
55 SPORTS IN ENGLAND

*In medieval times most sports played in England—jousting, sword-fighting, archery, wrestling, and so on—were related to military competition. Competing in such sports provided preparation and training for wartime. By the 1500s, however, sports that were played purely for recreation had developed. The excerpt below from *The English* by Christopher Hibbert describes some of these sports. As you read the excerpt, note the early beginnings of soccer.*

While hunting remained the favourite pastime of the healthy, the adventurous and energetic, most gentlemen enjoyed quieter sports and games as well. Nearly everyone played bowls, and few country houses were without their bowling-greens or bowling-alleys. The game was still played much as it had been in the time of Edward II, but the introduction of the bias, a heavy metal weight inserted into one side of the bowl, demanded much greater skill in play. Some houses also had courts for the playing of tennis, a game introduced from France where it seems to have originated as a sort of handball played in cathedral cloisters. There the game was known as *jeu de paume*, "palm game," the ball being struck with the palm of the hand, and its English name was probably derived from the French players' call of "Tenez!," "Watch out!," before serving. By the middle of the sixteenth century the game was being played in roofed courts with rackets and with harder balls made of bits of cloth tightly wadded together. . . . King Henry VII had

UNDERSTANDING
CONTEXT:

Why were
sports so
violent?



*The World Cup soccer
match*

had courts constructed at Blackfriars, Greenwich, Westminster and elsewhere; and his son, Henry VIII, a skilful player in his youth, had built tennis courts also at Whitehall, St James's and Hampton Court. By Elizabeth I's day fives, a form of handball played in a walled court with a gloved hand, was also popular; and fencing was becoming as widely practised among the upper classes . . . as archery and wrestling.

A kind of cricket was being played by the end of the century; but it had not yet caught the general fancy, whereas football had been played by the common people for centuries. With no generally accepted rules, it was a violent game in which "young men propel a huge ball not by throwing it into the air, but by striking and rolling it along the ground with their feet." It frequently led to quarrels and fights, sometimes to riot and murder. Constant efforts were made to control it. In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries several proclamations were issued banning it . . . and imposing fines and even imprisonment on those who continued to play it. But it proved impossible to suppress and by the sixteenth century had become established as part of the social life of the country, being played everywhere on public holidays and on Sundays. The way in which it was played varied from place to place but in most there were no regulations as to the number of players on each side, no boundaries and no time limit. At Ashbourne in Derbyshire the goals were three miles apart and the game lasted all day. In Pembrokeshire . . . it was played with a wooden ball ("boyled in tallow to make it slipperye") by men stripped to the waist and with hair and beards so short their opponents could not get a grip on them. As many as 2000 players took part; and the confusion and violence was so great that a visitor who chanced upon the scene in 1588 observed, "If this be but playe, I cold wishe the Spaniardes were here to see our plaies in England. Certes they would be oodielye feare of our warre."

Football, indeed, according to [one Elizabethan spectator], was "a bloody and murderouse practice."

Doth not everyone lie in wait for his adversary, seeking to overthrow him and pitch him on the nose, though it be upon hard stones, in ditch or dale, in valley or hill, or what place soever it be? He careth not so he have him downe. . . . Sometimes their necks are broken, sometimes their backs, sometime their legs, sometime their arms; sometime one part thrust out of joint, some time another; sometime the noses gush out with blood, sometime their eyes start out. . . .

There were a few who saw good in the game. Richard Mulcaster, headmaster of St Paul's School, thought that the game "strengtheneth and brawneth the whole body." . . . But Mulcaster had to agree that as usually played in England, "with bursting of shins and breaking of legs, it be neither civil, [nor] worthy." If it were to become a game for gentlemen, rules would have to be made and referees introduced to enforce them.

READING REVIEW

- ~~1. What sports had developed by the 1500s?~~
- ~~2. What, according to the author, was the origin of the name tennis?~~
3. Why do you think football, or soccer, was such a violent game?