

EARLY AMERICAN & CANADIAN 'FOOTBALL': BEGINNINGS THRU 1883/84

by Melvin I. Smith

(Excerpted from the book of the same name)

After spending about 30 years researching the beginnings of American 'football', I realized that there were many cross-references about games between Canada and the USA into the 1880s. I also became interested how Canada evolved their different 'football' styles of play from the 1860s into the 1880s. So I spent about a dozen years pouring over old Canadian newspapers, along with several trips to Canadian colleges and the Canadian National Library in Ottawa.

Originally, I was going to include new-found teams and games with all the accepted games and call them all football in a book. But I kept finding more and earlier games, which led to going back in time to the 1850s. In that decade, the only 'football' games were variations of the kicking game (which evolved to the soccer style) and the carrying game (which is now the rugby game).

Shortly after the founding of the University College at the University of Toronto in 1856, the kicking form of football was played with the Toronto Medical School. When the University of Toronto obtained the leather-cased ball in the early 1860s, the kicking game became the 'dribbling' game. The primary method of moving the ball was dribbling the ball with the foot along the ground. However, the 'old university game' rule of batting the ball with the hand did not stop, and was continued into the mid-1870s. Around the early 1870s in Halifax, the London association rules were in use when local teams would play the British military ships. In 1876, when the association game was dropped by the American colleges, this style would be accepted in Canada and continued to be played unabated.

The carrying game might have begun in the late 1850s on the McGill campus. A contributing factor to McGill's early venture into the carrying game was the fact that there were British soldiers stationed in barracks right on the campus into the late 1860s. In England, the carrying teams got together in 1871 and the rules for the rugby union game was solidified. In Canada, the carrying game evolved to the British form of rugby shortly after 1871. The rugby game then rapidly spread to Ontario in the early 1870s. In Nova Scotia, all association games seem to stop after 1873. The rugby game then became entrenched in Atlantic Canada up into World War II. McGill introduced this style of play to Harvard University in 1874.

By the early 1880s, newspapers in Canada and America were both stating 'there are now three forms of 'football'; the association game, the rugby union game, and the intercollegiate game.' It was the intercollegiate game of ball-control that evolved to what we now call football.

To list all the new data found I opted to use a simple rating system. This way I would be able to select the top few teams for discussion each season. This approach made more sense to me than to list all the old and new teams alphabetically. As snapshots of the times, here are my seasonal lists of the top ranked teams, plus runner-ups, rated under the two main styles of 'football' played in Canada at this time. I'm sure these lists will change as historians uncover more data. These lists are just my opinion and certainly do not need to be accepted. 🍁

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This book follows the early kicking game (now soccer), the carrying game (now rugby) and the intercollegiate game (now football). The 345-page book has 82 pages of text and the rest are data that contain listings of all 'football' games & scores found up through the 1883/84 season. Then there are ratings' lists of every team with a game, conference listings, scoring techniques and the first ten teams to play each style of 'football'.

EARLY CANADIAN RUGBY STYLE CHAMPS

TEAMS	RECORD	RATING	RUNNERUP
<i>Division I</i>			
1858/59 to 1861/62	(no games found)		
1862/63 to 1865/66	(unable to determine winners or losers)		
1866/67 Civilians (McGill)	1-0-0	51.2	Garrison Officers
1867/68 Civilians (McGill)	1-0-0	51.1	Garrison Officers
1868/69 Civilians (McGill)	0-0-1	50.0	N/A
Garrison Officers	0-0-1	50.0	
1869/70 McGill Arts	1-0-0	51.1	McGill Medics
1870/71 McGill Univ	3-0-0	54.4	Montreal Town Team
1871/72 Montreal FBC	1-0-0	51.1	McGill Univ
1872/73 McGill Univ	1-0-0	52.0	Montreal FBC
1873/74 Montreal FBC	2-0-0	58.6	Toronto Argonauts FBC
1874/75 Toronto Argonauts FBC	2-1-2	62.0	Halifax Bluenoses FBC
1875/76 Montreal FBC	3-1-0	61.6	Helmuth College Sch (ON)
1876/77 Halifax FBC	5-0-1	62.1	Ottawa City FBC
1877/78 Montreal FBC	4-1-0	65.1	Britannias FBC
1878/79 Montreal FBC	2-1-0	59.7	Royal Military Coll
1879/80 Upper Canada College Sch	2-0-0	62.7	Britannias FBC
1880/81 U of Toronto	5-1-0	66.0	Britannias FBC
1881/82 Montreal AAA	8-2-1	80.2	Britannias FBC
1882/83 Montreal AAA	6-1-1	76.5	Britannias FBC
1883/84 Toronto Argonauts FBC	7-1-1	90.5	Montreal AAA
<i>Division II</i>			
1873/74	(unable to determine winners or losers)		
1874/75 Quebec City Juniors	1-0-0	54.2	Bishops College Sch (QC)
1875/76 Quebec City Juniors	0-0-1	50.2	Bristows Sch (QC)
1876/77 McGill Frosh	1-0-0	53.8	Halifax 'B' FBC
1877/78 Bishops College Sch (QC)	1-0-0	53.0	McGill Frosh
1878/79 Acadia Frosh	1-0-0	52.0	Bishops College Sch (QC)
1879/80 Lennoxville Town Team	1-0-0	52.1	Ontario Agric Coll (Guelph) II
1880/81 Britannias II	1-2-0	50.9	Montreal FBC II
1881/82 Britannias II	4-0-0	56.3	Halifax "B" FBC
1882/83 Dufferin College Sch (ON)	3-0-0	52.5	McGill II
1883/84 Trinity College Sch (ON)	1-0-1	57.5	Ottawa College II
<i>Division III</i>			
1879/80 McGill Frosh	0-0-1	44.0	Bishops College Sch (QC)
1880/81 Bishops College Sch (QC)	1-1-0	45.6	Montreal HS (QC)
1881/82 Bishops College Sch (QC)	3-0-1	49.6	Montreal HS (QC)
1882/83 McTavish Sch (QC)	3-0-0	48.5	Royal Military Coll Juniors
1883/84 Lincoln College Sch (QC)	2-0-0	49.7	Kingston Collegiate Inst (ON)

NOTE:

The opinions presented in this article are solely those of the book's author and are not necessarily in accordance with those of The Canadian Football Historical Association.