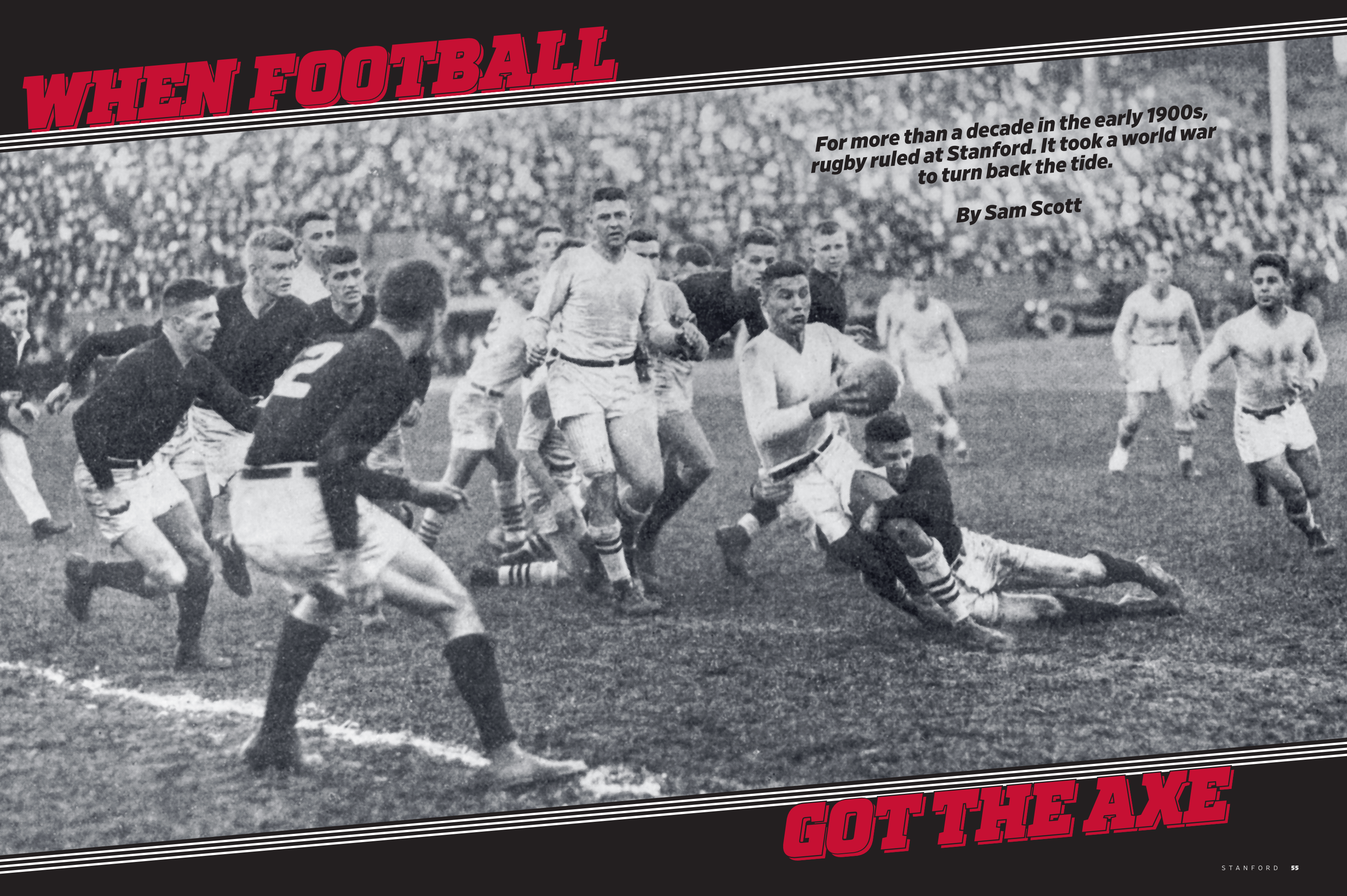


# WHEN FOOTBALL

*For more than a decade in the early 1900s, rugby ruled at Stanford. It took a world war to turn back the tide.*

*By Sam Scott*



# GOT THE AXE



# EXACTLY

who laid the fatal blow on Clarence Van Bokkelen wasn't clear. The young halfback never got up after taking a flying shoulder to his chest late in the 1905 football game between San Jose and Santa Clara high schools. But the coroner's inquest suggested the real harm might have come from a staggering hit earlier in the game.

For some observers, the ultimate reason an 18-year-old was lying on a slab in San Jose's O'Connor Sanitarium needed no autopsy to understand. He was killed by football itself—a brutish boil of a sport in urgent need of lancing. Newspapers across the country would add his name to what the *Chicago Tribune* called football's "death harvest." By the end of the 1905 season, at least 18 high school and college football players would be reported dead from the game, and pressure for reform was bearing down from as high as the White House.

The schools closest to the tragedy took immediate action. Santa Clara College, which had hosted the game, cut football altogether—at least until leaders could enable students "to enter into it without such fearful danger to life and limb." The high schools involved did the same, as did the University of the Pacific, then based in San Jose.

But 15 miles north, the death didn't seem to register much beyond a pair of briefs in the campus paper, the *Daily Palo Alto*. Far from rejecting football, Stanford was readying to embrace it like never before. Until 1904, Big Game—the preeminent athletic contest on the West Coast—had been held in San Francisco. But with Stanford Field now complete, the Farm was finally ready to play host. The game was the coming weekend. More than 15,000 tickets were printed. Campus was opened to automobiles for the first time. And the fans flooding in by car, as well as by ferry, horse and wagon, arrived to find a festival atmosphere. Memorial Church's organ played all morning; the museum was opened to the public; picnickers dotted the Arboretum.

It was an enchanting prelude to a riveting game—a closely fought 12–5 Stanford victory between evenly matched sides. "It will go down in the gridiron history of California as one of the greatest of all games," the *San Francisco Call* said.

If there were signs that this might also be the last such game, many closest to the scene seemed blissfully oblivious. The *Daily*

declared the victorious inauguration of the stadium to be the happiest day in the lives of fans, who celebrated with a serpentine dance across the field. The paper was soon guaranteeing gridiron success in 1906.

And yet just months later, Stanford and Cal would renounce football for a sport few had seen, let alone played: rugby. It was an upheaval of tradition that would isolate Stanford from much of sporting America for more than a decade and take a world war to undo.

It occurred despite shocked opposition from Stanford students, players and alumni—and their counterparts across the Bay—who'd been slow to realize the seriousness of the threat to what the Stanford Alumni Association extolled as the "greatest of games."

"Without opportunity for defense, the American game was sentenced, executed and thrust into its grave, almost before its friends knew that it was even in danger," the *Daily* protested when the change was finalized. "With scarcely a dissenting voice we desire and demand the game—the old game which we ourselves have played, and which has been played by Stanford men in the past.

"It is that game which we want, and not some imported English product."

The fiery language failed. The English import it would be.

**H**ow Stanford and Cal came to embrace rugby was inextricably linked to the growing national concern about the costs of football violence, which reached fever pitch in late November 1905, four weeks after Van Bokkelen's death.

In the first half of a game against New York University in Manhattan, Harold Moore, a star halfback for Union College, disappeared under a pile of players. When the referee cleared the jumble, Moore lay motionless on the grass. He would die hours later from a brain hemorrhage, much as Van Bokkelen had.

It was one thing for a schoolboy to die out by the California orchards. It was another for a college student to fall in the heart of the nation's largest city and newspaper capital. In swift response, Columbia abolished its football program and the president of NYU called an emergency nationwide conference, the progenitor of the NCAA.

Karl Brill, a star sophomore for Harvard—which had recently lost its captain for the season due to a brain injury—announced he was hanging up his cleats. His statement to Boston newspapers presaged the concussion debates of today: "I believe the human body was never meant to withstand the enormous strain which football demands," he



FOOTBALL FIRSTS: Once held in San Francisco, Big Game went to Berkeley in 1904 and Stanford in 1905.

said. "It is a mere gladiatorial combat. It is brutal throughout."

Cal's president, Benjamin Wheeler, was among the earliest university leaders to make Moore's death a rallying cry. "Football must be made over or go," he told the *Tribune*.

And indeed, under intense pressure, the game would be made over. The crisis would result in numerous changes, including the legalization of the forward pass and the doubling of first-down yardage. Both were intended to spur a more open game and end the mauling mass plays blamed for many of the worst injuries.

But football's sins weren't limited to its danger to life and limb. Both Wheeler and Stanford president David Starr Jordan had been athletes as Ivy League undergrads, and they revered a gentlemanly code of amateurism under which sports were subordinate to a university's mission of enlightenment. Football was dogged by another set of contentions with modern echoes: It contained mercenary players, academic shenanigans and richly paid coaches, and it required a level of commitment Jordan and Wheeler considered incompatible with study. Beyond that, it stirred rabid passions.

"Wheeler and Jordan were adamantly opposed to the value structure which had become associated with American football, believing that the game now taught a morality far

removed from that which a college should foster," writes Roberta Park, a UC-Berkeley historian. "What both desired for their students was vigorous, wholesome sport, not specialized and commercialized athletics."

Other university leaders had similar concerns. But as like-minded presidents operating in partnership from the remove of California—where their schools were what one historian called the "800-pound gorillas of coastal athletics"—Jordan and Wheeler had unusual power to exploit the crisis.

At a meeting of Stanford's and Cal's athletic committees in early December 1905, the joint body voted to recommend switching to rugby, or to a new version of the American game "with such modifications as shall promise to eliminate the existing evils." George C. Edwards, Berkeley's faculty athletic representative, exemplified the instinct to return to football's supposedly purer parent: "The game as played now is merely an offshoot of the old game. It has grown rotten with time. Now we will cut off the bad parts and return to the old stock."

An international rugby match between New Zealand and British Columbia was arranged that February to showcase the sport. It earned favorable reviews, even from the recently skeptical *Daily*. "[G]eneral consensus of opinion seemed to be that from the spectacular point of view rugby was far



superior to the American game,” the newspaper reported.

Jordan praised the teams’ clean play, where everything was out in the open for referees and spectators to see, and he indicated that he wanted the freshman team to play the game. The next month, he revealed a stronger position: “If we cannot adopt the English rugby game for next year,” he wrote to Wheeler, “it would be just as well to suspend the intercollegiate games until something arises which can be adopted.”

On March 20, 1906, the joint committee of the two universities voted for rugby. “It was rugby or nothing,” A.J. Chalmers, who’d captained Stanford’s football team the previous fall, said in an interview at the time. “I know there is a general sentiment among the football men at Stanford against rugby, and I heartily concur with that sentiment . . . but when it comes to a choice of rugby or nothing, I will support the English game.”

## Rugby, of course, was hardly a gentle replacement.

Like the gridiron game, it was a bruising battle to run an ovoid ball into enemy territory. But there were major differences, including a ban on blocking, and hence on football’s cursed mass plays, in which offensive players would converge into a many-headed battering ram. There were no downs, which reduced the feverish fight for every five yards. And there was no line of scrimmage, where in football each side would explode forward before every play. “Tackling in rugby ‘kills the ball,’ not the man,” the *San Francisco Chronicle* explained.

Rugby was also seen as more democratic. Smaller, lighter men could play, with skill supposedly being rewarded as much as strength. Most important, it was deemed free of the “immoral” influences of money and mania weighing down college football.

It had, though, been decades since football had emerged from rugby on the fields of America’s northeastern colleges. By 1906, the English game was a distant relation, and the scene at Stanford in early September hardly suggested that the transition back would make for attractive viewing.

According to the *Los Angeles Herald*, copies of the rules of rugby had yet to reach Stanford’s campus, and so aspiring

players could be heard quizzing each other on unfamiliar terms like “try,” “scrum” and “wings.” The few who knew what was going on were treated like sage heroes.

Stanford’s coach, meanwhile, wasn’t much better versed in the sport. Fresh off an undefeated football season, James Lanagan, Class of 1900, had offered his resignation once the move to rugby became inevitable. Instead, Stanford sent him to Canada to study up, while Cal’s coach headed to England and Wales.

“It may take us three or four seasons to learn this game, but when we do learn it and have men with hearts like last year’s varsity men, we need not be afraid of any team,” Lanagan told the scores of aspiring players.

Small wonder, then, that one reporter doubted it possible for “the two universities to play even one game of rugby that will be worth looking at.” And indeed, in the inaugural season, they may well not have. A *Chronicle* journalist complained that the low-grade rugby on display in the 1906 Big Game—a 6–3 Stanford victory—was as spectacular as watching sheep being driven into a pen. “Rugby a Great Disappointment,” one headline declared.

But fans still showed up. Receipts at the gate were up 13 percent from the 1905 Big Game. And there were signs rugby was gaining ground. Other colleges, including the University of Nevada, Santa Clara, St. Mary’s and, later, the University of Southern California, adopted rugby as their marquee sport. The Big Game victors headed to Canada to take on the British Columbia collegiate champions in a contest in which the Americans were instantly competitive.

“In my opinion the whole country will within five years be playing the rugby game,” Wheeler wrote in a letter sent to 200 California high schools urging them to make the transition. (Many obliged.) “I do not believe the present experiment in American college football can survive.”

Initially, Stanford’s president was seen by some as less of a force for rugby than his Berkeley counterpart. However, it soon became clear his own feelings were intensely held. After the 1907 season, Jordan let loose on the American game as “unethical,” “unchristian” and “unsportsmanlike” in a speech assailing virtually every football-playing college in the country for accepting unqualified students. The game’s

support of 40,000 fans eager for revenge.

And yet the Americans won 17–3 in an injury-marred slugfest. When a photographer attempted to take a picture of the American flag freshly raised atop the Olympic pole, enraged spectators let loose a barrage of projectiles.

One journalist likened the U.S. win to a French baseball team taking on an American pennant winner. “Their victory and their conduct under fire is the brightest entry that has been scored on all the pages of America’s international sport records.”



NEW RIVALRY: After Cal dropped rugby, Stanford’s “Big Game” from 1915 to 1917 was played against Santa Clara.

seething mass plays, meanwhile, he termed “a monstrosity. It is the greatest evil introduced into play.”

Jordan’s opinion was further hardened by the fact that football had failed to quell its violence. In 1909, the death toll from the sport hit 26, occasioning Jordan to write an open letter to the nation’s college presidents in which he denigrated football as rugby’s “American pervert” and called it the “heaviest burden yet borne by higher education in America.”

Outside of California and Nevada, however, no other American schools considered rugby a serious solution to football’s problems. Still, there were California’s “natural neighbors” on the Pacific to play. In May 1910, a combined All-American team of Stanford, Cal and Nevada players undertook a three-month, 15,000-mile tour of Australia and New Zealand, “the longest ever taken by a college athletic team,” the *Stanford Quad* boasted.

Finishing with three wins, two ties and nine losses against other collegiate teams, the Americans didn’t exactly return covered in glory. But against men who’d been around rugby their entire lives, the visitors had kept the games respectable—and with a little more time, it seemed reasonable to some that American hustle might predominate. “Will California Produce Rugby World’s Champions?” a headline in the *Call* asked. The answer, according to the writer, was yes, and soon.

Giving credence to the hype, two years later Stanford came back from an earlier defeat to beat the touring Australian national team 13–12 at Stanford.

A harsh reality check wasn’t long in coming. In 1913, the New Zealand national team—the feared All Blacks—scheduled games all over California and Canada and didn’t find much to worry about. “You don’t know how to play the game,” one All Black told reporters the day before his team faced Stanford for the first of two games.

If the Stanford players were aware of the disrespect, they didn’t do anything to quell it, losing by a combined score of 110–0. Any comfort in the result had to be found in the All Blacks’ domination over all other competition as well. The Kiwis played 16 games against American and Canadian opposition, outscoring opponents 610–6.

The sting of defeat was perhaps lessened by the fact that the All Blacks were the class of world rugby, but the crushing losses hardly helped the game’s status. One journalist dubbed the trip the “tour that killed American rugby.”

True or not, the sport’s momentum would soon flag. USC abandoned rugby in

1914 after failing to entice any other Southern California colleges to the sport. At the same time, the British Columbia colleges stopped fielding teams as Canada’s involvement in World War I turned playing fields into drill grounds and players into soldiers.

The biggest problem for Stanford, though, would come from across the Bay. The 1914 Big Game—a Stanford victory—would again set record receipts at the gate, but Cal was now bridle for an escape.

A Cal student, writing for the *Stanford Illustrated Review*, explained the desire: Rule changes had cleared up the American game, students and the public identified



# RUGBY'S HURRAH

By 1920, California rugby’s moment in the limelight was over. But its fading stars were about to pull off a shocking pair of encores: gold medals at the 1920 and 1924 Olympics.

There’s an asterisk. For various reasons, none of the English-speaking rugby powers sent teams to either event. But that left the French as the prohibitive favorite. And both times, the Americans beat them.

The 1924 victory in Paris was most astounding. The Americans—about half of whom were Stanford alums—had hardly played since the previous Olympics. And France had the





**DOWN AND DIRTY:** The 1912 Big Game, held at Cal, became known as the “Mud Bowl.”

more with football, and the American game better facilitated competition with other colleges. Football, he wrote, made a person “feel a bit proud to know that he is an American playing an American game the same as other great American universities.”

A more cynical take was that Cal had tired of losing to Stanford, be it in rugby or football. “California quit rugby because she had won only seven games since Stanford was founded,” a Stanford player told a *Chronicle* reporter.

Friction over football led to a total severing of athletic relations between the schools. Cal returned to the gridiron in 1915, losing 72–0 in its “Big Game” against Washington. Stanford stayed with rugby, routing Santa Clara 30–0 in its biggest regional game.

“Rugby Doomed in America,” the *New York Times* predicted in response. But even with the loss of its old rival, as well as Nevada and St. Mary’s, Stanford held to rugby, if barely. In May 1916, students voted 441–392 to maintain the status quo.

Stanford’s new president, Ray Lyman Wilbur, Class of 1896, MA ’97, MD ’99, was as anti-football as Jordan, his ire aimed at the power of the head coach. “It is a coach’s game. And the by-products that go with him—professionalism, anything for victory, secret practices—make the sport a power for harm,” he said. “American football is the greatest menace to intercollegiate athletics.”

**T**he rupture between Stanford and Cal may have calcified but for America’s involvement in World War I. The country’s entry into the war turned the Farm into a virtual military academy in the fall of 1918, when Stanford became headquarters for the newly created Student Army Training Corps for all of California, Utah and Nevada.

All varsity sports were canceled, and athletics and physical education were placed under the control of the U.S.

Army, which wanted an outlet for its men. And the Army believed, historian Park writes, that “American football, not rugby, was the game which would develop the type of spirit needed by fighting men.”

Stanford’s athletics director was outraged that the situation was being used to surreptitiously bring football back to the Farm. But opponents were in a weak position to object. The military had the final say, and the Berkeley game was a patriotic fund-raiser for the United War Work Fund.

The ensuing contest on November 28, 1918, a 67–0 kicking by Cal, is not considered an official game. The teams included military men who weren’t enrolled students. Ironically, it occurred more than two weeks after the war ended, but military control of campus athletics had lasted long enough to break the English import’s grip. A consensus arose that football was returning.

In February 1919, Stanford agreed to resume football. On November 22, 1919, Stanford and Cal officially faced each other in American football for the first time in 14 years. The press responded giddily.

“No matter who wins, whether the blue and gold, favored by the experts, or the Cardinal coming from behind as the dark horse, there will be that ‘tang’ in the air that you simply wouldn’t miss for the world,” the *Chronicle* wrote. “If nobody’s at home you particularly want to talk with, you’ll understand he’s down at Palo Alto.”

Cal won 14–10, though given Stanford’s time away from the game, the *Daily* called it “a defeat that is virtually a triumph.”

Two weeks later, the schools faced off in rugby, its diminished status confirmed by the fact that the game was a double header with the soccer teams. The fighting spirit was still there, one reporter noted. The crowds were not. “Only a small section of the bleachers was occupied by supporters of the two teams.” Football was king again. ■