

Hill-Fort Football

A Brief History of its Unwritten Rules

Even if we discount the testimony of *Asterix the Gaul*, it is certain that the inhabitants of Maiden Castle played football. Everybody at all times of history has played football - using tight bundles of willow, inflated pigs' bladders or empty wasps' nests sewn over with leather (maybe). Every rural footballer knows about sloping football pitches and the advantages to one side or the other (usually the home side) that they confer. One of the oldest and most curious forms of sloping-pitch football is **Hill-fort Football**, originally played among the ramparts and ditches that protected iron-age hill-top townships - until the Romans came along.

Hill-fort Football has the advantage over, for instance, **Fell Football**, as practised in the Lake District, that you don't usually have to descend a thousand feet to retrieve the ball before taking a goal-kick. The goal is set on the crest of a grassy, earthen rampart, preferably sheep-nibbled to improve the bounce. The goal can be as narrow, or as wide as is needed to produce a sporting game - the deeper the ditch or the steeper the bank, the wider the goal, maybe the whole perimeter of the fort for earthworks as mighty as those of Maiden Castle. There may be just one goalkeeper, the '*rampart-holder*', or many. Stationed at the bottom of the ditch is one attacker, the '*ditch-bottomer*', or many. If there is a ditch on either side of the rampart then so much the better, for the advantage of the rampart-holder is materially reduced if he or she is bombarded by ascending balls from both sides at once. The aim of the attackers is simply to boot the ball past or over the head of the rampart-holder and (preferably) into the further ditch. When this occurs the successful attacker and rampart-holder change places. The game continues until those in the ditches concede defeat or until all are lying panting in the flowery grass. Mixed-sex games do not last very long.

The search for **iron-age hill-fort football goal-post post-holes** (to twist the tongue with a glorious thicket of hyphens) has not yet borne fruit. It is not that a great deal more digging is needed but rather that enough archaeologists need to be convinced of the reality of the sport, for archaeologists, or prehistorians anyway, generally find what they seek, being selected largely for their imaginative powers of interpretation, or self-delusion.

Becoming now too old and infirm for effective fulfilment of my wonted role as formidable rampart-holder or ditch-bottomer, I must be content to hand on the knowledge of this ancient and modern pastime to further generations - so publish this and be damned, as we surely will be anyway.