

Snow on the Gridiron: A Brief History of Canadian Football

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ABSTRACT

Football is played throughout the far regions of the world. There is no other sport that brings so many people together locally, nationally, and internationally. Football is not, however, a unified sport with shared rules, customs and histories across time and space. In contrast, football is largely a different sport depending on where it is being played. This paper traces the development of Canadian football as a unique sport with strong similarities to and subtle differences from American football, as well as clear distinctions from forms of football played outside of North America.

KEYWORDS

football, sport, history, Canada

Introduction

The term football can refer to different sports depending on the geographic, cultural, and historical location in which it is being played. Football, for many individuals around the world, refers to a game that involves kicking a ball into the goal of an opposing team. This sport is commonly referred to as soccer in North America. In Australia, the term football denotes a game that involves pushing a ball up an oval shaped field by kicking, handballing, and running, with the end objective of kicking the ball through the goal posts of the opposing team (Piesse 1995). In Ireland, a form of football termed Gaelic football is played that involves a combination of carrying, kicking, and hand-passing a ball with the objective of kicking the ball through the uprights of the opposing team to score one point, or through the goal posts of the opposing team for three points (Mahon 2001). In various parts of the world, football can also refer to what North Americans generally refer to as rugby, which has numerous rule variations depending on where it is played but generally involves moving a ball up a rectangular field by passing, running, and kicking with the end objective of crossing the opponents' goal line (Powell 1976).

In North America, the term football refers to a sport that is altogether different from the other meanings of football just discussed. The North American game of football is often referred to as "American football" or as "gridiron football" (Bernstein 2001). The term gridiron comes from the particular way that playing lines are positioned on the field. Gridiron can either refer to the field that the sport is played on, or in some countries outside of North America, it can refer to the sport itself. While various forms of gridiron football do exist, the common features of each generally include: protective equipment, the passing of the ball forward by hand or running from an ever-changing line of scrimmage through a system of downs, and an objective to pass the opponent's goal line or kick the ball through the opponent's uprights to achieve a touchdown or field goal. A down in gridiron football refers to the stops in play when a player is tackled, a



pass is incomplete, the ball goes out of bounds, or the player running with the ball is halted by the opposing team and unable to advance the ball any further¹.

Figure 1. 2010 Vanier Cup

Source: <http://www.thestar.com/sports/football/article/897916-feschuk-football-digs-deep-roots-in-quebec>

The beginnings

The development of Canadian football is generally linked to early versions of rugby and soccer (Riesman & Denney 1951). The first records of organized football in the United States are from the early 1800s in intramural games at college campuses (Bernstein 2001, Umphlett 1992, Watterson 2002). At this time the rules were not standardized, and instead schools abided to their own set of rules. At Princeton a game called “ballown” was played; at Harvard an event called “Bloody Monday”; and, at Dartmouth a version called “Old Division Football” (Meacham 2006). While the rules of each game varied, they all involved a violent struggle to advance a ball against an opposing team, with frequent injuries resulting. The games were so violent that some schools began banning the sport, with Yale banning football in 1860 followed by Harvard in 1861.

While banned on college campuses, various sorts of football became increasingly popular in American prep schools in the mid-1800s. The games had three distinct varieties involving either: a) advancing a ball by kicking it, b) advancing a ball by carrying it or, c) a combination thereof. Among the first games involving both kicking and carrying the ball was a game referred to as the “Boston game”, which was named based on the location that it was developed (Danzig 1956). The game continued to spread and arrived back on major college and university campuses throughout the United States (Bernstein 2001).

In 1873, representatives from several American colleges and universities met in an attempt to create a standardized set of football rules for intercollegiate play (Bernstein 2001). The rules that were tabled appeared most similar to the contemporary game of soccer. Harvard did not participate in the rule-standardizing meeting; instead, they opted to keep playing the traditional Boston game that involved kicking and carrying the ball in a game that is most similar to the contemporary sport of rugby. Harvard was unable to find American teams to play the Boston game so they challenged McGill University from Montreal in Canada to a two-game series. Harvard took a quick liking to the Canadian game and decided to adopt it for future play against American schools. This version of the game caught on in the United States and Canada. It has been proposed that had Harvard not played McGill, gridiron football might never have been developed (Bernstein 2001).

In the years following, various rule changes were proposed by a man named Walter Camp who is now often considered the father of gridiron football (Powel 2007). These changes included reducing the number of players on the field to open up the game to make it faster and more exciting, establishing a line of scrimmage, and introducing a snap from a center to a quarterback to start each play. These new rules were revolutionary in the formation of a unique game of football that has since become what is now commonly referred to as American or gridiron football.

While similar to the American version of football, the Canadian game has its own distinct history and rules (Stebbins 1987). The first record of football in Canada appears to be of a game of rugby between officers of a British army garrison in Montreal and a group of Montreal locals in 1865 (Watkins 2004). Other reports indicate that the first game was played at the University of Toronto in 1861 (Dykstra 2008). In 1874,

¹ A University of Calgary player is tackled in the 2010 Vanier Cup for the Canadian University Championships (Figure 1). The distinct “gridiron” lines of Canadian football are visible through the snow.

the McGill versus Harvard series occurred, which marked the beginning of cross-border games being played with different sets of rules. In 1879, the University of Toronto played the University of Michigan. Through these cross border matches, the Canadian game began to take its own shape that differed from traditional forms of English rugby and soccer (Watkins 2004). While many leagues have developed in Canada since this time, this study looks at three significant playing levels including junior, university, and professional football in Canada. While sharing common origins and rules, each playing level has its own unique history.

Junior football in Canada

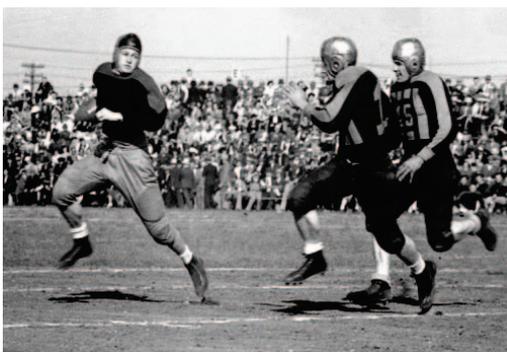
According to the online archived records kept by the Canadian Junior Football League (CJFL), junior football in Canada started in 1890 with the inauguration of the Ontario Rugby Football Union. In the first championship game, the second-string University of Toronto team defeated the Hamilton Ontario junior team 26-3. As reiterated in later sections, the boundaries between playing levels at this time were not as definite as they are today (Watkins 2004). At this time, matches were not arranged by leagues but rather, through informal systems of rivalry and invitation. This allowed both senior clubs and university teams to compete for the Grey Cup, which is now restricted to professional Canadian teams. In 1908, the first interprovincial games were played between teams in Ontario and Quebec (CJFL Records).

Junior football was established in Western Canada in 1919, with the first East/West game played in 1925. It was not until 1974 that junior football made a break from the rugby union and established its own separate association. Since 1890, many regional associations were established across Canada. In 1995, the regional associations took on their current form consisting of the: British Columbia Football Conference (BCFC), Prairie Football Conference (PFC), and Ontario Football Conference (OFC). Established in 1990, the Canada Bowl is played to determine the CJFL champion.

University football

The first interuniversity football game in Canada was played between the University of Toronto and McGill University in 1881 (Watkins 2004). In the years following, other universities developed football teams including the University of Ottawa, Ontario Agricultural College, and Royal Military College. Through the 1880s and much of the 1890s, no interuniversity league existed. Instead, teams played in provincial unions and community leagues (Currie 1968).

In 1898, the first interuniversity football league in Canada was developed and named the Canadian Intercollegiate Rugby Football Union (Watkins 2004). The league was three-tiered with teams from Central



Canada. The top tier university championship game was referred to as the Yates Cup. The winner of the cup would typically go on to play in the Grey Cup, which is the national championship at the professional level. By 1903, many of the rules had evolved to reflect those in existence today. For instance, teams were given three downs to advance the ball ten yards (Watkins 2004). This rule remains one of the distinct features of Canadian football.

Figure 2. Rugby Football Union game in Western Canada in 1947
Source: <http://esask.uregina.ca/entry/football.html>

Other regions of Canada were slower to take up the game of football in universities. Atlantic Canada did not form an interuniversity football conference until 1951. The Western Intercollegiate Rugby Football Union was formed in 1927, consisting of teams from the University of Alberta, University of Saskatchewan, University of Manitoba, and University of British Columbia (Watkins 2004). These teams did not play strictly university teams but also club and professional teams.

Prior to 1953 there does not appear to have been any interuniversity play between different regions of the country (Watkins 2004). From 1953 to 1964, teams began to play exhibition matches across different regions. In 1961, the Canadian Interuniversity Athletic Union (CIAU) was formed to provide a national

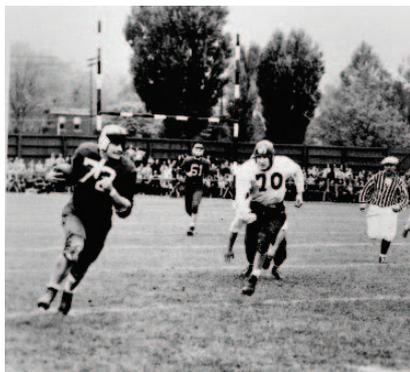
governing body over university sport across Canada. This led to the inauguration of the Vanier Cup in 1968, which is the championship game of Canadian University football that is still played today. In this competition, two semi-final games are played between the winners of each of the four conferences of university athletics, with two teams advancing to the final to play for the Vanier Cup. The four conferences of CIAU football, now named Canadian Interuniversity Sport (CIS) football, are: Atlantic, Canada West, Ontario, and Quebec.

Professional football

In 1909, Earl Grey, the Governor-General of Canada, donated a trophy for the championship of the Canada Rugby Football Union, which has come to be known as the Grey Cup (Kelly 1999). Originally, the trophy was open to any team competing in the rugby union, which allowed junior, university, and senior league teams to compete for it. A professional football league did not exist in Canada until 1956 with the establishment of the Canadian Football Council (CFC). In 1958 the CFC left the Canadian Rugby Union and was named the Canadian Football League (CFL). The first CFL game was played in 1958 between the Edmonton Eskimos and the Winnipeg Blue Bombers. The Grey Cup still remains as the top prize in professional Canadian football.

Stebbins (1987) suggests that the professionalization of football in Canada was a gradual process. It began not with the formation of a professional league or teams, but with isolated cases of players receiving remuneration in the late 1800s through to the 1940s. According to Stebbins (1987, p. 9), “since no contracts were signed, the fiction of amateurism could exist at the executive level of rugby unions”. Consentino (1969) contends that professional football began to move away from its amateur orientation following new rule developments after the Second World War. The new rules established in 1946 allowed a limited number of American imports to play for Canadian teams. The big city Canadian teams began bidding for elite American talent, fuelling the professionalization of the game in Canada.

The CFL became openly professional in 1956 with the establishment of the CFC, which later became the CFL in 1958. In 1965, the Canadian Football League Players Association (CFLPA) formed to address ongoing issues pertaining to wages, injury clauses and pension plans. Over the past 40 years, the CFL has undergone few structural changes apart from many teams coming and going. For a brief period in the 1990s,



several American teams played in the CFL; however, in 1996 the league became strictly Canadian. American players can play for CFL teams, but all teams are located in Canada. The CFL is currently comprised of eight teams including the BC Lions, Calgary Stampeders, Edmonton Eskimos, Saskatchewan Roughriders, Winnipeg Blue Bombers, Hamilton Tiger-cats, Toronto Argonauts, and Montreal Alouettes.

Figure 3. Professional Canadian football player, Tony Golab, runs the ball up the field in the 1930s.

Source: <http://www.cfhof.ca/page/golabtony>

Distinction from American football

The Canadian game of football remains unique from the American game in its history, traditions, organization, and most noticeably, its rules. As American and Canadian football have developed separately from similar origins, the intricacies of each sport are distinct. Countless subtle rule differences distinguish the two forms of football. The most apparent differences include: Canadian football fields are much larger in both length and width, Canadian teams have 12 players on the field at a time while American teams have 11, and, most noticeably, possession of the ball changes after three downs in Canadian football compared to four in American.

In the United States, another variation of gridiron football is also quite popular termed “Arena Football”, with a professional league titled the Arena Football League (AFL). Arena football is played on a smaller field than traditional Canadian and American football in indoor arenas. In Canada, the Toronto

Argonauts and B.C. Lions now host games in stadiums with retractable roofs to shield the field from environmental elements such as snow. All other Canadian teams play in open stadiums with no shield from snow, rain, wind, or cold. While the B.C. Lions and Toronto Argonauts host games indoors, the rules of play remain largely distinct from American Arena football. The most apparent differences are similar to those between outdoor Canadian and American football including: Canadian football fields are much larger in both



length and width, Canadian teams have 12 players on the field at a time while American arena teams have 8, and possession of the ball changes after three downs in Canadian football compared to four in American arena football.

Figure 4. The Toronto Argonauts celebrate their Grey Cup win over the Edmonton Eskimos in 1996. The game, played during a snow storm, has been termed the “Snow Bowl”

Source: www.cfl.ca

Conclusion

With humble beginnings, the sport of Canadian football has grown exponentially. With over 200,000 Canadian youth currently involved in the sport, it is among the most popular participant sports in the country (Ifedi 2008). Football is also a popular spectator sport in Canada with over 60,000 fans at the 2011 Grey Cup in Vancouver, and an estimated 11 million people who watched the game at home amounting to more than one in three Canadians (Constantineau 2011). Despite these numbers, the rich histories of Canadian football remain to be explored in depth, with much of the scholarly attention paid to American football or the sport of hockey in Canada. As this brief overview suggests, Canadian football does have a long, distinct history that should be further explored.

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