

THAT GAME OF FOOTBALL

By Bob Sproule
Toronto Argonaut Statistician

Whether you attend football games in person or watch on television, a great deal of similarity between the Canadian and American versions is apparent. But such was not always the case; way back in the beginning, there were two different games.

In November of 1823 William Webb Ellis did the unheard of – while playing a form of soccer, he picked up the ball and ran with it. This later became the distinguishing mark of rugby football, named for the school Ellis attended in England. From this point football was no longer just a kicking game, as the handling of the ball became an important part of the play.

When Harvard and McGill played their famous game of rugby in May of 1874, the Americans were given a lesson on how the game was really played, and from then on it was rugby and not soccer on the playing fields of America.

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By 1879 the first stepping stone in the evolution of American football occurred. Rather than have both teams bunch together trying to kick the ball out to put it into play, each club lined up facing the other to form a scrimmage line. The player in the centre of the attacking team kicked the ball back to a teammate who then ran with the ball or passed it to another ball-carrier.

This kicking of the ball was called heeling because the ball was kicked with the heel. It was introduced into the Canadian game in 1880. There the scrimmage system was known as the open formation in contrast with the orthodox rugby closed formation.

Now this part of the game was just fine, but once a team had the ball (per rules), by careful play they could maintain total ball control, allowing no opportunity to the other team. Because of this “hogging” of the ball, the game became a bore for spectators, if not for players.

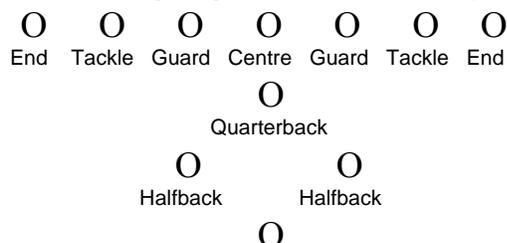
The scrimmage line established the “First Principle of Possession,” but to a counterproductive height. By this method one team could keep the ball for an entire half or until it scored. Only then was it required to kick to the other team.

In the American colleges the current terms for player positions were coming into use. The player heeling the ball was called the centre because he was in the centre of the line. The players on each side of him who protected him from the other team while he heeled the ball became the guards.

Since everyone played both offense and defense for the entire game, the next-to-end player usually made most of the tackles and became known as a tackle. And finally, the last player on the line, who usually led the end-run plays, occupied the end-rush position. Later he was simply called the end.

Now the backfield involved players who lined up behind the line or back in the field, and there were four of them. Directly behind the centre was the quarterback, so called because he was about a quarter of the distance behind the line from the centre to the farthest man. The man farthest back was the fullback, all the way back from the centre.

Two other players were in between the quarterback and the fullback and were thus called the halfbacks. The following diagram will illustrate the positions in relation to each other:



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Fullback

Fig. 1. Playing Positions in American Football.

In Canada in 1879 we were still using the rugby-type positions, but by the next year we had adopted the open formation, similar to the American scrimmage line.

Our centre and two guards were called the scrimmages, and because the heeler required support to kick the ball in the face of the onrushing team, the guards were called scrim-supports. Imagine if you can a centre-scrim bent over to heel the ball and a player on each side with arms draped over him to offer support.

The players to the sides of the scrimmages were called the wings and there were three of them on each side. The man nearest the scrim-support was the inside-wing. Next to him was the middle-wing, and the player on the end of the line was the outside-wing. The line consisted of the scrimmages and the right and left winglines.

The players behind the scrimmages and wing line were known as the back division. There were six such players. On defence there was a line of three players about five yards behind the scrimmages and another three about thirty yards farther down the field.

On offense the players lined up differently. The man behind the heeler was called the quarterback, just as in the American game. Another player, as far behind the line as the quarterback but just outside of the wings, was called the flying-wing because he was frequently called upon to lead the end-rush plays or fly around the outside.

Several yards behind the quarterback was the fullback, but in front of him were three men, side by side: one centre half, one left half, and one right half. The following diagram will illustrate this:

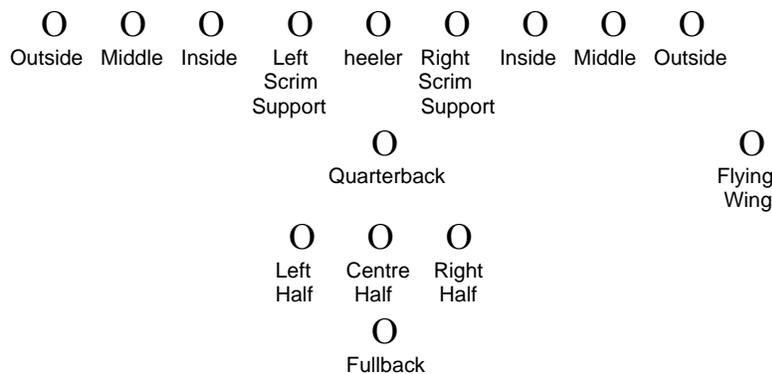


Fig. 2. Playing Positions in Canadian Football.

Now you will notice that the Americans used 11 players and the Canadians 15. How come, you ask. Well, we have to go back to the Harvard-McGill game of 1874. Canadians usually used 15 players (the original number for an English rugby team) while Harvard played ten. But as only 11 McGill students showed up, that was the number both sides used.

McGill played with a seven-man line and four backs, a quarter and three halves, while Harvard just added another back. After the game McGill resorted back to 15 players but Harvard liked the extra man. By 1880 other American colleges had gone to eleven men, and they have been using that number ever since.

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As mentioned before, once the First Principle of Possession was established the game stumbled down to a stalemate. In 1882 Walter Camp's suggestion that the team in possession be required to gain five yards in three tries or downs was adopted. If the five yards were not gained, the other team took over the possession of the ball. This then was the "Second Principle of Possession."

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Up in Canada we were quite happy with total possession of the ball, and there were even many high scores. But finally we saw the problem, and in 1897 the Canadian Rugby Union (C.R.U.), governing body of football in Canada, followed the American lead and decided on five yards in three downs. Terminology differed slightly. To retain possession Americans had to make a first down; we had to make yards.

Both countries used the punt (kicking the ball to the other side on the last down if yards were not gained with the first two or three), but Canadians frequently found it to their liking to punt even on first down. This generally gave the other side the ball, but if they fumble the kick the punting team could sometimes recover. Even if the kick was well handled, the receiving team might be placed deep in their own end of the field.

Thus we developed the punting duel in Canadian football. It was not uncommon for each side to punt 30 or 40 times for well over 1200 yards while gaining only perhaps 100 yards from scrimmage. True, we scored only a handful of touchdowns all season, but we had great kickers who could place the ball 50 or 60 yards downfield and score a half dozen single points each game. Most of the plays that would have been scoreless touchbacks in American football were worth a single point in Canada to the attacking team.

In 1906 both countries made a fundamental change in the Second Principle of Possession. American officials declared that a team now had to gain ten yards, but in four downs. In Canada the C.R.U., as a part of the famous Burnside rules, changed the distance to ten yards but still allowed only three downs.

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The third stepping stone (after the first two principles of possession) towards modern football involved a change in the movement of the ball from the centre to the quarterback. In 1895 the snap-back system came into being in the States. Rather than kicking the ball back to the quarterback, the centre now handed it back by a quick motion of the hand, or snap. This allowed the ball to be put into play faster and thus speeded up the game.

In Canada we still liked our 15-man game, and with our emphasis on punting we kept the foot in football. But in 1902 we dropped the centre half (or eliminated the flying-wing), whichever version you like) for a five-man backfield. Actually what we did was put the centre half near the wing line (later renaming him the flying-wing) and moved the fullback between the halfbacks. The result was a 14-man team and a somewhat less congested and more open game.

In 1912 Joe Price, a Calgary high school coach, dropped the two scrim-supports and told the centre to snap the ball back to the quarterback. However, it wasn't until April 23, 1921 that the C.R.U. permitted the other clubs to adopt Price's idea. We now had the snap-back rule and 12 players a side. The three-man scrimmage line, now down to just one man, was renamed the snap.

Teams using the snap system found that it allowed for fast-breaking end runs with the ball carrier taking the oval at full speed. The quarterback was now free! Before he had to be able to control a rolling or bouncing ball and make a quick pass to a teammate before being knocked down by the defence. The T-formation, where the quarterback stood behind the centre, took the ball and handed off to a potential runner, was not yet in general use.

Edmonton Eskimos introduced the power of the T in the first game of the 1921 season with Calgary Tigers. Edmonton ran for 13 touchdowns and over 850 yards as they crushed the Tigers 72-2!

Other teams used the direct snap, the ball going directly from the centre to the ballcarrier. The quarterback now became an important part of the attack. He could lead interference for another runner, carry the ball himself, or fake a run and hand off to the flying-wing doing an end-around play.

The last time this author saw the direct snap was in a 1980 game between Calgary Stampeders and Edmonton Eskimos. On a third down play, Edmonton quarterback Tom Wilkinson lined up behind his centre and called the signals. The ball was snapped between Wilkinson's legs to halfback Jim Germany. The rest of the Edmonton line didn't move, and the Calgary line didn't move. Wilkinson was still behind centre, but Germany had rounded left end and passed the Calgary defenders, who were still eyeing the quarterback. After gaining 25 yards Germany was pushed out of bounds by a quick-thinking defensive back. First down Edmonton!

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Because of frequent serious injuries and tactics (wedge football) that bogged down the movement of play, further changes were in store for American football. It took a presidential declaration to introduce the final stepping stone in the U.S. in 1906. This was the most drastic change in football since William Ellis picked up the ball and ran with it: John Heisman's forward pass was legalized!

Although it took several years for the tactical advantages of the pass to be realized, the potential was there. At first it was seldom used and subject to restrictive rules.

However the 1913 Notre Dame-Army game clearly demonstrated the power of a well organized passing attack. Notre Dame found they couldn't run against powerful Army, so at the half they switched to the pass. It was Gus Dorais-to-Knute Rockne, with devastating results. Gus threw for 14 completions and 243 yards in 17 attempts as Notre Dame won 35-13!

As the New York Times put it, "NOTRE DAME OPEN PLAY AMAZES ARMY." No one had ever seen perfect spiral tosses of 35 yards or more, nor a receiver grabbing the ball with relaxed hands while on the dead run. The forward pass had come to stay.

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Frank Shaughnessy of McGill had advocated the introduction of the forward pass as early as 1921. However there were too many other rule changes that year and "Shag's" suggestion was disregarded. Nevertheless by 1929 the C.R.U. allowed the American-style forward pass on a limited basis. Western teams could use it (they were doing so already anyway), but it was legal for eastern senior teams only in the Grey Cup final.

Finally, in 1931 the forward pass was adopted by the C.R.U. at all levels of competition in the East and the West. Montreal A.A.A. of the Interprovincial Rugby Football Union (Big Four) imported an American passer, Warren Stevens, to direct their offense. They used the new tactic with great precision and went through the season undefeated, capturing the Grey Cup for the first time.

Still, for most teams the pass was a surprise weapon and not as part of the game plan. In 1934 Regina, with American "Oke" Olson, demonstrated the potential of the pass in a game with Saskatoon. Regina won 29-9 as Olson completed 16 of 24 passes for 446 yards, including TD passes of 55 and 60 yards!

This style of play propelled Regina into the Grey Cup, but there they encountered the uncommon power of the Ontario Rugby Football Union and eastern champion Sarnia Imperials. It was a tight contest but the Imps won 20-12.

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The following chart recaps the four stepping stones in the conversion of English rugby into Canadian and American football.

TABLE 1. FOUR STEPPING STONES

<u>Canadian Football</u>	<u>American Football</u>
1880 - Scrimmage line with ball heeled out to establish First Principle of Possession.	1879 - Scrimmage line with ball heeled out to establish First Principle of Possession.
1897 - 3 tries or downs to gain 5 yards establishes Second Principle of Possession. Changed to 10 yards in 1906.	1882 - 3 tries or downs to gain 5 yards establishes Second Principle of Possession. Changed to 10 yards in 4 downs in 1906.
1921 - Introduction of snapback system.	1895 - Introduction of snapback system.
1931 - Introduction of forward pass.	1906 - Introduction of forward pass.

TABLE 2. PLAYERS PER TEAM

<u>Canadian Football</u>	<u>American Football</u>
1874 - 15	1874 - 10 to 15 per side, but

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1902 - 14
1921 - 12

adopted 11 after McGill-
Harvard game.

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It wasn't until mid-century that eastern Canada started using American terms for the line positions. We still called the centre snap and the linemen wings. However things were a little different in western Canada. Because of the Grey Cup, football west of Ontario became more American styled.

What happened was this. The Grey Cup trophy was donated to the C.R.U. as an award for the amateur Canadian (coast-to-coast) championship team, starting in 1909. The cup was presented by the then Governor-General of Canada, Lord Grey.

Out west, the Western Canada Rugby Football Union (W.C.R.F.U.) was established in 1911 to declare a western champion from among the provincial unions of Manitoba, Saskatchewan and Alberta. That first season, Calgary Tigers defeated all comers and were declared western titlists. They informed the C.R.U. that, being members in good standing, they wished to challenge the eastern winners for the Dominion title and the cup.

Now all this was fine and dandy, but as far as the C.R.U. was concerned, Canadian football consisted of the Interprovincial Rugby Football Union, the Intercollegiate Union, and the Ontario Rugby Football Union. All of the clubs in these unions were located between the cities of Montreal in the east and Hamilton in the west, and in the opinion of the governing body of Canadian football, these were the only centres that mattered. There was just no way they would even think of allowing some team "out west" to play for Lord Grey's silverware. Why, suppose they won; then other teams would want to come east too and Canadians (Easterners) might never see their Cup again!

No, it was better that they stay where they were; The C.R.U. simply told Calgary that their challenge would be taken up at the next annual meeting, which of course would be after the Grey Cup game.

The importance of this was that the East had failed to recognize the West's right, as Canadians, to challenge for the Dominion championship. Furthermore, the East expressed no interest in demonstrating their style of football, or even in assisting the growth of football "out there." In effect the East was saying, "Go develop your own style of football and maybe someday we'll let you play for our Grey Cup."

With few schools to teach football, the West was being isolated by the East. Western teams, now without any encouragement from the powers of the East, looked towards the only other source of football talent and skill – south of the border. They were quick to recognize the better trained players in the American colleges and the superior strategy of the American game.

Americans had been playing for western clubs as early as the turn of the century, but their presence and the resultant American influence on Canadian football became more noticeable just before the First World War (1914-18) and, especially, just after.

Players and coaches from American colleges introduced their concepts of football over the next several years. Deacon White and his Edmonton Eskimos went to the first East-West Grey Cup game in 1921 with the American-style T-formation. There they ran for over 300 yards on the ground, but lost 23-0 to a superior all-Canadian team, the Toronto Argonauts, who had the art of lateralling the ball down to scientific perfection.

Still, the West was starting to produce a more open and probably more exciting brand of football than their eastern counterparts. But the Grey Cup continued to elude them. It took the War of 18-12 (1935 Grey Cup: Winnipeg 18, Hamilton 12) to shock the East into a recognition that western teams could really play football. Winnipeg Rugby Club, with nine American players (imports) on the roster, was the first team west of Ontario to win the Dominion trophy. [Ed. note: An account of this game is included in the 1980 P.F.R.A. annual.]

From that point on more and more eastern, as well as western, teams looked for American imports to strengthen their rosters. Finally in 1936 the C.R.U. required that all Americans playing Canadian ball had to reside in Canada for at least one year prior to their first game. This was the famous "Resident Rule."

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The C.R.U. hoped that it would be able to limit the number of Americans on western rosters and maintain some degree of Canadiana in the game, at least in the east. Even today, the C.F.L. has a limit on the number of imports allowed on a team. Each team can carry 15 Americans and 19 Canadians on its roster.

Finally, just after 1950 the Eat gave in. Toronto Argonauts were the last all-Canadian team to win the Grey Cup (1947). Thereafter Amerks were in the line-up everywhere, and even the head coach was usually an American, raised, trained, and with coaching experience in the U.S.A. Now the centre was a centre, the guards guards, and the tackles tackles. The end became the split end or the tight end, and the extra back shifted to the wing line – oops! I mean moved to the end of the line, where he was called a flanker. The backfield consisted of the quarterback, the halfbacks and the fullback, just like in the American game. After all, declared the American coaches, football is football and we have to name them so we know what we is doing.

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In short, football came to Canada from England in the form of rugby. We taught the Americans that game and they refined it to modern-day football. We liked what they did so well we adapted it to our style of play and have been as happy as pigs in mud ever since.

This doesn't mean that American football is really any better than the Canadian version. It is just that our American cousins have developed more refined and concentrated instructional and coaching methods for the sport. And this has resulted in a rather interesting physical and scientific application in terms of tactics, strategy and human engineering co-ordination.

After all, we Canadians taught the Americans how to play hockey and now they have more professional teams than we have. But most of the players are Canadians who learned their skills here in Canada.

This game of football on both sides of the border certainly has gone through several changes since Ellis first got a firm hold on the ball over 150 years ago. Will fans 50 years hence still recognize their beloved game?

I wonder?

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