



Evolution of the Sport of Touch

(Dennis Coffey, M Ed Stds, B Ed, Dip Phys Ed, FIT Secretary General)

Executive Summary

Touch – the sport for all, is a worldwide phenomenon based on participant skill and teamwork, with a dash of fitness thrown in at the elite level. The sport is invasive by design with a history from Rugby league. Touch has gained popularity because of the non-contact format that allows participation by all ages and both genders, even in mixed form. It is ironical that the very creation of Rugby caused by the divide between Rugby and Football some 150 years ago was also based on non-contact – or “hacking” actually.

This paper looks at the history of Touch since it evolved just 45 years ago. The argument considers facts supporting the sport’s independence and compares Touch with other, like sports, some of which have retained a linkage to their forefathers.

Historical facts

After several decades of debate regarding aspects of the playing rules, the Football Association (FA) was formed in London in October 1863 and looked to frame playing rules that met the needs of most exponents of what was loosely called “football”. There was continued conflict regarding a couple of playing rules within the Football Association primarily concerning the matter of “hacking” – the act of kicking an opposition player in the shins, as well as issues about the degree of ball handling allowed. Subsequently the Rugby Football Union (RFU) was founded following a meeting of a number of clubs in 1870. Clearly two different sports evolved during the mid-1800s.

Over the next few decades and within several Rugby clubs, further conflict arose over what was called “broken time”, the issue of whether players should receive compensation for taking time off work to play. This was the result of a divide between upper and lower (working) classes. The northern England Rugby clubs were heavily of the working class and many players either had to miss matches due to work commitments or forego critical income to play Rugby. In 1892 allegations of player payments at Bradford and Leeds clubs were made, not the first to be made against northern Rugby bodies. Southern England clubs were also faced with similar circumstances. The RFU became concerned that these “broken time” payments were a pathway to professionalism.

Limitations on the playing ability of the working class was also based the fact that Rugby is a contact sport, hence working class players had to be careful how hard they played. If injured, they had to pay their own medical bills and possibly take time off work, which for a man earning the sole weekly wage could easily result in financial hardship.

In 1895 twenty Rugby clubs from Yorkshire, Lancashire and Cheshire resigned from the RFU. In 1908, eight clubs in Sydney, Australia, broke away from Rugby Union and formed the NSW Rugby League. Player payment and compensation were the prime reasons surrounding the breakaway. The two rugby codes were



to exist for the foreseeable future and although similar in style there were various rule changes introduced, especially concerning action after a tackle and player numbers.

Payment disputes were also affecting Soccer (Football) and Cricket however Rugby Union's stance was the most radical. Amateurism was strictly enforced. Anyone accepting payment or playing Rugby League was banned from playing Rugby Union. It would be a century before union legalized player payments and even allowed players who had played a single game of Rugby League to subsequently play in a game of Rugby Union.

In the late 19th Century evidence shows that many variations of "Rugby" and "Football" evolved. Although the history of Gaelic Football dates back to medieval times, there are close ties with that sport and variants of Rugby Union. The modern rules of Gaelic Football were set down in 1886. On the other side of the globe in 1859, the sport of Australian Rules Football (AFL) evolved and while specific origin details remain somewhat obscure and are the subject of much debate, there is little doubt that the sport evolved from both a "football" and "rugby" background. The reason for the AFL breakaway was once more related to playing rules. In the AFL case it was about groups disagreeing with the formation of a scrum following a dropped ball or knock-on in open play.

American football also evolved from the game of Rugby Union in 1879. Walter Camp, a player and coach of Yale University, is recognized as "The Father of American Football" as the early rules of the game was instituted by him. However and previous to that, students of Princeton were already playing a game called "Ballown". That game was about fisting the ball and then players using feet to advance the ball past their opponents. There were no hard and fast rules that applied however the physical aspect of the game was immense and often resulted on open violence.

Some variations had been played prior to that year and in 1873, the Intercollegiate Football Association had been formed with representation from Columbia, Rutgers, Princeton, and Yale. Walter Camp began the final process of evolution from Rugby Union to American Football. The number of players was reduced from fifteen to eleven and the field size was set to a hundred and ten yards. Later on the term of "downs" was introduced and tackling below the belt was legalized.

However, the violent physical challenge that the game demanded, caused many serious injuries and deaths in the next few years. As a result, although still gaining popularity, football was banned in many colleges. In 1905, under a directive from President Theodore Roosevelt concerning a play called "the Flying Wedge", Yale, Harvard and Princeton universities setup a couple of meetings between schools and formed a seven member Rules Committee which was later came to be known as National Collegiate Athletic Association, or the NCAA. American Football has now become a multi-billion dollar industry.

More recent history

In the mid 1960s in South Sydney, Australia, a group of ex-Rugby League players commenced a formal style of Rugby League (Football) that excluded body contact from the rules. The Australian Touch Football Association was formed in 1978 and the name of the game was formally changed to "Touch" in September 1981. Formal Touch rules were drafted and the sport quickly spread across the Tasman. The first



international was played in 1985 in Melbourne, Australia, between Australia and New Zealand and at the same time the Federation of International Touch was formed.

The sport of Touch completes the evolution of the manner of ball handling in recognized football sports. In the original Football the game involves foot contact with the ball and no handling is allowed, while Touch involves only handling with no kicking of the ball allowed. Ball movement and the utilization of space remain constant characteristics in each of the family sports.

The first Football world cup was delivered in 1930 and has been hosted every four years since (except during WW2). Rugby League conducted the original "Rugby World Cup" in 1954 in France, well before the first Rugby Union world cup, and has conducted fourteen world cup events at various intervals since then. The first Rugby Union world cup was played in New Zealand in 1987 just one year before the inaugural Touch world cup was hosted by Australia on the Queensland's Gold Coast. Both Rugby and Touch have delivered seven world cups and each deliver the event every four years – both sports are to next deliver their world cup events in 2011 (Touch in Scotland and Rugby in New Zealand).

Flag Football developed as a non-contact version of American Football with numerous variants. Flag football developed on military bases in the early 1940s as a recreational sport for military personal. The National Touch Football League was formed in 1960 and national championships have been delivered annually since 1971. Flag Football rules were first published in 1952 and Flag became an official non-contact variant in 1988. Again, the evolution of Flag Football was based primarily on a need for safer or at least less-physical sport and initially for a way to practice (real) American Football without injury.

Many other "national organizations" have formed since the mid 1990s to take advantage of the more than 20 million players participating in Flag Football programs within the USA. As the list continues to grow there have been many attempts to "unify" Flag Football however fragmentation continues. The drive to crown just one national champion is elusive and in the words of Tim Langdon, "will never be realized until league and tournament directors put the game and players first and their egos second."

In Sydney Australia in 1992, former St George Dragons halfback Perry Haddock founded the non-contact sport of OzTag while coaching a Rugby League junior team. The rules were basically copied from Touch with the same field dimensions but restricted kicking is allowed. Like most versions of Tag Rugby, a "tackle" is made when one of the two Velcro strips is removed.

Unlike OzTag, Mini Tag is clearly based on Rugby Union rather than Rugby League. For under-7 children it does not have an equivalent of the six tags or six touch laws and instead tackled players must off-load the ball. For under-8 ages there is a six tag law (RFU Continuum 3.5.g) which requires that on the 7th tag the referee will stop the game and give the ball to the other side. The game is then restarted with a free pass. Mini Tag is currently the only form of Rugby Union permitted by the English RFU for under-8 and under-7 age groups. Mini Tag requires the use of a size 3 Rugby ball and does not allow any scrums, line-outs or kicking.

Tag Rugby, also known as Flag Rugby or Flag Rugby League or just Tag, is a non-contact team game in which each player wears a belt that has two Velcro strips attached. The strips may also be attached directly to player shorts in some variants. The mode of play is similar to Rugby Union and Rugby League with a ball-



carrying attacking player attempting to dodge, evade and pass an oval ball while defenders attempt to prevent them scoring by "tagging", the action of pulling a Velcro attached tag from the ball carrier. Tag Rugby is also used as a development game / alternative by the Rugby Union amateur community and in some countries Tag Rugby has recently developed a close association with Rugby Union. Tag is a rather different game from the sport of Touch and has become particularly popular in Ireland.

There are four major types of Tag Rugby played in Ireland. They include men-only leagues, women-only leagues, mixed leagues (in which a minimum of three players must be female), and a veterans league (over-35 years of age). Each type is usually played in four different ability categories ranging from A league (the most competitive) through B, C, and beginners league (the most inexperienced and usually the least competitive).

The original sport of Touch (Football) was played under Rugby League Laws without activities that involved hard physical contact. The removal of body-contact was a prime evolution motivator. The field size was reduced by half so that two games could be played on one Rugby League sized field, allowing greater participation and adapting to the scarcity of available grassed areas. The name of the game changed officially in 1981 (dropping the word "Football") and a formal set of Touch playing rules was developed and issued the same year. The sport involved defenders stopping a ball carrier with a light "touch" rather than a body check or tackle that was used in Rugby League. Initially there were seven players on the field and a (Rugby League style) marker was used after each touch. Soon the marker was removed and the on field player number reduced to six. In March 1985 following the first international between Australia and New Zealand in Melbourne, the Federation was formed, the first global set of rules was issued and the official FIT playing rules have been the sport's global reference ever since.

Primarily because of simplicity, skills based motion and the avoidance of full-contact, together with team (social and communication) benefits and minimum equipment requirement, Touch is a game suited to both genders and to young and old alike. Few sporting activities have the attraction of men and women playing in the same team. Even fewer allow parents and children the opportunity to participate together. There are no limitations on the nature of playing divisions in Touch with single gender, mixed gender, aged divisions up to 65 years, and numerous community level divisions including family basis entry requirements.

While the main attraction is acknowledged as being for health and social reasons, Touch is also suited to the elite athlete with demands of high level skill, fitness, teamwork and tactics. The sport is primarily about creating space, ball movement and scoring. Over the past thirty years, primarily in Australia and New Zealand, technical education programs have been developed for coaches, referees and selectors in the sport of Touch. These programs, supported by respective resource packages, involve progressive and formal accreditations from community to elite levels. Scientific research has become an important element of the game and there are many instances where the sport of Touch has been the forerunner to similar technical developments in other sports.

As a relatively young sport, and perhaps somewhat different to the trial-and-error processes of earlier sports, most technical development is based on sound technical research. In 1983 a referee analysis project developed the justification for increasing on field referees from one to two. A more recent project in 2006, involved detailed on-field movement pattern analysis using GPS units on players and referees. Early this



century and because of the increasing speed of the representative game, Australia identified the need for three officiating referees, which is now standard practice in all representative matches. Some of the technical processes developed and implemented for Touch have been copied directly by other sports.

Globally there is a recognised technical gap between the Northern and Southern hemispheres. In an effort to reduce that gap both Australia and New Zealand, through the International Touch Federation, have been supporting worldwide technical development projects. Touch is currently played in more than 50 countries worldwide and membership of the Federation is rapidly increasing. Significant recent participant number increases have been noted in Asia and throughout Europe.

There can be little doubt that the success of the sport in Australia, where there are more Touch participants than Rugby Union and Rugby League combined, is a direct reflection of the success of the sport of Touch within the schools / education system. In addition to delivering regular intra-school and inter-school competitions, the sport offers the AusSquad program, AusTouch, Open Days and carnivals, coaching workshops, clinics and other school and community based activities, for schoolchildren, teachers and parents all year round.

The first Schools Touch Tournament was conducted in Queensland in October 1983 and the Queensland Secondary Schools Touch Association (QSSTA) was formed a year later. The Queensland All Schools Touch event is now the biggest schools event anywhere in the world with over 250 teams and nearly 3000 players entering each year. In 1986 the Queensland Open teams toured New South Wales and the ACT and during this tour a meeting was held in Sydney to form the Australian Secondary Schools Touch Association, a group fully supported and endorsed by the Australian Touch Association and the Australian Schools Sports Council. The first schools national championship was conducted a year later.

Touch quickly grew in popularity within the schools system, supported by teachers and parents, and today more than half a million children participate in regular schools competitions in the state of Queensland and a similar number in New South Wales. Now accepted as a main stream sport because of the skills base and lack of injuries, Touch was not seen as a threat to other sports. In particular, the football codes (especially Rugby League and Rugby Union) are more than grateful to receive the presented talent for their subsequent use. In Queensland alone, the sport of Touch has been a productive breeding ground for numerous Rugby League, Rugby Union and other sportsmen and sportswomen. The single state QSSTA is a model for developing athletes for national representation and professional sports.

Darren Lockyer, stalwart Captain of Australian Rugby League for many years, had his grounding in Queensland Touch. Benji Marshall, Captain of New Zealand Rugby League, represented Australia in the Mixed Open division of the 2003 Touch World Cup in Japan. Carolyn Crudginton (Gunderson), Australian Olympic Softball representative also honed her many agility and coordination skills in Queensland Touch. The list goes on and there is strong evidence to support the benefit of Touch to other sports.

There are also other derivatives of Rugby League also known as OzTag, and Mini Tag a derivative of Rugby Union for juniors, are popular in Ireland and Australia in particular, as non-contact variants. As Rugby Union and Rugby League may be perceived as competitors, a similar position applies with Touch and Tag.

Summary

Each of the (football) sports has evolved in its own unique manner and principally the evolution has been related to a desire for rule change – or a desire to not change. There are significant differences in field dimensions, number of players allowed, match duration and even in the number of referees, umpires or officials within each sport.

There is one consistent characteristic of many of the sports that have evolved in the last half century. Ironically that feature was also predominant in the first football sport. Football and its grandsons Touch, Flag, Mini and Tag are sports in which full body contact is not allowed. It is curious that the body contact issue (or “hacking” as it was then known) was the determinant for the very creation of Rugby Union, usually considered as the father of many of today’s football sports. The following summarises similarities and differences in “football” sports:

A Comparison of Like Invasive Sports

	Field Dimensions	Number of Players	Duration of Match	Rules Origin	Number of Referees
Football	Rectangular 105m x 68m	11 (7 / 3)	2 x 45 min	1863	1 / 2
Rugby Union	Rectangular 100m x 69m	15 (7 / 7)	2 x 40 min	1871	1 / 2
Rugby League	Rectangular 100m x 68m	13 (4 / 4)	2 x 40 min	1895	2 / 2
Touch	Rectangular 70m x 50m	6 (8 / 8)	2 x 20 min	1985	3
American Football	Rectangular 105m x 68m	11 (42 / 34)	4 x 15 min	1903	1 / 6
Australian Rules Football	Oval 165m x 135m	18 (Unlimited)	4 x 20 min	1859	3 / 2
Gaelic Football	Rectangular 140m x 85m	15 (15 / 5)	2 x 35 min	1887	1 / 7
Flag Football	Rectangular 100m x 40m	8 (5)	4 x 15 min	1952	1 / 3
Tag Rugby	Rectangular 70m x 50m	7 (5 / 5)	2 x 20 min	1992	1

(December 2010)