

A Brief History of the Laws of the Game

The Laws of the Game are incredibly brilliant. They must be because they provide us with a fun sport which millions of people enjoy. They are also incredibly dull, in their presentation, enough to switch off anyone searching for quick comprehension. Dull? Yes, but only if they are read as written. A brief glance at the rulebook shows just seventeen rules to govern the play but which, amazingly, do not include a single reference to the "Game of Football"!

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What we have is a skeleton, the bare bones of an exciting sport full of action, color, and passion, touching on the whole range of human emotions. Not easy to wrap these ingredients into an exciting document expounding formal procedures, duties, infringements, and sanctions. Another barrier to instant assimilation is the need for multi-language translation for worldwide application.

Scratch below the surface

And yet, there is a great mine of golden wisdom and commonsense in those dry and dusty old words and phrases. Scratch below the surface and all is revealed! But how? We will deal with that in a moment. For now, we ask a group of young players what they want from the rules. This is a summary of their views; "We want the chance to play well, without getting hurt, and we want to enjoy ourselves."

That is exactly what the formal rules do and why they are so incredibly brilliant! Brilliant? Yes, because they are not just ordinary words, arranged in a certain order, but words encasing the basic ethics of fair play laid down by footballers over 130 years ago, 1863.

A cold winter's night in London. A handful of soberly dressed men, some bearded, sat at a table in the smoky gloom of oil lamps in the Freemasons Tavern, engaged in heated discussion to agree on a common set of rules to play the game among just a few clubs. They, too, were players wanting to play well, without getting hurt and to enjoy a game of football. Their main concern was to decide how the game should be played in its physical sense and they wrote that down. In terms of moral behavior it was not necessary to write anything because they were all gentlemen ingrained with strict Victorian social manners. They understood how they were expected to behave.

What the Laws do not say

The fourteen "Laws" of 1863 read much like today's version - providing a skeleton guide for the action on the field. Although the laws have been chopped and changed the basic ethics survive. The wisdom

in today's laws is not in what they say but in what they do not say. To read them as they are written is no pleasure. If we read between the lines, using a simple key, we can unlock the original principles which give the ordinary words a new meaning, putting flesh and muscle, energy and vitality, on the bones of the skeleton. To do this we identify the spirit behind the written rule by stating the basic principles as expressed by the young players:

Equality: "We want the (equal) chance to play well ..."

Safety: "without getting hurt "

Enjoyment: "and we want to enjoy ourselves."

Equality, safety, and enjoyment. Three simple principles, locked into ordinary words. We can unlock them by applying another ordinary key word - Why?

As this series progresses we will touch on the origins of the laws, how they have developed in time and their status in the modern game. In particular, we shall question the reasoning behind certain statements to discover the basic spirit of the game in applying the three principles in actual play.

The rules will then take on a fresh meaning, relating more to the real Game of Football.

Make it easy

Whatever your interest in football, the easy way to look at the rules is to break them down. For example, 13 of the 17 rules have no meaning until the first four have been observed. Before the fun can begin a game needs players, a ball and space (Laws 1 to 4). Four game rules deal with the basic checks of duration of play, how play is started and restarted, ball in or out of play and scoring (Laws 7 to 10). Another five cover procedures to restart at free kicks and other dead ball situations (Laws 13 to 17). That leaves only four, the vital rules focused on live action. Law 11, the technical rule of Offside: Law 12, to curb physical and moral behavior, and Laws 5 & 6, the supervisors of the whole scene.

Football theatre

Every football match is pure sports theatre. We have the actors, the directors, a stage, an outline script and, sometimes, an audience. Although the players are the center of attraction we look first at the stage on which they perform their skills. Theatres have various shapes but, for football, Law 1 insists, "The field of play must be rectangular." Why? The game can be played on a square or even a circular field, so what is special about a rectangle? Where do we see

the basic principles? We do not need to search too hard for the reasoning. We know the main object of the game is to put the ball through the goals. A rectangular field guides the flow of play between these targets to maintain interest and enjoyment.

The football stage comes in various sizes, allowing for the availability of suitable space. The 1863 version could be a maximum 200 x 100 yards wide. Today, it is rare to see a field to the current maximum of 130 x 100 yards. However, fields of minimum size, 100 x 50 yards, are often squeezed into scarce common land to allow more people to enjoy games of football. International matches are usually staged on fields averaging 115 x 75 yards (105 x 68 meters). Law 1 is silent on playing surfaces. Very wisely because players are free to enjoy football on any available surface, be it grass; sand, dirt, plastic, concrete, whatever. Basic principles guide the choice to play on a surface which allows players to play well, without getting hurt, and to have fun.

The field of play must be rectangular. The length of the touchline must be greater than the length of the goal line.

Dimensions: International Matches:

Length minimum 90 m (100 yards) Length minimum 100 m (110 yards)

maximum 120 m (130 yards) maximum 110 m (120 yards)

Width minimum 45 m (50 yards) Width minimum 64 m (70 yards)

maximum 90 m (100 yards) maximum 75 m (80 yards)

The decor

Field markings have hardly changed since 1902. The only significant movement added a 10 yards radius arc to the penalty area in 1937. Lines need not be any special color, just distinctive. White on grass is fine, blue, or red on snow quite acceptable. The rule provides for zones of reference to guide players with procedures in starting and restarting the game (center circle and goal areas) and for defending players to take extra care in front of their goal (the penalty area). These zones are of the same size regardless of the dimensions of the outer boundaries.

Field equipment, comprising goals and corner flagposts, must meet certain safety demands to reduce danger to players. The size of the goals has remained unchanged for over 120 years, demanding skill from attacking players to put the ball through them and from goalkeepers to keep it out. Goal nets are optional to avoid imposing expense on

low-budget teams. Flag posts at the field corners are clearly to help decide whether the ball passes over the goal line or touchline. The minimum height (5feet), and the post tops not to be pointed, recognizes the danger of contact during play. Shorter posts can cause serious injury, as illustrated.

Corner flag posts are compulsory. At the 1974 World Cup Final, between Germany and the Netherlands, the referee Jack Taylor was about to blow his whistle for the kick-off, when he was alerted to the fact that the corner posts had not been placed after the opening ceremony. Had this been noticed only after the first minute penalty kick award to the Netherlands, the match could have been abandoned and restarted!

Flag posts placed outside the field at the halfway line are optional, being a relic from early days when there was no halfway line and goalkeepers were allowed to handle the ball inside the whole of their own half. These posts are disappearing without fuss.

The stage is set

Law 1 abounds with formal statements and dry parameters. As the above few examples show, it is based on a sensible application of principles to provide an agreeable backdrop for the football story to unfold. So, the stage is set, the actors are ready to perform to create their own dreams with a sporting troupe of football friends. They all want to play well in a healthy game and have plenty of fun.

In the next episode of this series we shall take a closer look at the players in our football theatre and the props they use to create their fun.

Evolution of The Field of Play - 1863 to 1937

1863 No bar and no lines on the ground. No minimum lengths and breadths specified.

1891 These changes followed the introduction of the penalty-kick in 1891. The theoretical 18-yard line was not specified by Law.

1902 After three years of discussion the penalty box was adopted, and a halfway line became compulsory.

1937 The penalty arc of a radius of 10 yards from the penalty-spot was introduced.

The Magic Formula: $1B + 2K = F$.

Football's magic formula, worthy of Einstein, needs no proof by a mathematical genius. Simplicity itself, 1 Ball + 2 Kids = Fun, can be seen in action anywhere in the world - in backstreets, on scrubland, hot beaches or cold snow - come rain or shine.

Right now, millions of kids are chasing a ball creating their fantasy worlds while running, jumping, kicking, scrambling, amid shrieks of giggles and laughter. A joy to behold as they invent and respect their own unwritten rules. The true heart of football beats strongly here where lifelong passions for the game are born at an early age.

The ball - Law 2

In those fun games, the ball may be anything - a bundle of rags, a carton, an old shoe, a can, a paper cup - any object that can be animated into an exciting game far removed from the dull realities of life.

One of these realities is that Law 2 of the formal, let's say organized, Game of Football insists that the ball shall be "spherical." Why? If we can play and enjoy football with any shaped object, why restrict the choice to an expensive sphere which must be "made of leather or other suitable material", conform to limits in size, weight, pressure, and bear official FIFA stamps of approval?

Why? A brilliant choice! In the mid-19th century, when English colleges had different ideas of ball shape, the Brighton College Football Song made a neat point;

"And ETON may play with a pill if they please
And HARROW may stick to their Cheshire cheese
And RUGBY their outgrown egg, but here
Is the perfect game of the perfect sphere."

Neat, yes, but it does not say what qualities a "perfect sphere" has over other shapes. For most people a sphere has pleasant associations, perhaps as a symbol of the sun, the moon, religious ceremonies, etc.

A spherical ball is a smooth and friendly object. In the hands of a child it is never still, being rolled, bounced, kicked. The slightest touch transforms it into a live and dynamic plaything. Other shapes do

not command such fascination.

The principal quality of a "perfect sphere" is that it helps players to play well. Reactions are predictable, it mirrors the skill input of every touch, rewarding good play or showing faults of individual technique in need of refinement.

How players display their skill is the magnetic focus in football theatre, whether it involves contact with the ball, meeting challenges of opponents or moving into tactical positions. Superstars of the sport owe their fame to the spherical object. Without it Pele, Cruyff, Ronaldo, Zidane, and many others, who have thrilled us with their talents, would be just ordinary people.

For centuries, games related to football have been played with an object about the size of a man's head. Understandable, perhaps, when history tells us that the 8th century Saxons celebrated victories over the Vikings by kicking the severed head of an enemy chief through the streets. For the modern game the first limits of size (27 to 28 inches circumference) were put into the laws in 1883. For seventeen years before that the size had been based on the Lillywhite's No. 5 ball. Today's Law 2 retains the same dimensions.

Ancient balls were made from pigs' bladders or skins stuffed with feathers. Later, inflatable rubber bladders housed in leather casings became standard. Since 1889 the weight of the ball has always been specified as that ruling "at the start of play." Without waterproofing, leather balls became heavy when wet and sometimes dangerous to head because of protruding lacings. Absorption of moisture is no longer a real problem. The original limits of weight, 12 to 15 ounces, were raised in 1937 to 14 to 16 oz and have remained so.

As to ball pressure, optimum performance is related to design and method of manufacture. Law 2 allows a wide margin, 0.6 to 1.1 atmosphere. What it does not require, and this is not such a brilliant omission, is that ball pressure should also be related to the conditions of play for each match. Many games are spoiled because the pressure is unsuitable. A hard ball, on a hard surface or in strong wind, is difficult to control. Unusual errors of judgement, higher frequency of dangerous situations and ball out of play causes frustration and loss of enjoyment among players.

A soft ball on a muddy surface can become a dull object and reduce potential for enjoyable play. The wide choice of pressure gives scope for marrying the ball condition to the conditions of play on the day.

Modern footballs are as near to a "perfect sphere" as technology can achieve to help the players do not play well. They must conform to standards of safety and pressure so that players do not get hurt. Combining the formal specifications of Law 2 with FIFA quality controls provides all players with a chance to enjoy themselves in "...the perfect game of the perfect sphere".

The players - Law 3

Our simple formula for football fun applies to any kick-about games involving two or more players. There is no upper limit but, when formal team matches are arranged, the current Law 3 changes the formula to; 1 Ball + 2x11 Players = Fun

Why 22 players? Could we get more fun with a larger or smaller cast in our football play? There is no special merit in this number. Early rules did not say how many players constituted a team. In the mid-19th century it was the accepted practice of heads of teams (captains with respected authority) to agree to eleven-a-side matches. The practice was recognized in the Rules of the Football Association Challenge Cup, founded 1871, but was only put into formal law in 1923. Today, Law 3 allows a maximum of eleven and minimum of seven players in each team.

A major reason for hesitating to fix team numbers was the complication of substitutions. It had been the custom for years in amateur matches to allow substitutions for players injured during a game, to maintain numerical equality. It was also customary to withdraw one player if an injured opponent could not continue and a replacement was not available. Fair play indeed!

Substitutes were not allowed in competitions as it was thought that the character of the game would suffer. The arrival of televised football influenced a change of mind when several important matches, e.g. FA Cup Finals, were spoiled by images of injured players continuing to play although obviously handicapped. For youth competitions only a 1956 law amendment allowed substitutes for a goalkeeper and one other player provided both were injured during play. Two years later the door was finally opened to all competitions, subject to the approval of national associations.

The qualification of injury was dropped in 1967 and, although the spirit of the original concession remains, the use of up to three substitutions for reasons other than injury has become common practice. The character of the game has certainly changed, some say not for the better, because players have less chance to enjoy a complete match.

Also, at professional level, the current system favors rich clubs able to afford large squads of quality players.

One of the eleven players must be a goalkeeper who, as the first definition required, "is the defender nearest to his own goal and shall be at liberty to use his hands for the protection of the goal."

Up to 1912 the handling of the ball privilege applied to the whole of the defending team's half of the field. It was then reduced to the penalty area and has remained so. In the modern game, the role of the goalkeeper has developed from the single task of protecting his goal to that of a specialist team player capable of influencing tactical play. Apart from designating this one player, the law is silent on the roles of the other ten. A brilliant omission which allows complete freedom for coaches and players to combine individual skills with imagination, spontaneity and flair!

Players' equipment - Law 4

Changing from mundane everyday clothes into colorful football costume satisfies a natural desire to dress up to play a role. Pre-match dressing-room atmosphere adds to the excitement of the performance to come. Football is not a dangerous sport but the opening paragraph of Law 4 requires every player to accept responsibility not to "use equipment or wear anything which is dangerous to himself or another player." Elements of danger include jewelry ornaments (earrings, pendants, etc.), plaster casts on limbs, anything which could cause injury. Players do not want to get hurt.

Football fashion insists on a jersey (from the days of knitted garments) or a shirt but Law 4 does not require these to be colored. Yet another brilliant omission which allows football to bloom in a kaleidoscope of exciting color! Only the goalkeepers must wear colors which distinguish themselves from the other players and officials. Shorts are compulsory and are as they sound - short, far removed from the breeches or knickerbockers which were ruled out of order in 1904 if they did not cover the knees! Thermal undershorts, if they are in the same color as the shorts, are permitted to help players enjoy the game in very cold weather.

Most injuries affect the legs below the knees. Shinguards, invented by S. Widdowson, became commonplace from 1874 but were not made compulsory, and covered by stockings, until 1990. The cause of most injuries, players' footwear, has had regular attention from the early heavy boots, fitted with steel toecaps and nailed leather studs, to the lightweight and supple foot coverings of today.

Until 1990, Law 4 was a tedious regulation of shapes, sizes, materials and quantity of studs and bars, to guide manufacturers and officials. The law was then rewritten simply to place the responsibility on players to choose equipment with care to comply with the overall message of the first paragraph.

Let the fun begin

We are almost ready to open the curtain on our football play. The first four of the 17 rules have shaped the components - the stage, the actors, their costumes and props. Up to six other people need mentioning before the fun begins. We shall meet them in the next part of this series and get the ball rolling. Our football play "The Match" is nearly ready to go. Pre curtain-up ambience is set with an overture, at least at big performances.

The beginners, players in colorful costumes, have assembled in two teams at opposite ends of the stage and are flexing muscles, rehearsing skills with a practice ball. The rules say nothing about this 'warm-up' activity. It is traditional; helps the 'play well' factor and calms stage fright nerves.

Up to six other actors make up our cast. One is the law enforcer, named 'the Referee', whose role is scripted as Law 5. He may have two helpers; 'Assistant Referees' equipped with small flags (Law 6), plus a 'Fourth Official' if the production can support a bigger cast. This official has a special role to help the Referee and, sometimes, to be a stand-in for the leading part. Effectively, the officials form the 'third team' and are often dressed in a costume of funereal black.

Many amateur productions have problems finding even one of these four principal officials because of the world shortage of volunteers for this demanding, and rarely popular, role.

The "Extras"

The other two are directors of team play with the title of 'Coach'. Mentioned in Law 3, Decision 2, their costume is not prescribed by the rules but they must be identifiable to the Referee.

As the plot unfolds we will see how these non-players are intended to help the main actors to play well, without getting hurt, and to have fun.

Our football theatre analogy would not be complete without an audience.

This can be down to one man and his dog, out for a stroll in the park, or up to the 200,000 fanatics who stormed the gates of Wembley Stadium to see the 1923 F.A. Cup Final (West Ham United v Bolton Wanderers). The positive influence of large audiences on the performances of the players can be enormous but, curiously, the rules do not recognize the existence of these "extras."

Until the 1997 rewrite of the rules the only references to 'spectators' at football matches were concerned with 'interference, misconduct or misdemeanors!' The current rules are no better with only one reference, to 'spectator interference' in limiting the liability of referees in deciding whether or not to abandon a match (Law 5, Decision 1).

Why is this so? Probably because the Laws of the Game have been devised, from their inception, for the players of the sport. Early rulemakers could not, in their wildest imagination, have foreseen the phenomenal growth of spectator football and the status the game has achieved in world society during the 20th century. "The People's Game" is an apt title for it touches the lives of millions. However, there is much to be done to help the masses understand the game better and gain more enjoyment. But that is another chapter in another football story.

"A bloodthirsty and murderous game"

A description of "football" worthy of a Shakespeare tragedy? Or perhaps the title of a Hitchcock film? Not quite. It was a commentary on an ancient form of mob football, or the Italian version 'calcio' which continues to spill blood in an annual ceremony in Florence. Mercifully, it does not apply to the modern game, thanks to brilliant rules! Brilliant in protecting players from getting hurt but not so brilliant in setting down the plot of the game.

Today's rules rely on a general understanding of the traditional mechanics of play observed for over a century. Fine if one is old enough, but as tradition fades new generations attracted to the sport need to be informed of the real Game of Football. Where else should they look other than in the rules which govern the play? At present such guidance is missing.

What do we hope to see, and feel, during the performance? The scenario could read like this: "The match." A sporting contest between two teams of eleven players who match their collective skills to move a ball through the opponents' goal. The players use their feet and any other part of the body, except arms or hands, to put the ball through the goal. The team scoring the higher number of goals is declared the winner. If no goals are scored, or the number is equal, the match is drawn.

Within this simple context our hope is to witness a sporting contest, played fairly, and to see the best team win (providing that we have no bias to one team which may exclude this ideal!). We hope to see exciting skills with the ball, athletic grace, intelligent running and passing movements, pace, goals scored with panache. We will feel emotions of suspense and drama as the play ebbs and flows. We will participate, by voice and gesture, to express our likes or dislikes about the performance. We will not know the result, or the heroes and villains of the play, until the final curtain. We hope to leave the football theatre satisfied with our moment of pleasure in sport and counting the days to the next performance.

How long will fun last? Law 7

Kids don't need telling. They will escape from the real world and play for hours until exhaustion overcomes enjoyment or the boy who owns the ball decides to go home! Busy adults have to program their lives and know when football can be fitted in. Early rules made no mention of a time limit until the first representative match was arranged between London (The F.A) and the Sheffield Association in 1866. Both sides agreed a fixed timing; "Play to commence at 3 p.m. and terminate at half past 4 p.m.".

The duration of 90 minutes play became the custom but it was not until 1897 that it passed into the rulebook on approval by the newly formed International F.A. Board, which has since determined all matters of football law.

Today, it is not so easy to plan your after-football life because the current Law 7 (Duration of the Match) provides for an interval of up to 15 minutes plus allowances for all time lost through substitutions; assessment of injuries; removal of injured players; wasting time; and any other cause, at the complete discretion of the Referee. In addition, some competition rules may require two further periods if a clear result has not been achieved. Then there may be a tiebreaker ceremony of kicks from the penalty mark, a much criticized procedure which decided the winner of the 1994 World Cup Final. The Brazilians were ecstatic but all Italy went into mourning due to one unsuccessful kick.

How long will the performance last? As you see you need to know something about the competition rules which may stretch that "3 p.m. to half past 4 p.m." limit! Most games end after two 45-minute periods, plus the interval of 15 minutes and a few minutes of time allowances. A total of nearly two hours but only count on about half of this for live action. As previously explained, a moving ball is the magnetic focal

point of play. It dictates all action, challenging players to show their skills in a duel as fascinating as the contest between players for its possession. We want a non-stop performance, as children do, but there are enforced interruptions which eat into those 90 minutes. An example; the 64 World Cup matches played in France 1998 averaged 62 min. 38 sec. of real action ball in play time.

Live ball - dead ball: Law 9

Every football match boils down to just two elements. The ball is either in play - live ball, or is not - dead ball. Law 9 (The Ball in and out of Play) is very brief. The ball is live until either it crosses a boundary line or the game is stopped by the Referee. It then becomes a dead ball.

It also says that the ball remains live if it touches the Referee or Assistant Referees when they are on the field. Effectively, the officials are considered equivalent to moving goalposts! To bring a dead ball back to life depends on how it died! Six of our 17 laws deal with revival processes to put it back into play (No.8 and 13 to 17). Enforced stoppages can mount up to an average of 108 in World Cup matches and to 136 for junior amateur games. Why such a wide difference?

Clearly, professionals have fewer problems keeping the ball in play due, mainly, to larger and less exposed playing areas, plus higher skill levels.

Match procedures: Laws 8 and 13 to 17

The curtain rises on a traditional ceremony to decide the beginning of Act 1. Guided by Law 8 (The Start and Restart of Play) the Referee calls together the two team leaders, known as captains but not mentioned in the law book, and produces a coin. No question of payment! A simple means of deciding the direction of play by tossing it. The winning captain chooses which goal his side will attack.

The other side will have first kick at the ball, the kick-off, from the center of the field unimpeded by their opponents (the center-circle marked as in Law 1 is a clear reference line).

It is not a disadvantage to lose the toss because a 1997 rule change allows the kicker to score by kicking the ball directly into the opponents' goal. Quite possible on short fields of play and/or against a sleepy goalkeeper! The other side has this chance by kicking-off in Act 2. Whenever a goal is scored the play is restarted with a kick-off taken by the team losing the goal. One condition, which must be

observed, is that the kicker is not allowed to touch the ball a second time before it has touched another player. This frees the ball to other players and is a condition common to all restarts.

Another method of restarting, seen about once every ten matches, is for the Referee to drop the ball after play is stopped for a serious injury or an unusual incident not covered by the rules.

"GO - OO - OO - AA - LL - LL!"

A goal! Guaranteed to animate any match, bringing tears of joy to one side and misery to the other. In the park the dog might bark approval but for the big matches on TV whole nations will rise to salute the hero of the moment. Law 10 describes "The Method of Scoring" in four lines. It is a goal if 'the whole of the ball passes over the goal line, between the goalposts and under the crossbar' providing that the scoring team have not committed any offence in so doing. Rather dull for an emotional highlight of the match...

Historically, goals were recorded by "scoring" a notch in a goalpost with an axe. Today, after a team 'wins' a goal the mark is "scored" in the Referee's notebook! The televisors would pay a fortune to screen the old method! Frequent restarts are Free Kicks (average 45 per match) awarded as a punishment for offences, so they are not free - for nothing!

Following the original 1863 definition, which required the offending team to observe a 10 yards distance from the ball, they are intended as free-from obstruction-kicks. Tension rises when the free kick is near to goal as defending players employ delaying tactics and form a wall to obstruct the kick. Law 13 (Free Kicks) allows for a direct free kick, from which a goal may be scored if the ball goes directly into the opposing goal, or an indirect free kick where the ball must be touched by another player before a goal can be scored. The law describes various procedures relating to the position of the kick e.g., inside or outside of a penalty area, special advice for goalkeepers and sanctions if the rule is not correctly applied.

The Penalty Kick: Law 14

The plot takes a dramatic twist when the Referee decides to stop play and restart with a penalty kick. The drama involves a duel between two opponents, the kicker, and the goalkeeper, at 12 yards with a 90% chance of a score. One goal, a penalty kick, decided the 1990 World Cup Final when Andreas Brehme converted for Germany against Argentina, five minutes from the end of play.

At least half of the players and the audience disagree with the decision and vent their feelings against the law enforcer. The fact is that a defender has committed a serious offence inside his team's penalty area.

Law 14 sets down the means of retribution chosen in 1891 to punish abuses of the rules by professional players e.g., handling the ball to stop a goal. Gentleman amateurs ignored the rule, as it implied a slur on their ethics of play, even to instructing the goalkeeper to stand at a corner post and leaving the goal undefended. Lawmakers countered, insisting he must be between the goalposts but could advance up to six yards before the kick. However, as too many penalties were frustrated, a 1905 rule placed the goalkeeper 'on his own goal line until the ball is kicked'.

Twenty four years later, 'without moving his feet' was inserted but this restriction was eroded over many years. When illegal movement along the goal line became common practice, ignored by referees at 70% of penalty kicks, the lawmakers accepted defeat and omitted it from the 1997 rewrite. Today the goalkeeper must not advance from his goal line but abuses are frequent.

Out of bounds: Laws 15-16-17

The action has to stop when the ball leaves the stage. To get it back simply and quickly is the function of the last three rules. The means are throw-ins from the touchlines and kicks from the goal or corner areas.

Touchlines are so named from the 1863 rule which awarded a throw-in to the team of the first player to touch the ball. Reasonable then but it became dangerous when the first one-man audience arrived on the scene with his dog who wanted to join in the scramble for the ball! Better to give the ball to the opponents of the player who put it out. Decided 1895, unchanged since.

The most frequent restart (80 recorded in one amateur game), the throw-in must be taken from where the ball crossed the line. If not, it is forfeited to the opposing team. Originally the ball was thrown in with one hand, similar to the rugby method, at right angles to the line. Later, the thrower could choose any direction. The two-hand throw we see today was adopted in 1882 because some players had developed great skill in throwing the ball unreasonably long distances. William Gunn, an English international, could hurl the perfect sphere the whole length of the field. Now, the thrower must face the field; keep feet on or outside the touchline; deliver the ball with both hands from behind and over the head in one movement. A goal cannot be scored directly from a throw-in.

Three rules apply to the ball crossing the goal line. When it goes through the goal legitimately the restart is a kick off (Law 8) as already mentioned. Otherwise, it is a goal kick (Law 16), or a corner kick (Law 17) depending on whether an attacking player or a defender last touched the ball.

Goal kicks can be from 10 to 35 depending on game level and conditions. The ball is kicked from anywhere inside the goal area. Opponents remain outside the penalty area and the ball must leave the penalty area to be in play. Another 1997 rule change allows a goal to be scored if the ball goes directly into the other goal - a rare possibility indeed.

Although corner kicks are less frequent (zero to 20) they are more dramatic, often leading to goals when the attacking team mass several players in front of goal. The ball is kicked from the nearest corner with opponents not nearer than 10 yards (aided by an optional reference mark on the goal line introduced in 1995). A goal may be scored direct from a corner kick.

The story so far

With actors and 'extras' in place "The Match" has kicked off. We have studied the structure of the play; noted that interruptions eat up nearly one third of "play time"; analyzed elements common to all matches; described basic procedures to restart the action. Some of these incite drama, others are routine. All contribute to the scenario.

The purpose of each rule previously covered in this series is clear. The components needed to start play (Laws 1 to 4); control (Laws 5 and 6); procedures governing the ball in and out of play, timing etc. (Laws 7 to 10, 13 to 17); all contribute to understanding the desired conduct of play. Just two more complete the scenario. Law 12, which prescribes physical and moral disciplines, will be examined in the final article. Here, we look at Law 11 (Offside) and explain why it is the most brilliant of all seventeen laws.

As written, Law 11 blandly sets down the elements to judge players liable to be in an offside decision. It gives no clue as to its purpose so, why is it there? The first point to make is that it is the only law which relates to the positions of players when the ball is in play. It is concerned with the tactics or strategy of play. Morally, to be offside is a form of cheating. Kids understand this in their fun games. They do not like the one who just stands close to the goalkeeper waiting to score easy goals. They know nothing of the offside law but to them this attitude is not fair play. The Eton College offside rule

of 1862 shared this philosophy viz. "A player is considered to be 'sneaking' when only three or less opponents are before him..." In those days 'sneaking' was undesirable social behavior committed by mean and worthless people. Offside is for fair play!

Morals apart, the law of Offside has an enormous influence on practical play. How so? Because its presence has shaped the game into the exciting world sport we enjoy today. Let's see how...

Football is a team game where the efforts of a group of individuals are combined to achieve an objective. This definition applies to many other activities e.g., business, politics, medicine etc. Each player is expected to contribute personal skills and help develop a team spirit, a feeling of pride, loyalty, and comradeship which enables people to work well together. The concept of teamwork and 'offside' is not modern. Backtrack two thousand years when Roman generals organized games of "harpastrum," a form of mock battle to train soldiers in disciplined warfare. Equal forces attempted to capture a target by moving a ball to and behind the enemy base line, employing physical strength and tactics to outwit opponents. A basic strategy was for unity in advancing behind the ball. Any soldier stranded in front of it was considered off-the-strength of his unit (off-the-side/offside), out of the battle (out-of-play), until returning behind the ball.

Fast forward to the 19th century. Several English schools developed a rugby/football game from its ancestor, a rough street version of "harpastrum." It retained Roman principles by including a rule that players combine to advance behind the ball. Specifically, the 1856 Cambridge Rules stated, "No player is allowed to loiter between the ball and the adversaries' goal".

At Uppingham School a player was "...out-of-play immediately he is in front of the ball and must return behind the ball as soon as possible" (1860).

Tactical development

Because a player could not receive the ball from a forward pass, a basic tactic was to obtain possession and pierce defenses by dribbling the ball in chevron or diagonal formations. Some players became famous for their dribbling skills. One, Reverend Vidal, scored three goals without opponents touching the ball in a match where the side winning a goal also restarted play in the center of the field! Impossible today, but we can name many stars whose artistry on the football stage has had us jumping from our seats.

A personal favorite is a man who became a legend in his own time as a player and, later, as an ambassador for the game worldwide. Crowned The Wizard of the Dribble, Sir Stanley Matthews thrilled us during 34 years as a professional, from 16 to 50 years of age, with Stoke City, Blackpool, and England. Lean in physique, quicksilver in action, idolized by millions, Stan remained a shy, modest man. Stan was a winger who knew how to play to the offside law. His role was to take the ball past the defense to the goal line so that supporting teammates could not be offside. A precise center to the head of "Dixie" Dean or Tommy Lawton had defenses in panic every time.

The early dribbling game was not effective for long. Defenses countered by descending en masse to smother the player in possession. A more flexible version of offside, favored by Charterhouse School and the colleges of Eton and Westminster, required any player to have at least three opponents (i.e., four or more) between him and the their goal line to avoid being "out-of-the-play". The Football Association adopted this version in 1867. A brilliant decision which opened up the game.

Until 1907 a player could be offside anywhere on the field, even a few meters from his own goal line as applies in the game of rugby today. A 1907 law change limited offside to the opponents' half. Goal kicks and corner-kicks have been exempted from offside since their inception (1863 and 1873) but a player could be offside from a throw-in until 1921. Originally the ball was thrown-in at right angles to the touchline and any player on the wrong side of the ball was offside. From 1880 the ball could be thrown in any direction, providing openings for attacking moves, but still subject to offside limitations. The 1921 change has allowed attackers to be goalside of opponents at throw-ins.

A thinking man's game

The foregoing law changes all favored attacking play. Skillful dribblers found more space, combined passing raids on goal could be planned. Players ahead of the ball had to think intelligently about seeking space to receive the ball and reading positions and movements of opponents. More exposed defenses were forced to invent counter measures which included the beginnings of tight man-marking still to be seen in modern football. Football had graduated to a thinking man's game.

Not all tactical thinking was positive. The offside trap, whereby defenders simply stepped forward to leave attackers in offside positions, was perfected to stifle long forward passes and squeeze play into midfield. Quite legal, but unpopular, it provoked many stoppages and blocked the fluidity of play. Billy McCracken, a Newcastle United fullback, was a master of this move and largely responsible for a change of just one word of football law which sparked a revolution in

tactical thinking. The change, adopted June 1925, required 'two' instead of 'three' opponents, between a player in an offside position and the goalline, to avoid infringing the rule.

Attacking players could now be even more adventurous, exploiting gaps in opposing defenses with lethal effect. The immediate outcome was to increase goals scored in the Football League from 4700 to 6373 in one season!

How to plug leaking defenses was the next challenge. Enter Herbert Chapman who became manager of Arsenal in the same year as the offside law change. A clever tactician, Chapman retreated his center-half in between the traditional two fullbacks. They linked, via two halfbacks and two inside-forwards, to two raiding wingers and a strong agile center forward (the so-called WM formation).

Chapman's success with Arsenal is legendary. He provided a football crazy public with teams of highly talented players with specialist skills, Alex James, Ted Drake, Cliff Bastin, Eddie Hapgood, to mention a few. He led the revolution of tactical innovation, inspiring following generations to devise an exciting game which combines individual skills with intelligent team play.

In our theatre context we marvel at the performances of the dribblers, their balance, control, daring challenges and swift juggling acts with the ball, which mesmerize opponents. We explode at the power of a thunderous shot or a headed ball compressed by bony skull, zooming in on target. We are absorbed by the subtle play of the 'midfield generals', receiving, controlling, stroking the ball to turn defense into attack. Flying wingers, over-lapping backs, curling corner-kicks, long throws, slick one-two passing moves, all make up the ebb, and flow of our play The Match. Great theatre, this!

"Offside? Who? Me?"

So, why does Offside cause such discord amongst players and audiences? A Match will be stopped by the referee on average six times to apply the offside law (World Cup analyses 1974 - 98). The ball is transferred to opponents, turning the tide of play. There will be groans and maybe protests from the attacking team; sighs of relief from defenders. The law is not difficult and yet how can experienced professionals be called for twenty offsides, as were England against Kuwait (WC 1982)?

How can a high goal scoring international be caught eight times in another match? One or two are acceptable - but eight? Is the law so

complex? How can we help players to adapt their game to the law?

The following could be a typical pre-match discussion;

Player: "How can I avoid an offside call?"

Referee: "If you are goalside of the ball I have to consider just two things. First, your position. You are in an offside position if you have less than two opponents between you and their goal line (fact). Second, if the ball is played in your direction by a teammate, are you involved in active play or gaining an advantage from your offside position?" (opinion).

A 1990 change exempts players level with the second last or the last two defenders. A major concession on paper but very difficult to judge with precision in fast moving play. Listen to your coach... Coach: "We kill a chance to score and give the ball away every time we're off-side. When you are ahead of the ball keep a sharp eye on defenders - have at least two between you and their goal line. If you can't avoid being in an offside position get back behind the ball quickly or move out of the play zone to show the ref you are not influencing play or gaining an advantage."

Applying the law

One source of dispute is that offside judgements start at the moment the ball is played. Match officials concentrate on this moment whereas others tend to follow the movement of the ball. The nearest assistant referee judges when a player should be penalized for offside and signals to the referee. However, the referee may have a different opinion of the next active playing zone and whether an advantage is gained. He may overrule the assistant. A rare situation but within the true spirit of the law. Offside judgements can be complicated when opposing players switch positions rapidly or an assistant is caught out of line. Also, TV replays of big game incidents tend to magnify negative aspects of interpretation, adding to offside controversy.

To change or not to change? That is often the question. Offside controversy has provoked many suggestions to change the law or even scrap it. Experiments for change have included limiting offsides to the penalty areas (Watney Mann Cup 1971), or within a line across the field at 18 yards (FIFA U-17 World Championship 1991, Scottish League Cup 1973), or up to 35 yards from goal (NASL-USA 1968 - 84). The International Board were not convinced that the game would benefit from any of these ideas.

The trend of changes over 150 years is to encourage attack and goal scoring. Each change moves closer to the death of the offside law. Mercifully, this is not on the immediate horizon. What would become of those exciting dribblers, intelligent midfield generals, overlapping backs, the beauty of the game as we enjoy it today? Who knows, but the possibility of foot-ball becoming a series of ping pong, up-and-under rushes from end to end, with basketball scores, etc., would turn traditionalists in their graves.

A more positive way forward would be to help the football world appreciate the vital role and effect of the offside law, to show that the Game of Football is better with it. To reduce errors of judgement and controversy is a constant goal for match officials. New methods of supervision may be necessary. The current trials with two referees could point the way. We shall see...

The opening paragraph of this series asserts that the presentation of football rules is incredibly dull if they are read as written. A quick glance at Law 12, entitled Fouls and Misconduct, reveals a dismal, joyless, picture of our sport, often described as the Beautiful Game. Superficially, the law is concerned solely with crime and punishment, listing physical actions committed against opponents which may be interpreted, by the Referee, to be "careless, reckless or using excessive force", "dangerous", "serious foul play", or "violent conduct." No visions of beauty here, except for sadists! Recall what our group of young players want from the rules: "We want the chance to play well, without getting hurt and we want to enjoy ourselves."

How does Law 12 meet these simple needs? The charm of the game lies in healthy physical confrontation tempered by a moral code of sportsmanship and fair play. While the offside law has shaped the intelligence of tactical play, as explained in the previous article, Law 12 is the heart and soul of the game.

Football was chosen by 19th century higher educationalists as a manly sport to build healthy bodies and to develop character qualities of courage, self-discipline, responsibility and justice, all worthy attributes needed in students preparing for leadership in a nation's affairs. Later, the sport moved away from its rough beginnings to a team game which encourages individual skills.

The current Law 12 stems from a decision taken at the fifth meeting of The Football Association on 1 December 1863. A three-hour discussion centered on a proposal to delete Law 10 of a preliminary set of laws intended to produce a final interpretation of physical play. It read:
10. If any player shall run with the ball towards his adversaries goal,

any player on the opposite side shall be at liberty to charge, hold, trip or hack him, or to wrest the ball from him, but no player shall be held and hacked at the same time.

Hacking, defined as, "kicking an adversary on the front of the leg, below the knee," was supported by those who considered it, and the other quoted actions, to be part of the struggle and courage of play. Opponents wanted brutal elements removed to avoid losing interest in the game among professional people who could not risk serious injuries, a telling argument which won the day. The accepted version read: 10. Neither tripping nor hacking shall be allowed and no player shall use his hands to hold or push an adversary.

The proponents of the rough style resigned from The Football Association and set up the Rugby Union. Ironically, it was the chief advocate of hacking, representing the Blackheath Club, who eventually had it banned from the handling game!

Law 12 - fouls and misconduct

The 1863 ruling banned four physical acts from play: tripping, kicking, holding, and pushing an opponent. In addition to reducing the risk of injury, players found greater freedom to express individual skills within the team game. In effect, the new law helped them to play well, with more protection and potential for enjoyment - the three elements desired by young players today.

As stated in our first article, early laws were silent on moral behavior in a sport invented for men of breeding. Lifestyles and ethics have changed, as reflected in Law 12 which includes sanctions of offences against an undefined code of moral conduct.

Today, crimes against the intended method of physical play, or infringing moral obligations, are regulated by four degrees of punishment: free kick - direct, for penal offences: free kick - indirect, for minor or technical offences; caution, a formal warning against further misconduct; dismissal; exclusion from the match.

To simplify explanation we look at the law in three parts, penal offences, technical offences, and misconduct.

The first part of the law lists ten offences sanctioned by a direct free kick. Any of these becomes a penalty kick offence if committed by a defending player within his team's penalty area. Law 14 describes the procedures for penalty kicks. Six of the ten include the tripping,

kicking and pushing actions banned 136 years ago.

How are they judged? In play any player has the right to challenge an opponent for possession of the ball. Opponents have the same right. Challenges often involve physical contact which is acceptable (fair) or unacceptable (unfair), all part of a virile sport.

Until 1996 referees were instructed to read the "intention" of a player to differentiate between fair and unfair actions. Today, interpretation depends more on what each referee understands as the intended method of play, a variable factor at the root of many differences of opinion.

The law requires the referee to penalize actions he considers to be "careless, reckless or using excessive force." Dictionary definitions are unhelpful to instant interpretation. In practice, the three terms fuse into one simple category of "unfair play." How do referees recognize unfair play?

Most match officials have played football, some still do. Having been at the receiving end (or the originator) of unfair tripping, kicking, charging, pushing etc., they know instinctively when an action is careless, reckless or involves excessive force. No time to refer to a dictionary, the action is either acceptable (fair) or unacceptable (unfair): the referee must decide whether to play on or stop. This has the merit of judging actions which may not be within the three qualifications of the law. For example, a sly nudge to put an opponent off the ball could not be interpreted as a push committed carelessly, recklessly, or with excessive force, but it is clearly unfair and deserves punishment.

Of the next four direct free kick offences, holding an opponent or spitting at him are clearly unacceptable but the offence of "tackling an opponent to obtain possession of the ball which involves contact with an opponent before touching the ball", needs a few words. It is intended to eliminate the challenge from behind which grew from a subtle touch, to warn a player in possession that an opponent was close behind, to horrendous collisions to destroy skillful play.

For nearly 30 years the International FA Board has appealed to players and referees to rid the game of this practice. It was officially outlawed in 1999 by an International Board decision requiring offenders to be dismissed.

Some progress is being made. Defenders are more cautious, skills of

exciting players more evident, but the problem has not gone away. The full potential of talented players has yet to be liberated. When it is, football will really bloom with artistry and grace.

Nine of the ten penal offences concern actions against opponents. The tenth, handling the ball, offends the basic method of play decided in 1863 which put it on a different path to the rugby game.

Technical offences

Eight actions are named, less serious than penal offences, which incur an indirect free kick award. Five are aimed at goalkeepers, who have caused much head-shaking in recent years by abusing the almost total physical protection accorded since the days when they were the target of deadly assaults by onrushing opponents.

Effectively, the ball is unplayable once in the goalkeeper's hands. To keep the game flowing, the five offences encourage quick release by restricting possession and touching the ball with the hands. The latter excludes handling when the ball is deliberately kicked to the goalkeeper, or thrown from touch, by a teammate (introduced in 1992 and 1997 respectively). Both restrictions have reduced boring defensive tactics and improved open play.

Playing in a dangerous manner, e.g. kicking at the ball close to an opponent's head and two actions of impeding opponents, complete this group.

Misconduct

In football, misconduct is unacceptable behavior which offends an unwritten code of morals for the sport. As already observed, the early gentlemen players thought it unnecessary to remind their peers of moral responsibilities. Recognizing changing times and attitudes, FIFA promotes a Code of Conduct comprising ten positive actions for the good of the game. It appeals for fair play, respect for participants and invites co-operation to safeguard the sport from evils of modern life. The code is not (yet) included in the rulebook.

In the misconduct section of Law 12, headed Disciplinary Sanctions, we have general and specific offences which breach the moral code. Seven incur a caution against further misconduct and another seven require offenders to be sent off. The first cautionable offence of unsporting behavior really takes in the six which follow e.g., dissent against a referee's decision, persistently breaking the laws, delaying the restart of play, entering or leaving the field without the referee's permission. To combat a recent trend of cheating, Decision 6 of this

law requires referees to treat any action to deceive them by simulating unfair play as unsporting behavior. The term covers many other actions, too numerous to list, which offend the spirit and/or the letter of the laws according to the judgement of the referee.

The ultimate punishment of dismissal from a match is applied for acts of serious foul play, violent conduct, offensive or abusive language, spitting at an opponent or another person, and when a second cautionable offence is committed. Finally, two 1991 Decisions concerning denying the opposing team an obvious goal-scoring opportunity, either by physical means or deliberately handling the ball, are now included in the law.

One other rarely mentioned crime, which is not in the laws but can invoke serious punishment, is that of "bringing the game into disrepute." It usually applies to incidents off the field of play which damage or taint the honor and prestige of the whole sport. Examples include derogatory comments expressed in public by administrators, coaches, players, club or match officials; unseemly personal behavior connected with football; drug abuse; fixing matches, etc. Punishments can be heavy fines, suspensions, or permanent exclusion from the game. Such is the nature of misconduct in football.

Those colored cards

All football people are familiar with the sight of a referee showing a colored card after an incident. Yellow for caution, red for off. Originally conceived by Ken Aston (when chairman of the FIFA Referees' Committee at the 1966 World Cup) to reduce language barriers between officials and players, they first appeared in the opening match of the 1970 World Cup in Mexico. No red cards were seen during the 32-match tournament but the yellow came out for 45 offences to signify cautions.

The card system spread throughout football, becoming mandatory in a 1993 amendment to Law 12. How times have changed! In the 1950s a formal caution was considered disgraceful to the point where The Football Association selection committee for international matches refused to consider players having received just one caution. Today, cards are evident in practically every match. Over 2,300 were displayed in last season's FA Premier League!

To complete the tri-color traffic signals code, a green card is sometimes displayed to permit medical officials to enter the field to examine seriously injured players. This is not yet applied universally.

Of referees and coaches

The dictionary definition of a referee, as "a person to whom a matter in dispute is referred for decision," was appropriate in football until 1973 when his duty, "to decide disputed points," was deleted from Law 5. It was finally recognized that the law enforcer's role and responsibilities had evolved to cover all aspects of an organized game. In effect, today's official is an operating agent of football authority with wide powers on and off the field of play.

More like a superintendent: one who is in charge of an activity, who manages, directs and controls with authority.

Volunteers all, referees are expected to be dedicated experts on the game and its rules, to be available, always at peak physical form, and prepared to withstand much abuse in their service for football. Our sport could not be so enjoyable without them. Hats off to all ladies and gentlemen of the whistle!

The coach also has a special role. For 130 years, coaching play from the touchlines was banned because players were expected to make their own game, with skills and mistakes, free from outside interference. Since 1993, Decision 2 of Law 3 allows the coach to convey tactical instructions to the players during the match. Two conditions apply; coaches are confined to a specific location and must behave in a responsible manner.

Both constraints are not easy for emotionally involved coaches who stretch limits to influence a good result for their teams. TV cameras capture the performances of both players and coaches to add spice to armchair entertainment.

Laws or Rules?

The title to this series, and many comments in the text, refer to the rules of the game. Most sports are governed by rules but football has retained its traditionally styled "laws" from 1863. Why they were so labeled is unclear. It was probably to differentiate them from the rules of newborn Football Association being formulated at the same time.

Here, the choice of "rules" is deliberate, not to disrespect tradition but to accept common usage and aid comprehension.

From experience of teaching the game, the mention of laws is an immediate barrier to motivating interest. They are more associated with

civil obligations than with the conduct of a popular sport.

It was not until 1997 that the outmoded offence of ungentlemanly conduct was replaced by the more appropriate unsporting behavior. Taking football, The Game of the 20th Century, into the next millennium could be an appropriate occasion to update the Laws of the Game to The Rules of Football.

Theatres of dreams

Our analogy of football and the theatre shows that the game brings color and passion into the workaday lives of millions, a chance to dream in theatres of dreams. Such theatres encircle the world, be they in the form of a farmer's humble cow-patch or the awesome tradition-soaked Wembley Stadium. They all stage a unique play, the match, performed to one script. No two performances are identical but all promise a heady cocktail of excitement, suspense, comedy, drama, even tragedy.

That a simple game can unite people of all ages, races, creeds, classes, and political beliefs in a healthy pastime must relate to the rules which govern its conduct.

This series has analyzed the 17 rules to expose content, purpose, intelligence and wisdom imbedded within their formal words. As a yardstick we asked young players what they want and were told equality, safety, and enjoyment.

Questioning each rule we have seen how these simple features are included from early principles, through evolution to meet changing circumstances to arrive at today's exposition. Hats off to the 1863 authors and subsequent generations of scriptwriters!

May future legislators be guided by the wishes of our young players, to help them play well, without getting hurt, so that we and our successors may continue to enjoy, in the words of the Brighton College song, "the most perfect game of the perfect sphere".

Yes, Football Rules really are brilliant!

Mike "Skipper" Goblet