

## ENGLAND: FOOTBALL

by Ross Mulkern

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The people of England have invented many sports, which we are famous for teaching to other countries so they can beat us at them. Examples include Cricket, Rugby and Tennis. Some people will argue that Tennis is French, but we know the truth.

Perhaps the most famous of all, though, is Football. The most popular sport on the planet. Nearly every country has its own football league and you probably have a favourite team that you support. Even if you're not a fan of football, it's likely that you've played it at least once in your life.

What many people don't know is that Football was not always played the way we do today, with eleven people on each team, two nets, a pitch and a referee. Back in Shakespeare's time, nearly 500 years ago, the beautiful game was a very different sport indeed.

For a start, there was no pitch. The game was simply played on the land between any two towns or villages. This meant the pitch could be several kilometres wide! There was also no limit for team members – a team could be ten or 100 people. The ball was placed between the two towns and each team had to get it into the other team's territory, any way possible. There was no such thing as a red card or a foul. Players could punch, kick, bite or wrestle their opponent to get the ball, and once they had it they could carry or throw it as well as kicking. This meant that football games were often very violent, with reports of players even being thrown off bridges into rivers to stop them getting the ball!

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Because of this, playing football in Shakespeare's time could be deadly. As well as "minor" injuries such as broken bones, people often died. In fact, more people were killed playing football than sword fighting! This meant that football players had a bad reputation, more like today's football hooligans than the players themselves. Shakespeare mentions the sport in two of his plays, most famously in King Lear, where a man calls his servant a "football player" as an insult to show how stupid he is.

Because of this there were several attempts to ban the sport, but it was so popular that this proved impossible. Fortunately, over time, the sport slowly became more organised and grew into the two modern sports we know today – Association Football, or "Soccer" which is the sport most people think of when you say "football", and Rugby Football, or "Rugger", more commonly known simply as Rugby. Strangely, of these two sports it is Rugby which is probably most similar to the sport which was popular 500 years ago.

So what do you think? Would you be brave enough to play football in Shakespeare's time? Does the modern sport have too many rules and regulations? Or are we lucky to live in a time where you can kick a ball in the park with your friends without worrying that someone is going to punch you in the face?