere near finished by the time of the first ever rugby international on 27 March 1871. Not that it mattered - the match was played in Edinburgh, and so basically under Scottish rules. The two sides had to agree on certain points before the match started, just as happened in ordinary club fixtures.

Fortuitously(!), Maton broke his leg playing rugby, so the others promised to keep him supplied with tobacco, while he was laid up, provided he attempted the first draft. This he did, in the law chambers of Holmes, and the legal character of the result is reflected in such details as the calligraphic twirls at the end of some lines - to deter any forger who might try to insert something.

There are also various marginal notes, crossings out, and alterations, some signed by other members of the committee. In the main, however, they are the work of one man. The basis was still the game as played at Rugby School, though with a number of differences. For example, hacking and tripping were abolished; and the tortuous process for bringing the ball out to convert a try was (optionally) reduced to its modern essentials..

The early minute books, and a formal copy of the early laws have disappeared, so my transcription tries to amalgamate the corrections with the first version, relying in places on later comments when the laws were modified in 1874. We know the laws were accepted by the full committee on 22 June 1871, and brought into force by a Special General Meeting 2 days later, in plenty of time for the new season.

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