



Football Time!



Walter played football. It was his favorite sport. He didn't mean the football that most of the world meant, either. Most of the world called soccer "football." That kind of made sense to call soccer that, because you play soccer with your feet, but he meant American football, which was actually a lot closer to rugby.

Football is expensive to play in its full version. Sure, a lot of people play a friendly game in their back yards or in the park, but that is not full tackle football usually. You can also play a no-tackle version with flags tied around your waist called flag football. It's very fun and doesn't cause many injuries. Walter played full contact football though, and that meant a helmet with a faceguard, full shoulder pads, along with pads for his hips, back, ribs, and thighs. He also needed cleats, gloves, a mouth guard, and a chinstrap. It didn't hurt to have elbow pads either. When it came to football, it was like knights in an old joust: you were going to get hit, so be prepared.

Football has 4 quarters of 15 minutes each. Football can take a long time to play, because there is a lot of stopping of the clock, a LOT of it. If a catch is dropped, if a penalty flag is thrown, if a whistle is blown, if there is an injury, if a team scores, between quarters, if the ball goes out of bounds... there are a lot of reasons to stop the clock, so that means you get a pretty full 60 minutes of actual heavy-hitting plays. Each play starts and ends with the crash of helmets and people running all over the field to stop the ball from moving.

Football is played on a 100 yard field with 10 yards of end zones on each side, so it's really 120 yards. If a team can run the ball into or catch the ball in the opponent's end zone, they get a touchdown, which is worth 6 points and a chance for an extra point (or a special 2-point conversion). If a team kicks the ball between their opponent's field goal posts, they get 3 points. There is also a special 2 point safety where you tackle the opponent in their own end zone, but this rarely happens. Generally speaking, football scores come in 7's (6 + 1 extra point) and 3's.

Football has a lot of players with a lot of positions. Each team has 11 men on the field at any given time. Positions vary for defense and offense, and the whole set of players switches when a team goes from offense to defense. There are also other sets of players for specific situations, which is called special teams. So, each team really needs 3 sets of players, plus backups for injuries. A good football squad is often 60 or more players! Players had specialized jobs to play in certain areas, to protect the ball, to kick the ball, to throw ball, or many other things!

The offensive unit is lead by the quarterback. He is defended by a line of men, whose job it is to stop him from getting tackled, so he has time to hand the ball off to a running back or fullback or to throw the ball to a receiver or tight end down the field. Those are the two ways to move the ball: running it or throwing it. The important thing is to move 10 yards in 4 tries. If you can't move the ball that far, the other team gets the ball, so usually a team gives up its 4th try to kick the ball way down the field and give the other chance their turn. If you make it the 10 yards (or more), you get 4 fresh tries. You keep moving the ball down the field, sometimes in short stretches and sometimes in long amounts, and then you score.

The defensive team also has men on the front line. They all try to break through the offensive line to get the quarterback or the running backs. If they do it fast enough, they can even stop the quarterback from throwing the ball past them to a waiting receiver. A group of linebackers are behind them, trying to stop anyone who gets past that first line and to prevent short passes from getting completed. Past them and to the outsides of the field are another set of defenders, who watch for receivers, who are trying to run past them and catch long passes thrown by the quarterback.

Special teams consists of teams who are trained to catch, block, and return kicks. There are punters who catch the ball and kick it as far as they can. There are place kickers who try to kick the ball between the field goal posts far down the field. There are special runners who specialize in catching balls punted high and far, and then running them back down the field into a crowd of people trying to knock them down! There are many special positions and jobs in football. Some of them only get to play for a few seconds per game, but they can make the difference between winning and losing.

Walter was a fullback, which is a position on offense. That meant that when play started, he was near the quarterback. Walter, as a fullback, had to help protect the quarterback and the other players that the quarterback might give the ball to. He was a blocker for the most part, but sometimes he took the ball. He was a pretty big guy, so he could make room for a running back to run. His favorite plays were the ones where he got the ball. Sometimes his team only had to move the ball a short distance in a play, and it required someone big and hard to stop. He could take the ball and try to punch through the defense to move the ball a few feet. Sometimes he only had to move it a few inches, and 21 other people were all crashing around him to make that happen or make it NOT happen. It was wild!

Football has a TON of rules. Referees, Line Judges, and other officials watched the game to make sure you weren't offsides, pulling on someone's facemask, holding, tripping, or being unsportsmanlike. Each play was different, too. Every time the ball started moving, there was a specific pattern or play being made. Of course, with 22 people all moving in different ways, the plan rarely went as it was supposed to. It was an idea of what could happen, and then luck, skill, and determination took over. The referee just made sure what happened was within the rules!

Walter loved playing football. He knew he played one of America's most popular sports, and similar versions like Australian football or rugby were pretty popular around the world. People loved to watch, but playing was seriously hard and dangerous. He hoped to play in high school and college and then professionally one day. There were huge followings of the pro teams, and the Super Bowl Championship game was one of the biggest sporting events of the year. Maybe someday he'd be in it!

Are you going to try to watch or play football?

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Use the information in the story to answer the questions below.

1. What sport does Walter play?
 - A. Rugby
 - B. Soccer
 - C. Australian Football
 - D. American Football

2. How long is a football game?
 - A. 30 minutes
 - B. 45 minutes
 - C. 90 minutes
 - D. 60 minutes

3. What position does Walter play?
 - A. Quarterback
 - B. Fullback
 - C. Lineman
 - D. Punter

4. TRUE OR FALSE: According to the story, football is a little similar to rugby.
 - A. True
 - B. False

5. TRUE OR FALSE: Walter does not have to wear any protection when he plays.
 - A. True
 - B. False

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