



Example of Rugby balls through time

The **Rugby Ball** and its oval shape did not come about because the ball needed to be handled during a rugby game.

The Rugby Ball shape was dictated by the pig's bladder that was inserted into a hand-stitched leather casing.

The pigs bladder would be blown up while still in its very smelly 'green state' just by lung power alone, often using a straw or the snapped stem of a clay pipe inserted into the opening of the bladder.

The balls also varied in size in the beginning depending upon how large the pig's bladder was.

Much later that rubber gained popularity and replaced the pig's bladder.

The Rugby Ball was originally much rounder and larger than it is today. It even had a lace handle on the top to hold it!

Even if it is difficult to tell precisely, it seems the oldest balls are from ancient Egypt. For the greatest relief of the animals of that time they were made of straw or cut reeds and wrapped in linen. But their joy didn't last very long, with animal bladders filled with air soon used because they were considered more flexible and bounced better, although they exploded more easily. In Greece, it was the cows that contributed their bladders, filled with sand or air and chased around by about 15 players in a game called episkiros, one of the precursors of football. In ancient Italy people stopped playing with their feet and started playing with their hands. The game was called harpastum, the ancestor of rugby, which means 'a ball of play'. The ball used was of a standard size and hard, so hard you couldn't kick it with your feet.

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Richard Linton

Richard Linton (1816 - 1887) and **William Gilbert** (1799-1877) started making balls for Rugby school out of hand stitched, four-panel, leather casings and pigs' bladders. Both men owned boot and shoe making businesses located close to Rugby school. Originally, Gilbert's business was located at 19 High Street and Linton lived next door as a young man at number 20. The High street led directly to Rugby schools quad entrance which is where the boys played football (quad ball) before Rugby school gained its playing fields.

Richard Linton's wife (who used to blow up the bladder based rugby balls for her husband) contracted a lung disease thought to have come from years of blowing up pig's bladders (some of which were most probably diseased) and died.

In the 1850s Thomas Hancock in the UK invented by an American, Charles Goodyear and vulcanised rubber separately in 1843/4.

Around 1862 **Richard Linton** introduced **Indian rubber bladder** inner tubes and because of the pliability of rubber the shape of the balls gradually changed from a sphere to the shape we know today. Richard Linton, having observed the ordinary ear syringe also invented the **Brass Hand Pump**, as rubber bladders were far too difficult to inflate by mouth, which he demonstrated, and won medals, at an exhibition in London. Richard Linton also claimed to invent the rugby ball and its distinctive oval shape but sadly, for him, didn't patent the ball, the bladder or the pump.

William Gilbert

'Gilbert' became one of the most popular makers of rugby balls and has been making rugby balls since the game's conception. William Gilbert had a boot and shoe makers shop next to Rugby school in the high street and started making balls for the school out of hand stitched, four panel, leather casings and real pigs bladders (he also made catapults for the boys).

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William was responsible for the leather stand made for the London Exhibition in 1851, which can be seen in the present Gilbert museum. The ball is hanging from the cross bar of a Rugby goal in a stand designed by Mr M H Bloxham.

When William died, his nephew James Gilbert (1831-1906) succeeded him. James was reputed to be "a wonder of lung strength and blew even the big match balls up tight". This was achieved by inserting a clay pipe into the neck of the bladder once it was encased in leather and blowing until the fully inflated. The balls also were made of cow bladder with oil on it or covered with leather

The difference between old and new

Old rugby balls were much different to now, due to the different type of materials used to make them. In the 1800's they were made from leather and pig's bladder but now they're made from rubber and plastic, which is much lighter to carry around.

The rugby balls they have now are much better than the 1800's Rugby balls. Most people prefer light balls with lots of grip.

In the 1880s the rugby ball was produced by manufacturers and described as oval, about eleven inches long, about nine inches across. 'It is light, hard-blown, of India rubber, covered with a leather case, very accurately fitting, made in equal pieces cut in the long axis of the ball, smoothly and strongly sewn together.'

'In the centre four inches of one seam is a slit, through which the India rubber bladder has been passed into the case. This slit has been very accurately laced up, and care has been taken to leave no tag of lacing hanging.'

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As manufacturing processes improved, the football's shape could be manipulated to better suit the game. Soccer balls became rounder, allowing players to have far greater control when kicking the ball on the ground. Rugby footballs became more shaped like an egg, making them easier to carry, handle and kick from the hand or place kick. The footballs in Australian rules and gridiron too have evolved to suit their game.

The Origin of the Rugby Ball

The origins of the rugby ball, the object of all desires on the pitch, goes back to ancient times but its oval shape was given to it far more recently.

In the middle ages, in three regions of France (Picardie, Normandie and Brittany) and in England, the Choule or Soule seemed to be inspired by the Greeks and Romans. The goal of the game was to get the ball into the opponent's territory by any means. The nature of the object, which was called a choule or Soule depending on which region the game was played in, was a pig bladder or cow bladder with oil on it or covered with leather. This envelope 30cm in diameter could be filled with air, straw, bran, wood shavings, foam or compressed hay. The choule became more elaborate as the importance given to it increased. Adding to the traditions of the game, the latest married couple would order it and buy it from the village saddler. In these places the choule, which was encrusted with copper nails, was made of leather bands of different colours, often the colours of the King and of the province where the game was played. It was believed touching the choule would bring player luck. The player carrying it at the end of the game was allowed to keep it and show it as a trophy.

In 1823 Webb Ellis was a student at Rugby University. According to legend, he picked up the ball during a football game and ran with it through the opposition defence to score the first try in history. This action was to be the start of the division between the different football codes and the invention of 'rugby football'. At that time William Gilbert, the shoemaker of Rugby, whose shop was next to the school, provided the ball to students.

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QUESTIONS

- 1) Who was the first person that invented rugby balls?
- 2) Were the rugby balls popular in the 1800' s?
- 3) What was the first shop called that sells rugby balls?
- 4) Have the rugby been tested and how rugby have change through year's?