mystery science

Grades K-5
Mini-Lesson: “Who invented football?”

VIDEO TRANSCRIPT

VIDEO 1

Hi, it's Doug! This might be familiar to you—it's a football—one of the most popular sports in North America. But you know, footballs haven't always looked like this. Back when football was first invented, a football looked more like this, or like this. You can see they were more round back then.

Someone named Janzen has a question about football. Let's give him a call now.

[Video Call]
- Hi, Doug!
- Hi, Janzen!
- I have a question for you. Who invented football?
- That's a great question.

It might seem weird to you to think of a game as something that was invented. When you think of an invention, you might think of something more like a machine or a device that does something useful. But games are something involving rules and equipment, and all of those are things that a person or group of people had to think up.

So who thought up the idea of football? Well, to start with, we've got to be clear on what we even mean when we say football. In most of the world, if you say football, that means this sport—what in American English, people tend to call soccer. So, what we're talking about is American football.

In fact, the name football to describe this sport has led some people to wonder, "Why do we even call it football, when you hardly use your feet to touch the ball?" But that's actually a really interesting clue about how it got started. Because it turns out, American football has a lot in common with another sport where you use your hands a lot, a sport started in a different country. It might be fun for you to try to guess which sport and country.

VIDEO 2

Even though American football is hugely popular in the United States, it owes a lot to a different sport started in Great Britain. You might know it. It's a sport called *rugby*.

Rugby has a lot in common with American football. Both sports involve trying to carry a ball towards a goal. Even the shape of the ball is similar, and both sports involve trying to tackle the person carrying the ball in order to stop them from reaching the goal zone.

But American football has some important differences with rugby. For example, in American football, any player can move the ball toward the goal zone by throwing it forward to another player. But in rugby, players usually move the ball toward the goal zone by tossing it to each other, side-to-side.

And there are other differences, too. A rugby coach named Walter Camp is often given credit for inventing American football because about 100 years ago, he created many of the rules in American football that we have today, rules that now make it a different sport from rugby.

But when we look at drawings and pictures from even further back in time, we can see that human beings have been playing ball games for thousands of years. Some of these ancient games are probably the early versions of games you know today.

Both American football and rugby might have come from the same sport, something originally called mob football, where two neighboring towns would compete against each other. You can see here mob football is still played today in certain towns in Great Britain.

There are very few rules. As you can tell, there's an unlimited number of players allowed, and they try to stop each other from tossing the ball all the way to a goal in the other team's town. Back in ancient times sometimes their goal was to toss a pigskin ball into the balcony of the other town's church.

And it's not just sports like football that had its beginnings in ancient times. Some of these ancient games involved hitting a ball with a stick. Does that remind you of anything? Other games involved only being able to use your hands, never your feet. Does that sound familiar? So in summary, many of the rules of American football were invented by someone named Walter Camp. But earlier versions of football have been played for centuries.

That's all for this week's question. Thanks, Janzen, for asking it!