

**THEY CALL IT GRIDIRON IN AUSTRALIA:
FOOTBALL OVERSEAS**

By Tod Maher

During halftime of the September 12th Raiders-Chiefs Thursday night game, Americans got a glimpse of the Summer Bowl, the championship of the American Football League. What was important was not the result, but the fact that, yes, those were Brits playing football. Not soccer football, but football football, American football.

In fact, North American football has been steadily increasing in popularity outside the United States and Canada – for a long time the only place it was played. Now you can find North American football being played as an organized sport in the United States, Canada, Mexico, Japan, Australia, England, Italy, and (yes) Sweden.

Here's a brief report on how the sport is doing abroad:

MEXICO. Twice NFL teams have played pre season games in Mexico City in the last ten years. Mexico viewers can catch American TV transmissions and the University of Mexico City has played a few games versus American colleges.

JAPAN. In 1934, missionaries introduced the game to the Japanese, with Meiji and Wasela Universities forming teams.

American service teams played after World War II and in 1976 the first Japan Bowl was played. The Japan Bowl features seniors from American colleges playing against each other on East and West squads. In the '76 game, six Japanese players played with the American collegiate players (which included Chuck Muncie).

That game showed off the one weakness of the Japanese players – size. The heaviest players from Japan were a 194-pound center on the west team and a 194-pound tackle for the east.

But, still, there are some 5,000 players on 167 college teams and 316 members in a group called the Japan American Football Association.

There is also the Mirage Bowl, featuring two American colleges.

AUSTRALIA. In Australia it's not football, but Gridiron. This is done so as not to confuse the game with soccer, rugby, or Australian Rules Football. Australians first saw "Gridiron" when NFL games were broadcast there in 1980, and amateur leagues started up last year. One problem: equipment is hard to come by.

ENGLAND. On August 6, 1983, the St. Louis Cardinals and the Minnesota Vikings played a football game. What was unusual about it was the place – Wembley Stadium, London, England. A year later two USFL teams played there.

This was due to the surprising interest in American football. In 1982, Englanders could catch an NFL highlight show every week. Every year since the audience has doubled, with the Super Bowl telecast (on live, usually around midnight) drawing nearly 8 million viewers. The AFL (UK) consists of 36 teams, with names like Ealing Eagles and Heathrow Jets.

There is even a magazine called Touchdown (NFL-licensed, by the way) which has a circulation of some 37,000.

ITALY. Italy? I was as surprised as you, but it's true.

THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 8, No. 1 (1986)

According to the 1985 Football Register, page 443, Mike Furnas, a running back who has been in the camps of the Memphis Showboats, Washington Redskins, and New York Jets, "played guard and fullback for Milan in Italian Football League, 1984."

Why not? The Italians have the Italian Baseball Federation and a pro basketball league.

SWEDEN. In 1984, a Swedish investment firm decided to finance a football league. So now, 500 players on 15 teams are playing the American game. They have even played Americans.

On June 18, 1985, Bethany College of Kansas whipped the Swedish All-Stars 72-7 in Stockholm (where most of the Swedish teams are from). It would have been worse, but Bethany had just been practicing for a few days and the Swedes had just completed their season.