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THE FIRST FOOTBALL GAME

Every time Rutgers and Princeton meet on the gridiron they celebrate the anniversary of the first American intercollegiate football game, held at New Brunswick, November 6, 1869. Exciting as that was, the game that took place on the first Saturday in November, 1938 between the same institutions will probably hold first place in the hearts of loyal Rutgers rooters. On that day for the first time in 50 years, Princeton played on Rutgers' territory: this 36th game between the schools marked the dedication of the new \$1,000,000 Rutgers' stadium: the date of the game, November 5, lacked only one day of being the 69th anniversary of the first game: and finally, despite a nation-wide tradition that the school which dedicates a stadium generally loses the dedication game, Rutgers felt confident of victory over its old rival.

A sure sense of what would most infuriate the aroused Rutgers students led Princetonians on the eve of the game straight to an old black cannon on the Rutgers campus. Within sight of the banners flaunting Rutgers' defiance of their old time enemy, half a dozen Princeton men coolly painted bright orange stripes around the muzzle of the old cannon. Rutgers students, meanwhile, were smearing Princeton buildings, statues and walls with vivid scarlet paint. But Princeton had gone to the heart of the old feud by desecrating the Rutgers cannon, for between Rutgers and Princeton cannon means fight.

It meant fight so realistically 69 years ago that the first game was viewed at the time as an incident in a long contest over the possession of the historic cannon. In 1854 a Revolutionary cannon mysteriously disappeared from the New Brunswick campus. Since Princetonians had previously made off with Rutgers' cannon in 1836, Rutgers men quickly assumed that the rival school had done it again. Their suspicions became unshakable convictions when Princeton loftily declined to deny the accusation.

Although school authorities hopefully sanctioned the football game in 1869 as a means of settling the "cannon war," as it came to be known, the conflict persisted. In 1875 nine members of the class of 1877 at Rutgers set out for Princeton at night to recover the cannon. They had hired a box wagon and team and were armed with crowbars, pickaxes, shovels and ropes. They did not get to Princeton until one in the morning. Five men dug while the other four kept watch, and when the "Owl Train" came in with the late students, they hid. Foot by foot they dragged the cannon over the grass to the wagon, several hundred feet away, hoisted it in and quickly covered it with a tarpaulin. Just in time. Already the windows were being raised in some of the buildings, but no hue and

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cry arose as they strained away and creaked slowly back to New Brunswick. When they arrived at Rutgers at ten-thirty the college went wild with jubilation and the cannon was hidden in a cellar downtown.



The First Intercollegiate Football Game--Nov. 6, 1869.
Rutgers 6 - Princeton 4

From a Painting by William Boyd. Courtesy - Rutgers University Library

The next night Princeton men invaded the campus, but, unable to find the cannon, they made off with some government muskets from the gymnasium. This aroused the college presidents who named a committee of two professors from each school to solve the mystery. The cannon that had disappeared from Rutgers in 1854 was never found: but the committee proved that the one stolen by Rutgers was actually the property of Princeton and the Scarlets were ordered to return it. They evaded this order as long as possible but at length the New Brunswick chief of police and his men returned it to Princeton, "one man sitting on the cannon with a revolver facing the indignant mob that followed."

Old rivals, Rutgers and Princeton had long competed in boat racing in the spring, in baseball both spring and fall, and had exchanged many heated words in their literary periodicals. The urge for a hand-to-hand fight, partly satisfied in the cannon war, was answered when a Rutgers student in 1869 suggested that Princeton be challenged to a football match.

Although up to this time the game had been played only between classes, Rutgers saw in the proposal a means of deciding the feud. An invitation sent to Princeton was promptly accepted and enthusiasm ran high as the afternoon of November 6, 1869 was set for the first intercollegiate football game ever to be played.

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The morning of the sixth the Princeton team accompanied by a few fans arrived by train. They were greeted riotously by the whole Rutgers student body and were escorted on a tour of the town that generously included billiards and lunch while the captains convened to draw up a set of rules.

After lunch the street swarmed with students as they hurried to the field, now the site of the gymnasium, in the wake of the two teams. Bill Leggett, Rutgers' captain, led the procession with Bill Gummere, captain of the rival Princeton team. As they neared the field the crowd broke and ran for the best seats on the fence top, the rest sat on the ground. Out in the center the team stood discussing the rules.

The captains had decided that holding, tripping, and throwing or running with the ball were fouls--penalty, perpendicular throw into the air; a ball out of bounds was to be kicked in at right angles to the field by the side that drove it out: the system of gaining a free kick for a ball caught in flight or on the first bounce that Princeton had been using in their interclass games was discarded. The field was 360 feet long and 225 feet wide and the goal posts had no crosspiece to regulate the height of the kick. There were 25 men on each team and one man on each side was goalee and stayed near the posts. The first team to get six goals was to be the victor and there was to be a ten minute rest after each goal or period, and no limit to the length of the period.

Leggett devised a system that spread his team out over the field. Eleven of his players stayed within 30 yards of the posts as "fielders" while the other 12 followed the ball as "rovers" or "bulldogs." All of the Princeton men followed the ball.

The players rolled up their trousers, stripped off their coats and vests and lined up ready to start. Some of the Rutgers players wore red turbans and one player appeared in a red jersey. There was a discussion still going on about how to begin. Rutgers had been in the habit of "babying" the ball at the start but a mounted kick-off was decided upon. Princeton won the kick, the whistle blew and the game began.

There was a wild scramble for the ball. Back and forth the players went, bucking and kicking at the round ball. Rutgers managed to make a wedge around it and forced their way down the field using short dribbles straight through the goal. The crowd yelled themselves hoarse in the excitement and banged the fence with their heels. The success of this strategy so cheered the Scarlet who had been discouraged by the superior weight of the Tigers that they planned to repeat this maneuver for the six needed goals.

Gummere held consultation with "Big Mike," their best man, a big raw-boned Kentuckian with his suspenders wrapped around his middle. At a disadvantage playing under new rules, Princeton decided on new tactics. The second period began and Rutgers quickly formed their "flying wedge" but they hadn't gone five yards before Mike butted his way into it. Each time the wedge was formed the Princeton battering ram broke it wide open. Once they captured the ball, made a wedge of their own and quickly scored a goal.

Rutgers tried kicking over the Tiger's heads but the Princeton men, being taller, often captured the ball and Rutgers now settled down to stubborn short

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dribbles keeping the ball close to the ground with a chance good kick when near the goal. The Scarlets, being lighter, were faster and their team work was better. Princeton men following the ball got in each other's way more often.

Madison Ball, of Rutgers, invented an excellent way to stop the ball without losing time. He ran ahead of it as it approached the enemy's goal and kicked it back with his heel without losing time turning around. He also tried this at a crucial point when approaching his own goal and the ball was off center; he kicked it back to position and Dixon of Rutgers easily scored.

Without uniforms it was very difficult to tell friend from foe, with the result that at one point a Rutgers' man kicked the ball in the wrong direction thinking it was his goal, but one of his agile teammates retrieved it in time. Rutgers gained a lead of two goals and the next period Princeton put up a terrific struggle. The ball was kicked off side. The ground sitters scattered as it rolled toward the fence and the teams tore after it. Large, of Rutgers, made a grab for it but Mike was on top of him and the two of them smashed into the fence tearing it down with the luckless spectators landing on top of the heap. Large lay limply at the bottom, all the wind knocked out of him, but Mike rose unperturbed, ready to continue the play.

At last the final whistle blew. Rutgers had won six goals to Princeton's four. November, 1869, Rutgers' TARGUM said: "To sum up, Princeton had the most muscle, but didn't kick very well, and wanted organization. They evidently don't like to kick the ball on the ground. Our men, on the other hand, though comparatively weak, ran well, and kicked well throughout."

Rutgers paid heavily for the glory of winning the world's first football game. A return match the same year was won by Princeton which initiated an unbroken Rutgers' losing streak until the cannon war was reopened in 1938.

The magnificent new stadium should have been enough to inspire the team to "die for dear old Rutgers." Constructed of steel and concrete, it seats 20,000 people and can be enlarged to accommodate as many as 70,000. A modern field house containing a varsity dressing room, three rooms for visiting teams and a number of small offices runs the full length of the east stand. Sufficient room remains for the erection of lockers for the entire student body.

Rutgers went out on the field that day determined to prove that Princeton no longer had "the Indian sign" on them and November 5, 1938 became Rutgers' greatest football day since the school had cooperated with Princeton to found American intercollegiate football. Down went the jinx. Down went the old hoodoo. Rutgers rose to play inspired football and regained supremacy over Princeton by winning a thrilling game 20-18.

In the stands that day sat former State Senator George H. Large, at 86 years of age, the last survivor of the game played 69 years before. The defeats of the intervening three score years and nine dropped away in the memory of the veteran of the first game. As the Rutgers fans riotously celebrated by tearing down their own goal posts, he noted with satisfaction that the Princeton-Rutgers rivalry had at last been returned to "normal."