



DUDLEY KINGSWINFORD RUGBY FOOTBALL CLUB



Accredited Club



The Beginners Guide Series

No 5

The Ball

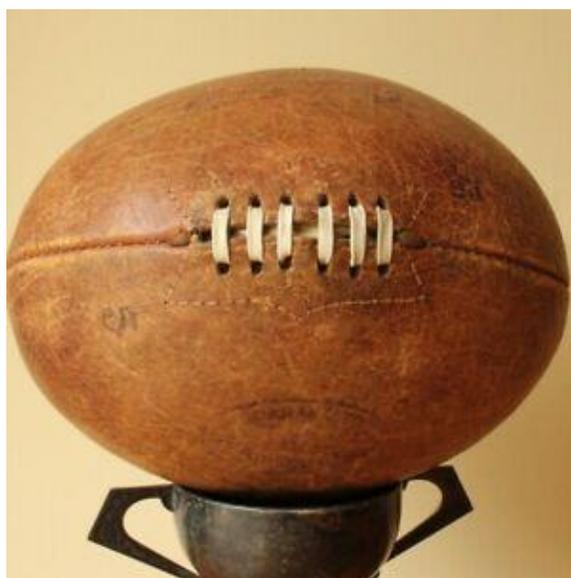
The humble rugby ball, formerly known as a ‘quanco’, is iconic in the game for its odd shape, completely different to almost every other sport. Whilst cricket, football, tennis and more use traditional spheres for their playing equipment, the rugby ball is an ‘elongated ellipsoid’ or basically oval.

So why does the sport employ such a strange-shaped object?

Well, it turns out the ellipsoid makes it easier to pass with.

Having said that, some of the world’s best players have made it seem like a doddle to kick such a bizarrely crafted ball. Yet there are some other curious reasons as to how the modern day ball evolved.

The history of the rugby ball goes back to some of the first games in the sport at Rugby School, where Richard Lindon and Bernardo Solano used pigs’ bladders and leather casings. The original rugby balls were more plum shaped than oval. The pig’s bladder was inflated by mouth via the stem of a clay pipe then surrounded by panels of stitched leather, and the ball was not of a uniform size due to the variations in pig bladders used.



Original Lindon Rugby Ball



Lindon opened his first boot and shoemaker business at 6/6a Lawrence Sheriff Street, Rugby, England, straight across the road from the now famous Rugby School. Originally, Lindon supplied footwear to the people of Rugby, including staff and students at the School.



Richard Lindon in 1880,
with two Rugby balls

Lindon's wife was responsible for inflating the pigs' bladders. Unfortunately, this job didn't exactly meet current health and safety standards; if the bladder was diseased, this was going into Mrs Lindon's lungs. Eventually Mrs Lindon fell ill as a result and later passed away.

Roughly around 1862 Richard Lindon was desperate to find a replacement for the pig's bladder and used an India rubber bladder instead. India rubber was too tough to inflate by mouth and so having been inspired by air syringes, he created a larger brass version to inflate his rugby balls.

The Rugby School wanted an oval ball produced to further distinguish their game from that of soccer football, so Lindon designed a more egg-shaped buttonless ball to be manufactured. This was the first specifically designed four-panel rugby ball and the start of sizes being standardised. In 1892 the RFU made it compulsory for all rugby balls to be oval in shape.

At the same time as all this was happening, Gilbert were manufacturing rugby balls to be used at Rugby School and by 1877 the family business was hand-stitching over 2,800 balls a year. 'Gilberts' then began exporting their balls to Australia as the sport itself was growing.



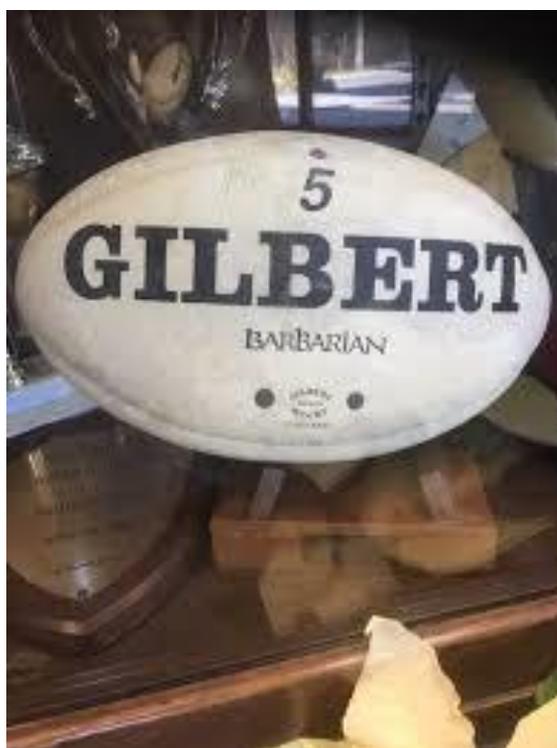
William Gilbert, a boot and shoemaker born in 1799, had established his business in High Street, Rugby, early in the 19th century and it was only a small diversification from repairing the shoes of Rugby School boys to making leather casings for their footballs.

By 1917 different test nations had their own preferences for particular balls types. In Australia and New Zealand a ‘torpedo’ shape was generally preferred, whilst in South Africa an eight-panel ball was preferred because of the better grip it provided. By 1932 a change in the rules saw the ball reduced by 1/2 inch in size.

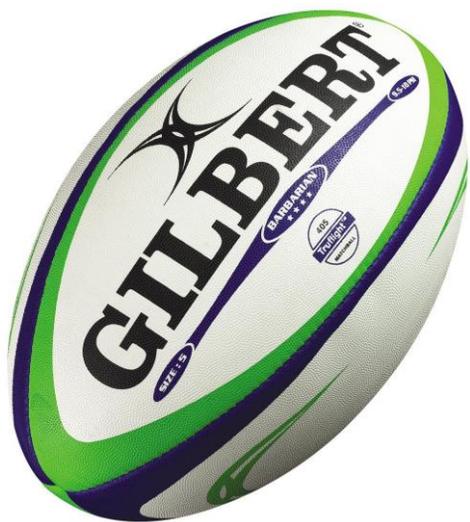


The Gilbert ‘Match’ ball soon became the preferred choice of most international teams and by 1970 the company began to manufacture the balls in white as well as the traditional leather colour previously used.

Eventually, in 1980 leather casings were replaced with synthetic materials in times of poor weather conditions, including the new Gilbert ‘Barbarian’ ball. However, all leather balls were later phased out.



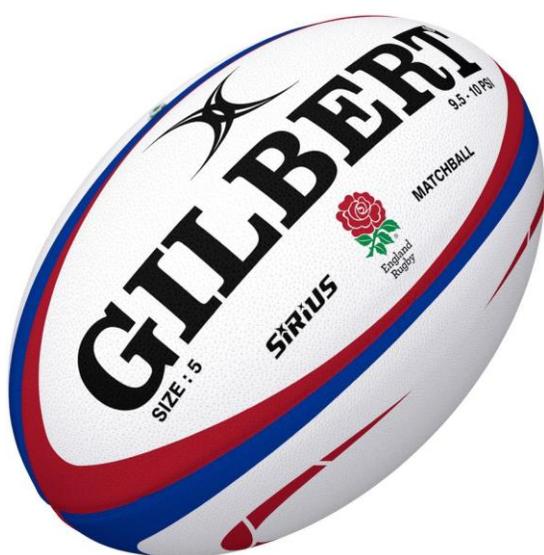
Gilbert ‘Barbarian’
Match Ball



In 1994 Gilbert first began using the coloured ‘trims’ that have become so iconic in the sport of rugby. Their rugby balls have been used in every Rugby World Cup since 1995

Other businesses have also forayed into the rugby ball market with Adidas, Mitre and Webb Ellis all making headway in particular tournaments and competitions, but for many the Gilbert brand remains synonymous with rugby and rugby balls.

The humble rugby ball is just a small footnote in the glorious history of the sport, but its past really is fascinating. It will continue to change and to evolve, just as the game does, but it’s come an awfully long way since its primitive beginnings.



The latest from Gilbert:
SIRIUS Match Ball
£130!



The making of a traditional rugby ball