

You've heard that the Canadian pros raided the NFL in the 1950s. How close did they come to victory? Closer than you might think ...

'54, 40 or Fight

Canada's 1954 War With the NFL

By Mark Ford

"Fifty-four Forty or Fight!" is one of those phrases, like "manifest destiny", that people vaguely recognize from grade school, but can't readily explain. In 1846, America was on the verge of war with Canada over disputed territory in the Pacific Northwest, and "54-40" was the northern latitude of the disputed territory west of the Rockies. The U.S. finally signed the Oregon Treaty, taking Washington and Oregon, giving up what is now British Columbia. The two nations co-existed peacefully thereafter, but their sports leagues did not. In 1954, more than 40 NFL players and draft choices opted to go north of the border, in addition to those already there.

Parallel Evolution

As with the English language, Americans and Canadians borrowed rugby football from Britain and adapted it to suit their culture. On May 15, 1874, students from Montreal's McGill University introduced rugby to their American counterparts at Harvard, playing to a 0-0 tie. For the next thirty years, the two nations played with similar rules. Indeed, when Michigan met Stanford in the first Rose Bowl in 1902, the rules included 3 downs, a 110 yard field, and five point touchdowns. But rules committees in both countries refined the sport over the years, and football evolved along different courses on both sides of the border. Intercollegiate conferences and pro football leagues developed in both countries, and eighty years after that first McGill-Harvard meeting, American football (4 downs, 11 players, 100 yards, 6 point TDs) and Canadian football (3 downs, 12 players, 110 yards, 5 point TDs) were as different as eagles and allouettes.

The end of World War II saw growing interest in the pro game on each side of the border, and the introduction of television networks in both countries was bringing the parallel lines toward an intersection. Pro football relied on college football, rather than a farm system, for its supply of talent, and with far more college programs in the U.S. than Canada, and a good economy in both nations, the Canadian teams were ready to compete with their Americans for those players.

Before '54, Canadian clubs had made significant incursions into the American talent pool. Frank Filchock and Merle Hapes, banned from U.S. football, had found new careers north of the border in the 1940s. After the NFL and the MFC merged, and 18 teams worth of players were gradually reduced to 12, castoffs looked to become imports on Canadian rosters. Black athletes found Canada to be less intolerant than the states (Jackie Robinson, for instance, was assigned to Brooklyn's Montreal Royals farm team before integrating baseball).

Soon, the four western Canadian teams in the WIFU (Calgary, Edmonton, Saskatchewan, Winnipeg) and the "Big Four" teams in the eastern IRFU (Hamilton, Montreal, Ottawa, Toronto) started to bid against the NFL for top college talent. Billy Vessels, Johnny Bright, Larry Isbell, Bobby Marlow, and Donn Moomaw – all number one draft picks – signed for more money in Canada than they were offered in the U.S. When their contracts expired, vets like Bud Grant, Tex Coulter, Ray Poole, Mac Speedie and others, elected to go north rather than re-enlist with the NFL. Coulter, for instance, went from \$12,000 with the Giants to \$20,000 with the Montreal Allouettes.[1] "I'm sick and tired of sitting around, waiting for these people to do what's legally and morally right," grumbled Bert Bell, citing the renewal clauses in the standard NFL contracts.[2] The Canadian press responded with examples of pacts there being ignored in the States, as with Ottawa players "raided" by Cleveland.[3] The standoff between the leagues was smoldering as 1954 began, and it would be inflamed by the actions of an expansion team in British Columbia – the birthplace of "54-40 or Fight".

"The war is on!": Arnie Weinmeister's Return to the Motherland

As 1954 opened, Canadian coaches were scouting college All-Americans at the Shrine Bowl. NFL teams couldn't do the same, however, for their draft was weeks away. Although Canadian teams had a draft of players from Canadian colleges, the WIFU and the IRFU teams could bid against each other for American players. Thus, a blue chip player like Notre Dame's Johnny Lattner got offers from six Canadian teams even before his selection by Pittsburgh.

Bell, who had guided the NFL through a bidding war with the AAFC only a few years earlier, counteracted by accepting the aid of Bob Snyder, the recently fired coach of the Calgary Stampeders. Snyder talked to groups of players about the downside of living, and playing ball, in Canada. With no antitrust law protection, Bell was unable to ban players from going to Canada (as baseball

had done to counteract the Mexican League in 1946). When the recruitment spread to veteran NFL players, Bell had had enough.

On January 20, New York Giants' all-pro tackle Arnie Weinmeister announced that he was foregoing his option year to sign with the expansion British Columbia Lions. Weinmeister (later enshrined at Canton) was an American citizen, but a native of Saskatchewan.

Coach Annis Stukus persuaded him to return to his homeland to give a chance to a fledgling team. "The war is on!" Bell announced in a press conference in Philadelphia. "The Canadian league has again breached our contracts. They had better start counting their players. We'll fight fire with fire."^[4]

Meanwhile, the Canadians voted to increase the number of imports on their rosters to ten – meaning that up to 90 American players would have places on the top teams. Larry Grigg, the Colts' 2nd round pick, signed with Montreal. On March 23, Redskins quarterback Eddie LeBaron signed with the Calgary Stampeders and was followed there by teammates Gene Brito and Don Campora. Larry Siemering, who had replaced Snyder as Calgary's head coach, had been an assistant at Washington and knew whom to pick. Rocky Ryan, the Steelers' 2nd pick, signed with the Hamilton Tiger-Cats.

In April, 49ers first round choice Bernie Faloney went to the Edmonton Eskimos instead. Dick Chapman, a top choice for two teams of Lions (Detroit and British Columbia), chose Canada. Eddie Macon of the Bears jumped to Calgary, and his teammate Frank Dempsey was negotiating with Hamilton. As more and more college and pro players were considering opportunities north of the border, NBC sports director Tom Gallery was working on a deal that would rock the football world.

NBC and the World Series of Football

May 1954 was a month of historic developments. The Supreme Court ruled that segregation of schools was unconstitutional. France surrendered to Ho Chi Minh in Vietnam. The U.S. and Canada agreed to spend hundreds of millions on the St. Lawrence Seaway, linking the Great Lakes to the Atlantic Ocean. And the NBC television network and the Canadian IRFU signed a \$320,000 deal to broadcast "Big 4" games across America.

Tom Gallery was the Roone Arledge of his day, not content with simply broadcasting sports. In the 1940s, he had worked to create the first NFL Pro Bowl. Now he was announcing a deal to bring pro football to an American TV network. Shut out from college

football, NBC announced that its Saturday afternoon fare would be pro ball from Toronto, Montreal, Ottawa and Hamilton, beginning on August 28. "It's the greatest thing that ever happened in Canada, the United States, and football!" gushed an enthusiastic

Lew Hayman, who had negotiated the deal for the Canadian clubs. Added Jim McCaffrey, Ottawa owner, "I can just see the look on Bert Bell's face."^[5] It could not have been a pleasant sight. Canada now would have a game of the week on 120 NBC stations – compared to the 18 DuMont affiliates that broadcast the NFL.^[6]

Though the NCAA was not pleased with the Saturday competition, a poll taken by the Los Angeles Herald-Examiner indicated that football fans were looking forward to seeing the games on TV. An unidentified member of the Rams said that "Televising of the Canadian games means absolute death in the NFL's monopoly on players. It's the greatest thing that's happened to us since the All-American Conference days."^[7] No longer would players disappear from public view when they left the States.

Moreover, Gallery was now being called "the man who will eventually bring about a World Series of professional football between the U.S. and Canada,"^[8] an idea that had never been seriously considered, and now seemed inevitable as President Eisenhower and Prime Minister St. Laurent were working together for the good of North America. There had been some precedent for interleague play. In 1950 and 1951, the New York Giants and the Ottawa Rough Riders had played exhibition games, with Canadian rules in the first half, American rules in the second (the Giants won both times, 27-6 and 41-18). It was not inconceivable that the NFL champ and the Grey Cup winner could play one game under each set of rules, and a third if necessary, for a true world championship. In an era of supermarkets, superhighways, and supersonic airplanes, a "super" championship bowl seemed like a logical next step.

British Columbia Lions 6, New York Giants 0

Eleven days after the breakthrough with NBC, the B.C. Lions met the New York Giants in Seattle, not on the gridiron, but in a United States District Court. On May 22, Judge Lloyd Shorett denied the Giants' request for an injunction to bar Weinmeister from playing in Vancouver. Although the option clause in the contract was not ruled invalid, the court made a finding of fact that Wellington Mara had waived his options in a letter to Weinmeister.^[9] The NFL would need to restructure its contractual language for future dealings, but those teams that had not been insisting on their option to renew were now facing the loss of players. Norb Hecker, unhappy from being traded to the Redskins by the Rams, went to Toronto, and was followed by others. Some teams sought damages – notably, the Bears filed an unsuccessful \$150,000 suit against Calgary over Eddie Macon, notwithstanding

that it was ten times Macon's salary.[10] Others, like the Chicago Cardinals, gave up and let all-pro Bill Fischer depart.[11] Training camps opened and the 21 major league pro teams prepared to play football.

Closing of the Window

August 28, 1954, arrived and the Toronto Argonauts met the Ottawa Rough Riders for the first Canadian game broadcast on NBC. Though the game was close – a 13-6 win for the Argos – most viewers in the States had never seen anything like it. *Time* magazine gave mixed reviews to that first game: "The man in the bar was puzzled as he looked at the television screen. No doubt, he was watching a football game... Still, something was wrong." [12]

Despite the initial interest in the Canadian game, NBC's ratings for the game up north were soon "going south". American viewers, used to college football and the NFL, did not adjust well to seeing five point touchdowns and the other radically different rules used in Canada. They tired of seeing the same four teams week after week – or watching the Als and the Argos play on October 2nd. And the 23rd. And the 30th.[13] A lack of timeouts meant that NBC had to choose between missing some of the action or irritating a sponsor. NBC would face these problems again – in 1968 with the "Heidi Game", in 1982 when it returned to Canada during the NFL strike, and in 2001 when it attempted to create interest in the XFL.

As for the Canadian teams, the owners had a dilemma of their own. The game, a national sport second only to ice hockey, could not be completely Americanized for the benefit of NBC viewers. To do so would have been similar to postponing Dominion Day (July 1st) three days for the convenience of the States. On November 27, ABC's telecast of the Army-Navy game outdid NBC's first – and last – telecast of the Grey Cup.

Some accommodations were made. Within two years, the WIFU and the IRFU would merge to create a single league, today's CFL, and the owners voted to make TDs worth six points. The CFL would continue to sign college stars, but elected for survival for all

nine of its teams and peace with the twelve in the NFL. After the 1954 season closed, the NFL teams were ready to make peace. Calgary and Washington signed a truce in 1955, agreeing not to take each other's players.[14] The Detroit Lions were concerned enough to propose a common draft.[15], a move that might have been the first step toward a merger of the leagues. But the money was not there, as NBC did not renew its IRFU contract.

Canada flirted several times with expanding into the United States between 1957 and 1961, staging games in Philadelphia, San Francisco, Spokane and Portland.[16], and experimented with American teams in the 1990s. The CFL game was still a cut above that of the AFL in the latter's formative years, as reflected by Hamilton's drubbing of the Buffalo Bills in 1961. Some of the AFL's early stars had been CFL castoffs – Jack Kemp was on Calgary's taxi squad, and Gino Cappelletti played for the minor league ORFU – while others, like Eddie Macon, "retired" to the AFL.

Eventually, though, it would be the AFL that would take advantage of the opportunities that might have gone to a unified CFL. It was the American Football League that would sign the star collegians, land a long term national television contract from NBC, negotiate a merger with the NFL, participate in a common draft, and get a chance to play in a "World Series" of football (scaled down to one super bowl game). In the 21st Century, the CFL is considered minor league. But for a decision to make peace, it might have been the Grey Cup champ Stampeders upsetting the NFL's Rams for the 2002 world championship.

How serious were the Canadian raids on the NFL? Here's a list of 17 vets and 10 high round draft choices who went north in '54, along with 13 other established players who stayed. While a later round draft choice might not seem important, consider that, in 1954, Hall of Famer Raymond Berry wasn't drafted by the Colts until the 20th round. Not on the list below are CFL superstars like Jackie Parker (drafted 17th by the Giants in 1954) and Sam Etcheverry (not drafted by the NFL).

The '54 Top 40:

1. Arnie Weinmeister (B.C. Lions), starting DT, N.Y. Giants, and all-pro, 1950-53.
2. Bill Fischer (Toronto Argonauts), starting G, Chicago Cardinals; all-pro selection 1952; #1 draft choice, 1949.
3. Ken Carpenter (Saskatchewan Roughriders), starting RB, Cleveland Browns; played in 1952 Pro Bowl; #1 draft choice 1950.
4. Eddie LeBaron (Calgary Stampeders), starting QB, Washington after Sammy Baugh retired, 1952-53.
5. Gene Brito (Calgary), End for Washington, 1951-53.
6. Don Campora (Calgary), DT, Washington 1953; #2 draft choice for 49ers in 1950 draft.
7. Frank Dempsey (Hamilton Tiger-Cats), DT, Chicago Bears, 1950-53.
8. Norb Hecker (Toronto), DB, L.A. Rams, 1951-53; left after being traded to Washington.
9. Howie Livingston (Calgary), RB, 1944-50, Chicago Bears, 1953.
10. Eddie Macon (Calgary), Punt returner, back, for Chicago Bears, 1952-53.
11. Ray Pelfrey (Winnipeg Blue Bombers), RB, P for N.Y. Giants, 1951-53.
12. Al Pollard (B.C. Lions), RB for Philadelphia, 1951-53.
13. Ray Ramsey (Hamilton), DB, Chicago Cardinals, 1947-53; led the team with 11 interceptions in '53.
14. Byron Bailey (B.C. Lions), RB, Green Bay, 1952-53.

15. Lowell Wagner (Calgary), DB, San Francisco, 1946-53; 2nd team All-Pro, 1952.
16. Neil Ferris (B.C. Lions), DB, L.A. Rams, 1951-53.
17. Ed Henke (Calgary), DE, San Francisco, 1951-53; UPI 2nd team All-Pro 1952.
18. Dick Chapman (B.C. Lions), Rice, Detroit's #1 pick in 1954 draft.
19. Bernie Faloney (Edmonton), San Francisco #1 pick in 1954.
20. Larry Grigg (Montreal), Oklahoma, Baltimore's #2 draft pick, 1954.
21. Rocky Ryan (Hamilton), Illinois, Pittsburgh's #2 draft pick, 1954.
22. Tom Miner (Calgary), Tulsa, Pittsburgh's #3 pick in 1954.
23. Ted Connor (Toronto), Nebraska, Philadelphia's #3 pick, 1954.
24. Les McClelland (Hamilton), Washington St., Rams #4 pick, 1954.
25. Howard McCants (Toronto), Detroit's #5 pick, 1954.
26. Tom McHugh (Ottawa), Cardinals #6 pick, 1954.
27. Sam Marshall (Toronto), Green Bay #7 pick, 1954.
28. Tex Coulter (Montreal, since '53), T, N.Y. Giants, 1951-52; Cardinals #1 pick in 1947 draft.
29. Bud Grant (Winnipeg, since '53), WR, Philadelphia, 1951-52; #1 draft choice in 1950.
30. Ray Poole (Montreal, since '53), WR, Giants, 1947-52.
31. Mac Speedie (Saskatchewan, since '53), WR, Cleveland, 1946-52; All-Pro 1950 and 1952; led league in receptions 1952.
32. Frank Tripucka (Saskatchewan, since '53).
33. Gene "Choo Choo" Roberts (Ottawa, since '51), N.Y. Giants, 1947-50; NFL scoring leader in 1949 with 17 touchdowns.
34. Travis Tidwell (Hamilton), QB, Giants, 1950-51; #1 choice, 1950.
35. Bobby Marlow (Saskatchewan), Alabama, Giants' #1 pick, 1953.
36. Johnny Bright (Calgary), Eagles' #1 pick, 1952.
37. Larry Isbell (Saskatchewan), Redskins' #1 pick, 1952.
38. Chuck Hunsinger (Montreal), Florida, Bears #1 pick, 1950.
39. Neill Armstrong (Winnipeg), Philadelphia #1, 1947.
40. Stan Heath (Calgary), Green Bay #1, 1949.

Endnotes:

- [1] *Times Herald* (Dallas), May 31, 1953
- [2] *Philadelphia Bulletin*, May 13, 1953
- [3] *Globe and Mail* (Toronto), January 22, 1954
- [4] *New York World Telegraph*, January 21, 1954
- [5] *Globe and Mail* (Toronto), May 11, 1954
- [6] *Sports Illustrated*
- [7] *Globe and Mail* (Toronto), May 25, 1954
- [8] *Id.*
- [9] *Globe and Mail*, May 23, 1954
- [10] *Chicago Tribune*, June 16, 1954
- [11] *Globe and Mail*, July 30, 1954
- [12] *Time*, September 6, 1954, "Canadian Football"
- [13] *Sports Illustrated*, Oct. 4, 1954, et seq.
- [14] *Washington Star*, February 22, 1955
- [15] *Detroit News*, March 30, 1955
- [16] Ronald A. Ferroni, *The 2001 Unofficial Canadian Football Encyclopedia*