

“Here They Come!”

Pilgrims, Corinthians, and the “Foreign Game” as Invader

We have come over here not so much to win games, although we have managed to do that with pretty fair regularity. We are making this tour because we want to show Americans how football ought to be played.

—Fred Milnes

“**A**SSOCIATION FOOT BALL is by no manner of means a new game in this country,” wrote a contributor to Spalding’s *Association Football Guide* in 1904. “[It] can be said that more or less, it has been played for a number of years, and the words ‘more or less’ just about explain the situation, for just when it would appear that the game was booming, petty quarrels, and the inevitable spectator stepped in, newly organized clubs lost interest, and spasmodic was the life of this, one of the grandest winter sports.”

Brighter days lay ahead, according to the *Guide*—they always would—yet the game teetered in the dark for some time to come. To most of the country, “foot ball” had come to mean Americanized rugby, in all its rugged, manly glory, and under its considerable weight soccer had all but suffocated. Nowhere was this more true than on college campuses, where sports were developing a telling significance. Well before the start of the twentieth century, many of the most enduring rivalries of the gridiron had been established: Georgia–Georgia Tech, Minnesota–Wisconsin, California–Stanford, and dozens of others—headed, of course, by Harvard–Yale.

Soccer hadn’t simply missed out on this attention and excitement, it had proved incapable of so much as organizing any sort of intercollegiate play. After 1876, when Columbia, Harvard, Princeton, and Yale agreed to form a rugby football association and not a soccer one, the game faded from campuses—and most of the country would never get to see it. In

places like Kearny, New Jersey, and Fall River, Massachusetts, British enclaves disconnected from elite institutions of higher learning, soccer would become all the rage. But that was part of its problem.

Perhaps more to the point, it lacked violence. In an industrialized country increasingly fearful of becoming effete, aggression on the gridiron, even at the risk of serious injury, had come to be perceived as a welcome demonstration of masculinity. This wasn't necessarily limited to headlong leaps and crunching tackles. Few saw much wrong with the occasional flying elbow or closed fist, or even with Frederic Remington, the future artist and sculptor, dousing his Yale uniform in slaughterhouse blood in preparation for Saturday's game. Though nominally proscribed, stamping, gouging, hair pulling, slugging—or jumping on an opponent and breaking his collarbone, as had occurred in the infamous Harvard-Yale encounter of 1894—had become furtive tactics. The sight of sideline doctors stitching dazed combatants back together was an accepted consequence of the pursuit of glory for the alma mater.

Not everyone had been swept along. A few college presidents—most notably, Charles Eliot of Harvard—wanted desperately for the game to be removed from campus. But popular sentiment weighed against it. Far more of Eliot's number echoed the sentiments of Notre Dame's John Cavanaugh that it was better for students to play football and suffer the occasional broken collarbone than “see them dedicated to croquet.” Even the nation's rough-riding president stood firmly behind the game: Theodore Roosevelt was “utterly disgusted” by Eliot's desire to ban football and “would a hundred fold rather keep the game as it is now, with the brutality, than give it up.”

Periodically, though, the level of carnage, as well as the use of proto-professional and tramp athletes and football's bloated position on campus, sparked calls for reform. But the game's leading figures, headed by Walter Camp of Yale, resisted. Critics were mollified through disingenuous “statistical” analyses of casualties as well as propaganda initiatives, underlining what Camp and his counterparts professed to be the merits of playing the game: discipline and self-sacrifice, teamwork, endeavor, and the transformation of weedy boys into strapping young men.

Of course, such virtues could be applied to a number of sports, soccer among them. But as the “college game” had demonstrably won campuses over, it was assumed to possess inherently superior qualities. After watching a soccer match between teams from Philadelphia and New York in 1894, Penn's quarterback remained convinced of his sport's superiority:

Ours is a running and tackling game. The association game is an individual game. By this I do not mean that it is not one of team work, for there is plenty of this, and in some respects there is more than in the college game. What I mean by individual is that spectators can see who is doing a particular thing, as distinguished from our game, where the men are massed and it is impossible to see, in a jumbled-up heap, the ball or the man who has it. . . . The game is exciting, but not so much so as the college game. In the association game the goal is threatened oftener, the ball changes from one side of the field to the other very rapidly. In the college game the excitement is wrought up to a greater nervous tension.

Julian Curtiss, a Yale alumnus, was more unequivocal in 1903:

I venture to say that if an Association game was played on one field and a game under the college rules was played next door, the latter would so far outdraw the former that there would be no comparison. This “tag, you’re it” style of play would not draw a corporal’s guard when there was a game of the other sort going on.

At the start of the twentieth century, the most likely hope for soccer—assuming it would establish itself—was not of supplanting football but of coexisting with some toned-down version of it. Reporting in 1904 that Harvard’s decision to form a soccer team had “been seconded at the University of Pennsylvania,” the *New York Times* noted that “rugby and association football are both popular in England, and there is no reason why they should not work together in this country.”

Intercollegiate play finally arrived in April 1904, when Harvard and Haverford College of Pennsylvania faced each other in a home-and-home series. Some schools had fielded teams prior to then, but they had been left to compete against whatever opposition they could find. In 1895, the *New York Times* reported at length on Princeton’s trip to Newark for a match with the Rangers club of Kearny. “Being used to [watching] a game where weight and strength count for everything,” the paper noted, “they relied too much on charging, and passing and dribbling were neglected.” They lost, 7–3.

But it was at Haverford where the college seed first found purchase, some two years before the encounter with Harvard. Its soccer team had taken part in matches against Philadelphia’s cricket clubs and even

helped them to form a league in 1903. The University of Pennsylvania could also attribute its comparatively early start to the profusion of teams in the city. Indeed, at the time, Philadelphia offered a more sympathetic home to the game than New York. In a report on a match between the Belmont club of Philadelphia and the Staten Island Cricket Club in 1902, the *New York Times* claimed that soccer was “not played much in this city” and that only around a hundred fans had attended a match that, according to the visiting team, would have brought a crowd of 500 or 1,000 to Philadelphia. Spalding’s 1904 *Guide* even contended that “games are now played in Philadelphia which will compare favorably in skill and conduct with the average game in Britain.”

In St. Louis, soccer was catching on just as keenly, if with less finesse. One official noted “while the St. Louis teams rated highly compared with clubs from Chicago and even Canada, it was apparent that the finer points of the game . . . were forgotten. Rough play featured almost every game and many former followers of the sport refused to continue their patronage.”

The reasons for such capitulation to primitive play, in St. Louis and elsewhere, were not merely bloodlust and a lack of coaching. One of the perceived advantages of soccer was that it could—allegedly—be played right through the winter, a folly that consigned much of it to pools of mud or sheets of ice. Even in the best weather, the marginal places in which the game was played were small, uneven, and rutted, and the best chance of success on them wasn’t always in maneuvering the ball methodically along the ground. Not surprisingly, chasing down ambitious long passes and beating a more direct path to the goal worked very well; in turn, this made the game seem easy enough to learn. Yet it also attracted criticism that soccer lacked the necessary “science” of the gridiron.

Fortunately, the emerging incidence of international competition—in particular, between North America and Great Britain—would begin to change perceptions. As early as 1888, a Canadian soccer team toured the British Isles; three years later, it did so again, taking part in no fewer than fifty-eight matches and including several American players in the squad. As British soccer teams were also crossing oceans with some regularity, a visit from some crack English or Scottish eleven seemed inevitable. In 1890, newspapers reported that an “international team of Scottish players” was likely to visit the eastern United States, taking on the likes of Yale, Harvard, and Columbia—whether they had teams or not—as well as more tangible opposition in Fall River and elsewhere. The plans were abandoned, apparently out of a “fear that a representative team could not

be got together." But the idea was not. Sunderland, the English champion in 1892 and runner-up in 1893, announced its intention to make a North American tour in 1894, with stops from Boston to St. Louis. This, too, failed to materialize (or, at least, it took sixty years to do so; the club finally came across in 1955).

The sport of cricket was having better luck attracting British teams into the country, and a few of them, given a willing opponent and a spare afternoon, even indulged in soccer. Kent's county eleven did so against an all-Philadelphia selection during a 1903 tour. Yet the closest America had come to hosting a genuine international soccer match remained the two encounters it had staged in New Jersey with a representative Canadian team in the 1880s.

Things looked set to change the following year. Toward the end of 1904, it was reported that the Corinthians, "the foremost association football club in England" that "numbers among its members all the best known amateurs," had agreed to a North American tour. All seemed to be in order until the English Football Association got wind of the plans. One report somewhat cryptically claimed the governing body "did not look with too much favor upon the trip and probably feared that it would not be conducted on the principle of pure amateur sport, for which the Corinthians' name is so well known."

For the time being, the club stayed put. But on the heels of this disappointment, or perhaps even as a result of it, another English team announced its intention to make a North American tour and proved as good as its word.

The group, known as the Pilgrims Football Club, was more a collection of individuals than an enduring team. They bore no relation to the club of the same name from East London that had regularly entered the English Football Association Challenge Cup (the FA Cup) in the 1870s and 1880s, nor were they the former students of a college in Brighton who in 1902 had won an international tournament in Belgium as Pilgrims FC. They were, in fact, a band of "gentlemen amateurs" who, as was common at the time, played as little or as often as they cared to or as their professions permitted.

According to one U.S. publication, the sixteen players likely to feature in the squad were "not absolutely first-class" but did include "quite a number of well-known names in the football world." Among them were Tom Fitchie of Woolwich Arsenal (which became Arsenal in 1914) and Vivian Woodward of Tottenham Hotspur. Fitchie, a Scotland international, ended up staying at home, but it scarcely mattered: the nimble

Woodward, who according to the biographer Norman Jacobs was then “generally recognized as the best centre forward in the country,” would average more than two goals a game on the tour. Woodward’s most famous days were still to come. In the 1908 and 1912 Olympic Games, he captained England to the gold medal and over his career made seventy appearances for his country, including forty-four at an amateur level.

In America, though, not even the presence of a top-class striker could overshadow that of a baronet. As its goalkeeper, the Pilgrims had selected Sir Charles Sharpe Kirkpatrick of Closeburn, variously described as a representative of “the main line of the family to which the Empress Eugenie [wife of Napoleon III] belongs” and “a big fellow with a genial smile.” As a soccer player, Kirkpatrick’s pedigree seems open to question—one account describes him as “merely a spare man who butted into the team at his own request”—but to the smitten U.S. newspapers, this mattered little; he had supposedly “earned high honors at the game” and was “good at almost everything in the way of athletics.”*

Preoccupied as they were with the nobleman in their midst—the *New York Times* even devoted 450 words to his hat falling off outside a hotel—the cosmopolitan press assumed Kirkpatrick to be captaining, directing, or otherwise leading his team. There are suggestions that the others became piqued by this star billing, an irritation doubtless exacerbated by the American promoters, who knew what sold newspapers. In truth, the driving force behind the Pilgrims was a twenty-seven-year-old Yorkshireman named Fred Milnes, who’d occasionally played fullback for Sheffield United but was also “in business with his father as an iron founder.” Milnes’s peripatetic soccer career would encompass appearances for several other clubs, including Manchester United, all of them fleeting. “He is a fair-haired young fellow of splendid physique,” one account observed, “and so fond is he of the game that he has been known to play six strenuous matches in as many days.”

Milnes’s account of the tour, published in 1906 as *A Football Tour with the Pilgrims in America*, places the transatlantic competition firmly in the context of a sightseeing expedition rather than any mission to change America’s sporting predilections, as some have claimed. The tour lasted virtually the whole of September and October, starting in Canada and swinging as far west as St. Louis. It also included excursions to Niagara

* The press also took a strong interest in another soccer-loving baronet, Sir Ernest Cochrane, a “noted patron of the game in England” who accompanied the Pilgrims in 1905 and donated a “valuable silver cup” for unspecified “international challenge play.”

Falls and other natural wonders; visits to parks, libraries, and monuments; and tours of factories, breweries, and distilleries (to Milnes even the municipal water works of Detroit represented "one of the sights well worth seeing"). "Off the field they might be taken for members of the Moseley commission, which came from England some time ago to investigate commercial conditions," noted one of the tour's organizers. "Machine shops, car works, factories, and other industries appear to be their especial delight."

Clad in the same combination of white shirts and blue shorts as England's national team, the inquisitive visitors had little difficulty in asserting their superiority. After a 5-0 victory in Montreal, they did come unstuck against the Rangers club of Berlin (now Kitchener). Milnes, though, pointed to extenuating circumstances:

Berlin is certainly German, and many of the residents are German, too. Our referee for this match, which was well attended, seemed more conversant with rules Made in Germany, than with English Football Association Rules, and thus his way of refereeing spoiled everything in the way of good football, and he would persist, after the first few minutes[,] in playing the game under Canadian Rules and his own thrown in. We offered to find a referee so that the game might be played correctly, but the knight of the whistle, who was also an official of the Berlin club, would not hear of it. Several times he would ask my decision on certain points, and especially what off-side was. During the game the ball was kicked out of touch, and until it came back the referee solicited more information on the rules. Imagine my surprise when suddenly an opponent came to us and said they'd scored a goal! Neither the referee nor I knew anything about the goal, but it was allowed to count as the winning goal of three, and thus our first defeat was administered.

The man in charge, a Mr. Radforth, would not be the last whistle-toting chevalier to aggravate the Englishmen. For the fifth match of the tour, against Galt FC of Ontario, Milnes asserted that although a "special referee had been chartered right away from Montreal," a local man ended up taking charge. "Of course as far as we were concerned we did not mind who the referee was, so long as he understood the rules," Milnes wrote. "However whether the 'tootler' knew our rules or not, I can't say, he certainly did not enforce them, and we soon found ourselves playing strictly Canadian rules." Urged on by a crowd of 5,000, the gold-medal winners from

the previous year's Olympics managed a 3–3 draw. "We certainly got well kicked during the game," claimed Milnes, "but remembered that the best method of revenge is not to imitate the one who has done the injury."

Two days later, they crossed the border into Detroit to begin the American part of their tour. Rather ambiguously, Milnes refers to the match against a picked eleven there as the "most disappointing game of the tour . . . whether through lack of interest or some other cause I do not exactly know, although I have reason to believe it was not the former." The 10–2 trouncing may have contributed to his disappointment; or, perhaps, it was the fact that the referee turned up without a ball, leaving the players to sit around for the better part of an hour while he left to buy one. Woodward tormented the home defense, scoring five times to take his tally to thirteen goals in five games.

St. Louis, where two matches were scheduled, was expected to offer a sterner challenge, in every sense of the word. Indeed, the captain of the local all-star eleven, Phil Kavanaugh, seemed more concerned by the severity of the refereeing than the visiting team. "If the contest were fought out under the conditions which prevail in St. Louis during the regular football season, I would be almost certain of winning," he said, "but the Englishmen interpret the rules of charging differently, and do not, in general, conduct as spirited a game as we do." All the same, he believed his team had an "excellent chance to win both games," owing among other things to its "superior weight."

Certainly the St. Louisans were not light on their feet; their own season had not yet started, and most of the players appear to have been risibly out of shape. Years later, the team's center-half, "King" Finnegan, would claim that two teammates "were so obese they had to wear elastic abdominal supporters." Keeping up with the sprightly Englishmen, let alone putting the wood to them, proved a fanciful notion. The Pilgrims scored ten times without reply in the first game—and, as Finnegan recalled, left the home goalkeeper fearing for his life:

"Gaspip" Tully was our goalie, and what a day he had of it. Those English forwards hammered at him all afternoon. He fisted, headed and booted the shots away heroically during the first half, but the second found him exhausted. The terrific bombardment from British foes could not be held off and goals began to slip through Gaspip's guard. Panting and all in, he fisted one away and shouted to his nearby teammates: "Say, come back here! What are you guys trying to do, get me killed?"

The intrepid Gaspipe survived the rematch—this time the score was 0–6—and was probably as relieved as anyone by a decision to shorten the halves to thirty-five minutes, apparently in deference to English complaints about the heat. Kavanaugh had complained after the first match that the referee had not been sympathetic in his interpretation of the rules. But after the second game—for which hopes had been high ("You can put all your money down that we will not only make a better showing, but will win")—he was left to concede the opposition had been "too fast and too clever for us."

The real story, though, had been the level of fan interest, which had benefited from the necessity of playing both games after major-league baseball contests. The 10,000 or so who attended the first match may have set a record for soccer in the Midwest; if so, it lasted barely a day. No one can be sure how many attended the second; it might have been 28,000, as Milnes wrote, or it may have been nearer to the 21,000 cited as the baseball attendance, which even for that sport represented the "greatest crowd seen in a St. Louis park this year." Years later, a St. Louis newspaper placed the figure at a precise 15,986, claiming that several thousand more had gate-crashed crumbling League Park after the baseball had finished. In a facility with a capacity of less than 16,000, this was no mean trick. What was clear, though, was that the Pilgrims had demonstrated a standard of play far beyond anything the city had ever witnessed—and whether through an appreciation of their talents, a fervent desire for revenge, or sheer curiosity, the public had responded in numbers soccer in America would not see again for decades. That Milnes should later reflect, "If there is a place in the U.S. where our Association game has a bright future, it is St. Louis," was hardly a surprise.

But early October was time for a major shift in the sporting calendar—or, as one newspaper mused, "It will not be long now before the gridiron will be the scene of many a fierce scrimmage, and the annual talk of whether football is a brutal game or not will be in full force." The conversations had become particularly animated that summer as a number of influential publications ran articles drawing attention to the less reputable elements of the game. It had even attracted presidential attention. Around the time the Pilgrims were leaving St. Louis, President Roosevelt met with Walter Camp and other gridiron chieftains and directed them to address the excesses of violence, cheating, and unsporting behavior he'd been reading about. The meeting had little effect (according to one account, "Camp made some considerable talk but was very slippery and did not allow himself to be pinned down to anything"), and it did little to

point the sport in a new direction. Indeed, it might even have crystallized perceptions that the game was out of control. While there is no evidence to suggest the president threatened to abolish football, as is sometimes claimed, to many in the press the possibility seemed genuine.

The Pilgrims knew of the sport's perilous position. To the likes of Milnes, the American brand of football was rather superfluous ("We play the ball, not the man. There are plenty of other games where you can play the man—prize-fighting, for instance") and destined to lose out to the association game. While such an attitude may have reeked of British imperialism, soccer was certainly developing with alacrity in other parts of the world. Only the year before, the Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) had been formed.

But in Milnes's view, even American teams who had chosen the right code of football were playing it the wrong way. "The main difference in our style of play and that of the American teams we have played against is that we use heads—both literally and figuratively—to a far greater extent than they do," he claimed. "Both here and in Canada you seem to rely more upon the 'one man' play. You kick the ball much more than we and do about four times as much running." The British, naturally, knew best. Milnes wrote:

Combined, or team play, is certainly the best method of succeeding in this game, each player working with his fellows, passing the ball from one man to another, to the disadvantage of the opposing team. Directly each player commences playing for himself and keeping the ball, the other side finds comparatively little difficulty in obtaining it, and commencing an attack themselves. One of the most important points in "Soccer" is to keep the ball on the ground as much as possible. Directly the ball is lifted it becomes far more difficult to control, with the result that an element of luck comes into the game to the exclusion of science.

Of course, on the less cultivated playing surfaces of North America there was often a good reason to elevate the ball, particularly if a lack of finesse could be overcome by greater exertion. Britain's expansive pitches did not exist within the confines of baseball parks or gridirons; in American soccer, there was often a lot less ground to cover, with or without the ball.

The two matches the Pilgrims played in Chicago illustrate this point graphically. The first, against a local all-star team, took place at a cricket ground. The Pilgrims won easily—and impressively; the *Chicago Tribune*

claimed their 6–0 win had been “the greatest game Chicago has ever seen, and cleanly fought from start to finish.” According to the paper, the cricket pitch, “lightning fast and thoroughly level, was admirably suited to their scientific work.” The same may not have been true of other provisions. “The papers seemed quite ‘tickled’ because we ordered tea for refreshments at half time instead of wine, which is their custom,” Milnes noted. “We were evidently giving a Temperance lesson, in addition to football, but all the same[,] the two go together.”

When play moved the next day to a baseball park—the home of the White Sox—it was with dramatically different consequences. Except for a new right-back, Chicago was unchanged but their loins were girded; according to the *Tribune*, they “went after their opponents from the first whistle, rushing them off their feet, and, by aggressive playing, offset the advantage the Britons had by their slightly superior team work and combination plays.” Yet they had also benefited from the “rougher ground” that had “favored [their] style of play.” Within six minutes they’d taken the lead; midway through the second half, they scored again. All the English managed was a goal awarded after the Chicago goalkeeper fell into the net with the ball in his hands. Milnes claimed his team monopolized the second half with the exception of one counter-attack. But endeavor had triumphed over science, and before a sizeable crowd: according to the *Tribune*, “the attendance was the largest ever drawn out to a local association game, between 4,000 and 5,000 people being in the stands.”*

From there, the Pilgrims would play three matches in Philadelphia on consecutive days. They won them all convincingly; their greatest foe seemed to be the unseasonably warm weather, which was “no joke, though the players be jokers.” In winning 5–0 against the local Thistle club, the perspiring guests readily consented to shortening the second half to 30 minutes, doubtless to the relief of their overmatched hosts. The third game was played in Manheim, where an overflow crowd of perhaps 10,000 saw them trounce an all-Philadelphia selection, 5–0. “Such a crowd has not been seen at Manheim since the famous Penn–Princeton 6 to 4 game,” claimed one report, referring to a gridiron contest staged there in 1892. Again, the true attendance is unknown; Milnes claimed it was 15,000, “twice the size” of a Penn–Swarthmore football game taking place the same day and something that “evidently proved that our game had ‘won favour.’”

* Attendance estimates for matches from this era varied wildly. One newspaper reported that 16,400 had witnessed Chicago’s victory.