



# FOOTBALL

## Action on the Gridiron

by Phyllis McIntosh





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Rules written by Walter Camp, known as the father of American football, established the line of scrimmage as the starting point for each play. Here the Washington Redskins and the Cleveland Browns face each other across that line.

On any fall weekend across the United States, football reigns as the nation's favorite sport. Thousands of high school teams, the pride of communities from coast to coast, compete under the lights on Friday nights. Saturdays feature the tradition and pageantry of college football. Sundays belong to the 32 professional teams that play in the major metropolitan areas.

Professional games typically draw crowds of 70,000 or 80,000, while some large universities pack their stadiums with upwards of 100,000 cheering supporters. Back-to-back broadcasts of both college and professional contests reach millions of armchair fans. Those for whom an entire weekend of football is not enough can tune in to yet another pro game on Monday Night Football, a staple of American television for the past 40 years.

A rough and tumble game of sometimes violent physical contact, American football is not for the faint of heart.

Although it has roots in soccer and rugby, the sport as it is played today is purely American, having evolved through countless rule changes over the past 150 years. But football in the United States is more than a game. For legions of fans, it is a source of school pride, a social event, and an integral part of holiday celebrations.

Even though "football" means soccer in most parts of the world, the American game is catching on around the globe. College and professional leagues now exist in a number of countries, from the United Kingdom to Japan.

### History of Football

People have been kicking and tossing balls around for thousands of years. As part of their military training, ancient Chinese soldiers played a game known as Tsu Chu, which loosely translated means *football*. Likewise, Roman soldiers maintained

their physical fitness through a rugby-like game called harpastum, which they adopted from the Greeks. As the Roman Empire expanded through Europe, its army shared the game with conquered peoples, especially in Britain, where it eventually gave rise to soccer and rugby.

A rough tackle game using an inflated cow bladder as a ball was popular in 11th and 12th century England, first among young boys and later in violent contests between rival villages. Casualties were so numerous that several English kings outlawed the game. The sport eventually resurfaced in more organized form, and by the early 1800s a game resembling modern soccer was commonplace in English public schools. As legend has it, the sport took a new turn in 1823, when a player at the Rugby School decided to pick up the ball and run with it across the goal line. The idea caught on, and the sport of rugby was born.

Football in its various forms crossed the Atlantic and became a favorite college sport. A soccer-style contest between Rutgers University and the College of New Jersey (now Princeton) in 1869 is considered the first official intercollegiate football game, although the game played then would be hardly recognizable to today's fans. An 1874 match between Harvard University and Canada's McGill University popularized the combination of kicking and running with the ball.

In 1876, representatives from several eastern schools created the Intercollegiate Football Association to standardize rules of play. But credit goes to one man—Walter Camp, a player and coach at Yale University—for crafting rules that helped shape the game as we know it. Known as the father of American football, Camp reduced the number of players on a team, established the line of scrimmage as the starting point for each play, created the position of quarterback as offensive team

leader, and instituted a system of downs for advancing the ball. For the first time, the field was marked with yard lines, leading some to refer to it as a “gridiron.”

Following Camp's innovations, college football grew rapidly, with 250 schools fielding teams by the turn of the 20th century. But football remained a brutal sport. With little protective gear for players and dangerous field formations that encouraged crushing physical contact, injuries and even deaths were common. In 1905, after several colleges banned the sport and others threatened to do so, President Theodore Roosevelt called on schools to come up with reforms to save the game. The result was an organization that in 1910 became the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA), which continues to regulate college football today.

## Football Fundamentals

As decreed by Walter Camp, football requires two teams of 11 players each. The teams take turns trying to score by



▶ A quarterback, the offensive leader of the team, gets ready to pass the ball to a receiver down the field.

moving the ball across the opponent's goal line. The game consists of four 15-minute quarters, with a halftime break after the second quarter. But because teams can take timeouts and a number of actions on the field stop the play clock, games can last three hours or more.

Play takes place on a field 53 yards wide and 100 yards long, with a goal line at each end. Behind each goal line is a 10-yard end zone with upright goal posts. Lines run across the field every five yards and are numbered every 10 yards.

The game starts with a kickoff. The receiving team plays offense and will have four chances, or "downs," to move the ball forward at least 10 yards. If it succeeds, the team gets four new downs. If it fails, the other team gets the ball and tries to move it in the opposite direction. An offensive team that has failed to advance 10 yards usually uses its fourth down to punt—that is, kick the ball down the field, so the opposing team will have to start its offense farther back.

To begin each down, the offensive center lineman snaps the ball back to the quarterback, who throws it to a receiver

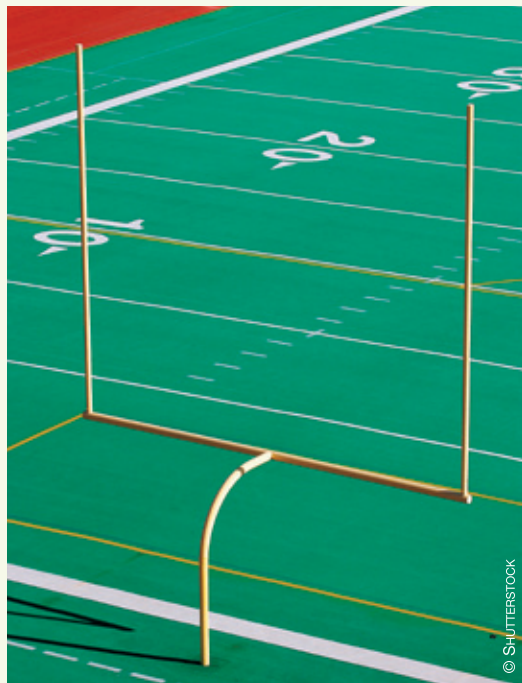
downfield (a forward pass) or hands it to a teammate who runs with it. The defensive team tries to tackle the quarterback or the player running with the ball and to prevent receivers from catching a pass. The offensive linemen attempt to block the defenders from tackling their teammates.

A team can score in several ways. The most desirable score is a touchdown, worth six points, which a team scores by carrying the ball into the opponent's end zone or by catching it there. After a touchdown, the scoring team can earn one extra point by kicking the ball through the uprights of the goal post or two extra points by passing or running the ball into the end zone from the three-yard line. If the offense cannot get close enough to the end zone for a touchdown but is inside the opponent's 45-yard line, it may attempt a field goal—kicking the ball through the goal post for three points. The defense can score two points if it traps an opponent with the ball in his own end zone, though this happens infrequently.

Because football involves constant physical contact, players are clad head to toe in protective gear. All players wear a heavy helmet with face mask, mouth guard, and chin guard. Under their uniform jersey and pants, they wear special pads that protect the shoulders, upper chest and back, ribs, hips, thighs, and knees.

The football is elliptical in shape, about 11 inches long and 22 inches around the center, and weighs 14 to 15 ounces. Though sometimes called a "pigskin," a holdover from days when a pig bladder was used as a ball covering, today's football is made of brown cow leather stamped with pebble grain texture to make it easier to grip.

Football players, especially at the college and professional levels, specialize in either offense, defense, or special teams. Special teams players, such as the punter or field goal kicker, come onto the field only when their particular skills are required.



An upright goal post stands at each end of a football field. The field is 100 yards long with lines running across the width every five yards, leading some to call it a "gridiron."



▶ A football game begins with a kickoff. The team receiving the ball then tries to advance the ball back down the field in the direction from which it was kicked.



▼ Football is a game of strategy, and teams memorize and practice plays like the one diagrammed on this chalkboard.

While individual skill is important, football requires a carefully coordinated team effort. And strategy is critical. Each team attempts to “read” the opponent and chooses its next move from among dozens of well-rehearsed plays in the team playbook. In advance of a game, teams spend long hours watching films of opposing players and coaches and plotting strategies.

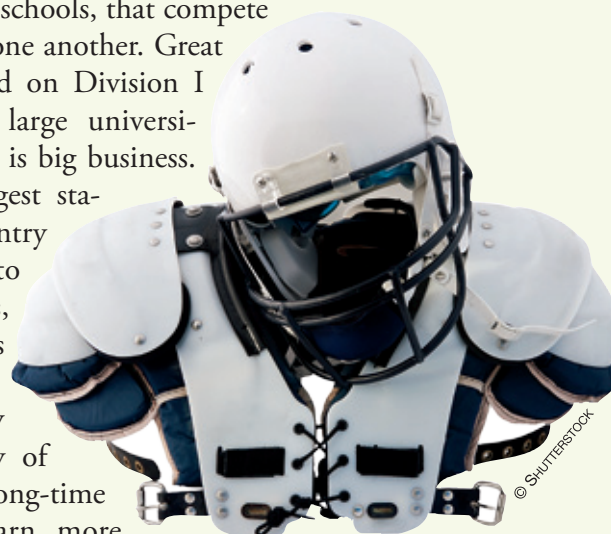
## From Junior Leagues to the Big Time

Children as young as five can begin to learn the basics of tackle football through junior leagues. By the time they are teenagers, many young competitors are playing on school teams. Football consistently ranks as one of the most popular high school sports, with 15,000 teams and more than a million participants nationwide. High school teams are a source of immense community pride, especially in Texas and other southern states, where games draw tens of thousands of fans. The best high school players are recruited by colleges and universities and awarded scholarships to attend those schools and play on their teams.

Under NCAA guidelines, colleges and universities play football in one of three

divisions; each division has many conferences, or groups of schools, that compete frequently against one another. Great attention is focused on Division I teams, mainly at large universities, where football is big business. Twenty of the largest stadiums in the country are home, not to professional teams, but to college teams such as Pennsylvania State University and the University of Michigan. Some long-time college coaches earn more than a million dollars a year, as much or more than some professional coaches.

At the end of the regular season, the champions of the various Division I conferences compete in bowl games on or around New Year’s Day. The oldest of these is the Rose Bowl in Pasadena, California, which began in 1902. Other warm weather cities soon launched their own bowl games, such as the Orange Bowl in Miami, the Sugar Bowl in New Orleans, and the Cotton Bowl in Dallas. Some of these games are now part of the Bowl Championship Series, created in 1998 to determine a national champion of college football.



▼ A helmet and shoulder pads are among the protective gear worn by football players.



A high school football player runs with the ball as opponents topple around him. Football consistently ranks as one of the most popular high school sports.



Children learn the basics of football in junior leagues. Here a young player runs for a touchdown while members of the opposing team try to tackle him.

Upon graduation, the best college players are drafted by the professional teams of the National Football League (NFL).

Now considered the pinnacle of the sport, pro football did not begin to rival

the college game in popularity until a half century after the first professional player, William “Pudge” Heffelfinger, received a 500-dollar contract in 1892 to play for the Allegheny Athletic Association against the Pittsburgh (Pennsylvania) Athletic Club. It was more than two decades later that pro football found its first superstar—Jim Thorpe, renowned for winning both the pentathlon and decathlon at the 1912 Olympic Games. After signing with the Canton, Ohio, Bulldogs in 1915, Thorpe led the team to three championships and drew unprecedented crowds of 8,000 fans to Bulldogs games.

In 1920, several pro clubs created a loosely organized league called the American Football Association, which elected Thorpe as president and sold franchises for 100 dollars each. Two years later, the group changed its name to the National Football League. In its early years, the NFL did little to create stability or win over fans. As teams came and went, pro

football simply couldn't compete with baseball or college football.

The 1958 NFL championship contest between the Baltimore Colts and New York Giants, celebrated in football lore as "the Greatest Game Ever Played," is often cited as the turning point in pro football's popularity. When Baltimore kicked a field goal to tie the score with 30 seconds remaining, the game became the first in NFL history to go into sudden death overtime. An estimated 45 million viewers who were tuned into the nationwide TV broadcast watched spellbound as quarterback Johnny Unitas methodically led Baltimore 80 yards in 13 plays for the winning touchdown. Overnight, Unitas and other stars of that game became household names, and within a few years, pro football ranked as America's favorite spectator sport.

The sport's popularity was fueled in part by the creation in 1960 of the rival American Football League (AFL), which fielded eight new teams and entered into

bidding wars with the NFL to draft the most promising college players. A decade after its founding, the AFL was absorbed into the NFL, which was then divided into the National Football Conference and the American Football Conference. Currently, the two conferences comprise 32 teams in four divisions. At the end of the 16-game regular season, a series of playoffs determines the champions of each conference, which then face off in the Super Bowl.

## Football's Appeal

At any level, football is fun to watch because of its fast-paced action, but much of the sport's appeal is in the hoopla surrounding it. Marching bands, acrobatic cheerleaders, and costumed mascots lead excited fans in cheers and fight songs to urge their team on to victory. Halftime shows feature bands marching in intricate formations or, at major bowl games, performances by musical celebrities.

▼  
A Temple University player (#28) runs up the field after intercepting a pass intended for the other team.







This statue of Jim Thorpe, pro football's first superstar, stands in the rotunda of the Pro Football Hall of Fame in Canton, Ohio.

Football includes social events that extend well beyond the grandstands. High schools and colleges often hold pep rallies the night before a big game to rev up the faithful with bonfires, cheers, and pep talks by the players and coach. Homecoming celebrations welcome alumni back to campus for a weekend of parties, dances, and an important game, usually against an archrival.

Game day itself starts well before kickoff time as fans gather for tailgate parties in stadium parking lots, where they cook food on outdoor grills, listen to music, and visit with friends. Those who can't attend the game in person congregate around televisions in college dormitories or fraternity houses, sports bars, and pri-

Fans attend a large tailgate party before an Ohio State University football game.



vate homes to watch the game and share their excitement with fellow enthusiasts. Some holidays, such as Thanksgiving and New Year's Day, which feature day-long broadcasts of games, can be as much about football as traditional celebration.

While baseball will always be known as the national pastime, football, with its increasingly popular customs, has certainly earned its title—America's Game.

## Talking Football

**down** – the period of action that starts when the offense puts the ball in play and ends when the officials rule that the play is over

**field goal** – a play worth three points made by kicking the ball through the goal posts; used on fourth down when the offensive team is close to the end zone or on any other down when time is running out

**fumble** – to lose hold of the football while running with it or handling it; the team that recovers the ball gains possession

**huddle** – players gathered in a circle before each down to hear instructions for the next play from the quarterback

**interception** – a pass by one team that is caught by a player on the other team, which then takes possession of the ball

**line of scrimmage** – the place on the field where a play begins; an official moves the ball to this line before each down.

**punt** – a kick made when a player drops the ball and kicks it downfield to move the other team back; a team usually punts on fourth down after having failed to gain 10 yards in three downs.

**rushing** – use of running plays to move the ball downfield on offense

**sack** – tackling of the quarterback behind the line of scrimmage, resulting in a loss of yardage for the offense



▶ A marching band performs in the Tournament of Roses Parade in Pasadena, California. The parade precedes the Rose Bowl, a post-season game between two of the top college football teams.



▼ Hooter, the mascot of the Temple University Owls, revs up the crowd before a game.

**turnover** – a fumble or interception that results in the other team gaining possession of the ball

**Pro Football Hall of Fame**  
[www.profootballhof.com](http://www.profootballhof.com)

Official site of the Canton, Ohio, shrine to pro football, this website features facts about the more than 250 Hall of Fame players, information about the history of football, and descriptions of exhibits at the Hall's football museum.

## Websites of Interest

**Football Almanac**  
[www.football-almanac.com](http://www.football-almanac.com)

The ultimate guide to football statistics, this site highlights teams and players who hold records for passing, receiving, rushing, and other feats. It includes Top 100 charts and Legendary Firsts, as well as information about the history of the game, the Super Bowl, and other football-related events.

**National Football League**  
[www.nfl.com](http://www.nfl.com)

This official site of the National Football league features news, statistics, schedules, players' data and photos, and links to all the professional football teams.

**NCAA Football**  
[www.ncaafotball.com](http://www.ncaafotball.com)

This football site of the National Collegiate Athletic Association provides comprehensive information about college teams, their stadiums, and the divisions, conferences, and bowl games in which they play.

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▶ A player practices kicking a field goal, sending the ball between the upright bars of the goal post. A successful field goal scores three points.

# THE SUPER BOWL: AN AMERICAN PHENOMENON

The biggest championship game in U.S. sports, the Super Bowl, lives up to its superlative title in a number of ways. It is a broadcast extravaganza, a top-notch entertainment venue, and an advertiser's dream. And, oh yes, it's usually a football game, too.

The Super Bowl originated more than 40 years ago as part of a merger agreement, the National Football League (NFL) and rival American Football League (AFL) decided to hold a championship playoff between the winning teams from each league. In the first game, held January 15, 1967, in Los Angeles, the NFL Green Bay Packers handily defeated the AFL Kansas City Chiefs. The NFL dominated the second championship match as well, but in the third year, the AFL New York Jets, led by charismatic quarterback Joe Namath, beat the highly favored Baltimore Colts in one of the most stunning upsets in Super Bowl history.

The championship was not officially called the Super Bowl until 1970. The name originated, so the story goes, when Baltimore Colts owner Lamar Hunt, recalling his daughter playing with a toy called a Super Ball, jokingly coined the term Super Bowl to add to the contest's air of importance, each game is numbered with a Roman numeral instead of the year in which it is played. The 2007 game, for example, was Super Bowl XLIV.

Now played on the first Sunday in February, the Super Bowl usually takes place in a city with warm weather, such as Miami, New Orleans, or Los Angeles. Three games, however, have been played inside domed stadiums in the northern cities of Detroit and Minneapolis. No team has ever played the Super Bowl at its home stadium.

Over the years, all but four of the teams currently in the NFL have appeared in the Super Bowl. The most successful team is the Pittsburgh Steelers, with six victories. Among individual players, the leader is former San Francisco 49ers quarterback Tom Brady, named the Most Valuable Player in three Super Bowls. His teammate, wide receiver Jerry Rice, holds records for the most career points scored in Super Bowls and the most Super Bowl touchdowns (8).

Interestingly, no Super Bowl has ever gone into overtime, although several have remained tied into the final minute. Nor has there been a Super Bowl in which no team scored a touchdown or one team failed to score at all. The widest margin of victory so far has been 45 points, the smallest just one point.

In the beginning, the Super Bowl was a rather modest affair, with tickets costing about 10 dollars and halftime entertainment provided by local high school or college marching bands. In recent years, however, it has become one of the most heavily hyped and commercially important events of the year. Tickets sell for as much as a thousand dollars, and extravagantly staged halftime shows have featured such top performers as Paul McCartney, Bruce Springsteen, and the late Michael Jackson.

With more than 100 million viewers worldwide, the Super Bowl continues to break records as the most watched broadcast in U.S. television history. With such a vast viewership, advertisers pay up to \$3 million for a 30-second spot and use the broadcast to debut their cleverest and most expensive commercials. All of the hype has made the game itself incidental for some viewers, who tune in mainly to watch the halftime show and critique the new commercials.

For millions of fans, the big game is an excuse for a Super Bowl party, which has become a national tradition. According to some analysts, Americans consume more food on Super Bowl day than on any other day except Thanksgiving.

Super Bowl Sunday has, in effect, become America's newest national holiday.



Quarterback Peyton Manning (#18) of the Indianapolis Colts talks to his teammates on the field during the 2007 Super Bowl. The Colts won the game, defeating the Chicago Bears.



Super Bowl halftime shows feature top performers. Prince performed at the 2007 Super Bowl in Miami.