

At Queen's Sonshine twice won the most-valuable-player college award.

The Fan who took over The Argos

BY TRENT FRAYNE

For Harry Sonshine, the dream of all football fans came true.

He walked down from the stands, fired the quarterback, got rid of the coach and began running the team himself. The cries of outrage have covered the continent

IN TIMES of adversity, every good football fan dreams the same glorious and impossible dream. As he huddles in his three-dollar seat watching dear old Rutgers or the Mighty Misfits fumble away their sixth straight game, his eyes grow dim and a vision swims before them in which the following blessed happenings occur:

☆ He personally takes over the sole and uncontested direction of the team.

☆ He personally gets rid of the coach and hires a new one.

☆ He personally fires the quarterback and engages a successor.

☆ He personally discharges the team's players in wholesale lots and employs new ones by the carload.

To only one football fan in all of history has this universal dream come true. He's Harry Sonshine who for thirty years, man and boy, has bled for the Toronto Argonauts.

For three years in the late 1930s he played with the team and twice shared their glory in winning the Grey Cup as national champions. Through the 1940s he sat in the stands and cheered hoarsely as they added three more Grey Cups. He clasped the hand of a coach named Frank Clair in 1950 and again in 1952 as two more Grey Cups were won—and then he grew glum. The Argonauts finished 1953 a miserable fourth in the Big Four league. He grew glummer as they foundered again in '54.

And then all of a sudden he was hauled out of the stands, handed approximately one hundred thousand dollars and told to go build the Argos a winning team. He assembled a number of outsize athletes from the

National Professional Football League in the United States and returned, as spent as his bank roll, to take his bows.

What he took instead were lumps. Headlines, lawsuits and strong language were his rewards. What Sonshine had done was simple enough—he had hired some American players for the 1955 Argos who were better, he believed, than those who'd been hired the year before. But it was the way he operated that alienated almost everybody, including the coach Frank Clair who was so hamstrung by various clauses placed in his 1955 contract by Sonshine that he resigned his \$12,500-a-year job for five thousand less at the University of Cincinnati and what he termed "better security." Scores of other people took more voluble, if less costly, exception to the Sonshine manner.

"A terrible black eye to Canadian football," said Leo Dandurand, president of the Montreal Alouettes. "I do not hesitate to indict Mr. Sonshine."

"He's trying to price the rest of us right out of business," said Jake Gaudaur, president of the Hamilton Tiger-Cats.

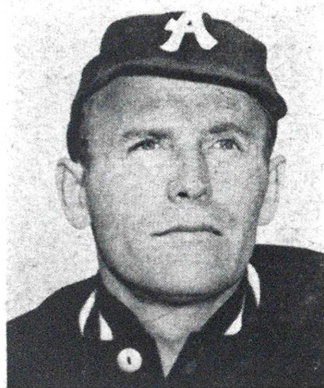
"Callous and undiplomatic," wrote Baz O'Meara, sports editor of the Montreal Star.

"Disastrous," said George Preston Marshall, owner of the Washington Redskins.

"He's pushed Argonaut press relations, which have often been strained, to a new low," said Jim Vipond, sports editor of the Toronto Globe and Mail.

Even staunch Argonaut fans showered letters of protest into Toronto newspapers, and the papers themselves

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Coach Clair of Argos quit after year with Sonshine.



In the stands he left to direct Argos, Sonshine poses

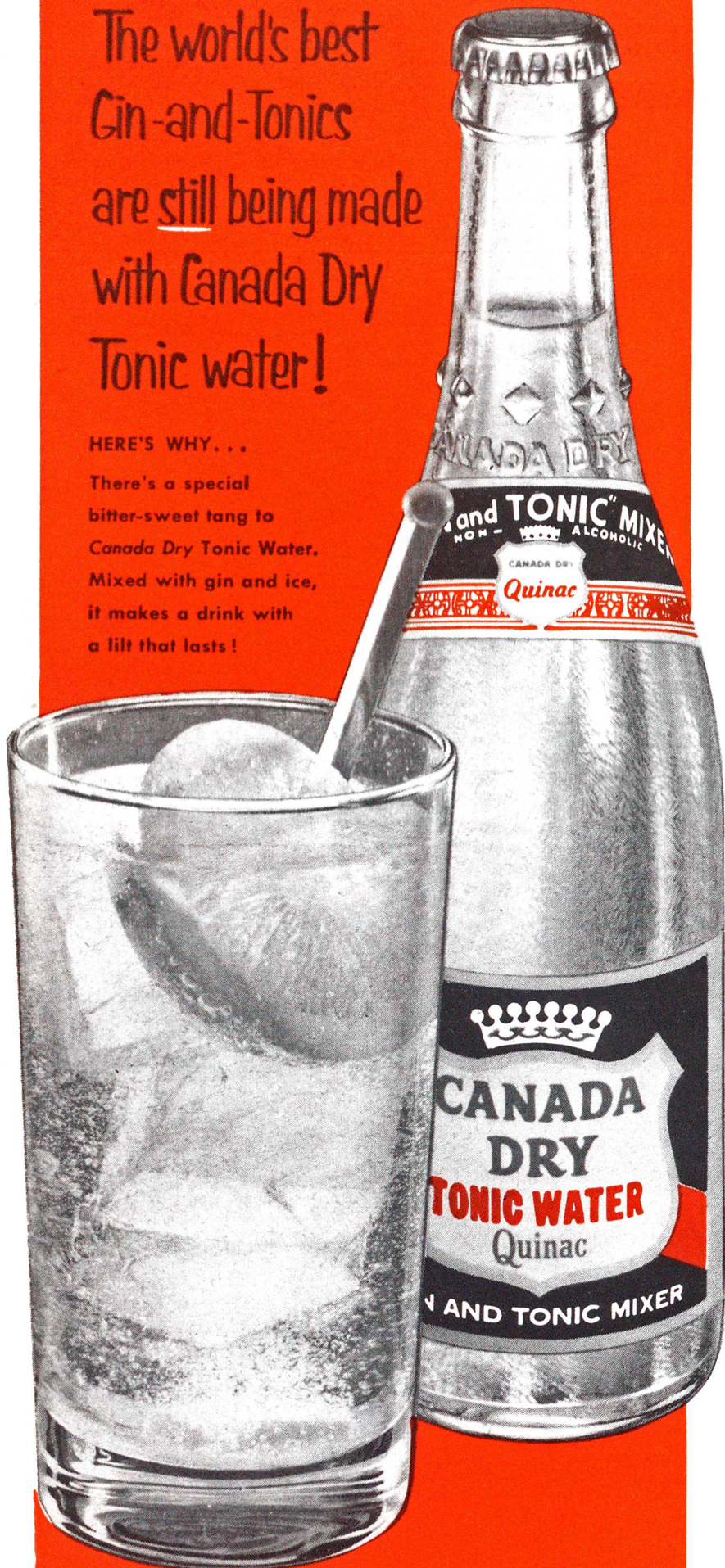


with wife Ailene and (reading from left to right) veteran guard Fred Black; new fullback Don Guest; trainer George Stockwell; import tackle Gil Mains.

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The Fan Who Took Over The Argos

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 12

were so numbed by Sonshine's manoeuvres that as late as April they were shunting hockey's Stanley Cup play-offs out of favored positions in their columns to make way for his latest announcements. Sonshine's activities got Toronto football reporters quarreling, often bitterly, among themselves and with him over news releases, and precipitated a series of broken confidences which Sonshine claimed were responsible for a lawsuit filed in April by the Detroit Lions. His operations brought the threat from Timothy Mara, owner of the New York Giants, that "we'll run those Canadians out of business."

Sonshine has stirred up criticism on three main counts:

First of all, he casually announced to the newspapers one afternoon last December that none of the thirteen Americans who'd played for the Argonauts in 1954 would be hired in 1955. It was the first the affected players had heard of it, and the announcement brought censure from press and public on the grounds of heartlessness and callousness, and a lack of sportsmanship and diplomacy. It also brought the charge from Montreal's Leo Dandurand that "all the publicity Canada has received through National Broadcasting Company televising of our games, and the goodwill and impressions of integrity we have created over the years, have been demolished in one fell swoop." Dandurand said he believed the action would cost the Big Four league future television contracts, a matter of a quarter of a million dollars in 1954 when NBC carried Big Four games on hundreds of U. S. TV stations. Actually, NBC was already angling to carry U. S. college games in 1955, but as late as last May Big Four teams were still negotiating with other U. S. networks to televise Canadian games this fall.

The second point that made Sonshine's critics boil over was that while shopping for new material in the U. S. he negotiated with players already signed to 1954 contracts by teams in the National Football League, a sixteen-team powerhouse stretching from New York to Los Angeles. All such contracts contain a clause giving the NFL team an option on the player's services for the following season. Contracts in the Big Four and in the Western Conference contain a similar option clause which each league scrupulously respects within its own boundaries. But Sonshine and several other Canadian football executives feel this clause is not legal—or at least they appear to feel it is not legal outside their own leagues. It has been tested in the courts three times over the past five years when Canadian teams have hired players who were under option to NFL teams. In each case the court ruled that the option clause was not binding. And so so-called raiding between leagues has continued. To stop the practice, which has constantly threatened a costly player war, several Canadian teams sent representatives to Bert Bell, commissioner of the NFL, in an effort to work out a lasting peace between the two countries, and just such *rapprochement* seemed in the making when Sonshine skimmed across the border and came back loaded. That's when NFL owners screamed defiance and they were quickly joined by Canadians who wanted peace and saw Sonshine as a warmonger.

The third rallying point for the we-

hate-Sonshine forces was the fact that Sonshine paid salaries ranging from ten thousand to seventeen thousand five hundred dollars a year when he landed the NFL stars he wanted. Such prices were deemed too rich for the budgets of Ottawa and Hamilton, both of whom claimed to have lost money in their 1954 operations. "To up salaries is suicidal," said Jake Gaudaur of Hamilton. "Yet if we don't keep pace on the field our fans will desert us and that'll be suicidal. I do not hesitate to condemn everything Sonshine has done."

Through all this storm of criticism Sonshine has been backed by the unwavering loyalty of the Argonaut executive in general and of the tall vigorous club president with brush-cut grey hair, Bill Ross, in particular. It was Ross who brought Sonshine out of the stands and gave reality to every fan's dream. The story traces back to a warm late afternoon last August when the air at Toronto's Varsity Stadium was heavy with humidity and derision from the stands. The Argonauts, once proud and powerful, had finished last in the Big Four in 1953 and now they were being made to look amateurish by the Edmonton Eskimos in a preseason exhibition game to launch the '54 season.

Sonshine Joins the Team

Three days later in Winnipeg, where the Argonauts had gone for another preseason exhibition, three sombre Argo executives fretted in a suite in the Royal Alexandra Hotel. A meeting had been called by Ross. On hand were club executives Ted Punchard and Joe Wright and a swarthy, jowly, heavy-set friend of long standing named Harry Sonshine, whose personal wealth permitted him to accompany the Argonauts on most of their trips.

"We can't take much more of this," Ross began. "We can't have our own fans down on us like this. We're off forty thousand dollars in season-ticket sales and we won no friends against Edmonton." He turned to Sonshine. "You got any notions, Harry?"

"I'm sick to death of seeing us get kicked around," said Sonshine bluntly. "The trouble, I'm convinced, is our material—the imports just don't measure up. Would you fellows, for example, trade our Americans for Montreal's?"

The three of them reluctantly agreed that they'd not hesitate to make the swap.

"Well," said Sonshine, "it's not too late. If Frank agrees, I'll try to help."

Coach Frank Clair was consulted and he agreed to assign Sonshine the task of finding new players.

"We'll spend a hundred thousand dollars if we have to," Ross told Sonshine. "I've had enough of this kicking around."

Sonshine quickly lined up four players. Frank Clair was reluctant to accept them. Sonshine sent up Frank Polsfoot, an end formerly with the Washington Redskins. But after three days of workouts Polsfoot had not been looked at by Clair. When Sonshine asked why, Clair replied that it would take six weeks for a player to learn the Argo system and he was too busy getting the team ready for the Big Four opener to spend time on newcomers. Polsfoot left in disgust, joined the Chicago Cardinals and scored two touchdowns a week later in his first game.

"It didn't take him six weeks to learn Cardinal plays," Sonshine says sharply.

In Rochester, where the Philadelphia Eagles were playing an exhibition game, Sonshine lined up Ken Snyder, an all-league tackle. "He met me in front of the hotel, his bags packed and

ready to leave with me," Sonshine relates. "He told me Adrian Burk, the quarterback, and John Palmer, a tackle, would like to go to Canada too, and asked if he could bring them. I told him we'd have to consult our coach."

Again, according to Sonshine, Clair was reluctant to take new material. It would take the players six weeks to learn the system, he told Sonshine.

"We could have had Burk for twelve thousand dollars," Sonshine says. "Today, after the great year he had last season with the Eagles, he'd be at least twenty thousand."

At this point, Sonshine says, he withdrew from the whole thing. "It was obvious to me," he declares, "that Frank was really not interested in getting new players."

But almost from the start of the Big Four season things went badly for the Argonauts. Clair and his assistant coach, Chuck Klein, began arguing openly in front of the Argonaut bench during games. Clair went to Sonshine and told him of reports he'd heard that Klein was after his job. The reports were common gossip among Toronto football reporters.

"He felt Klein was undermining him and asked for advice," Sonshine says. "I told him to send Klein to the press box as a spotter, so that they wouldn't be arguing on the field. Because of this trouble I got back into the Argo picture. The executive appointed me team director, and I took off on scouting trips."

Club president Bill Ross says the executive dispatched Sonshine with full authority because, as a life member of the Argonaut Rowing club which owns the football team, "he had always been around us and we knew him as a very shrewd judge of people, honest, and a successful businessman."

Unpaid by the Argonauts (he still is) and spending close to fifteen thousand dollars of his own money, Sonshine went to the United States every week end to scout players in the NFL. By the end of the Big Four season last November he had a hatful of names and notions and took them to the Argo executive.

"We agreed that because of crowd reaction either Clair or Nobby Wirkowski, our quarterback, had to go," he recalls. "The fans had given them a rough time but it was my feeling that Clair was a good coach who had been saddled with too much work. We agreed to offer him the same salary for 1955 as he'd got in '54, but with reduced authority. As team director I was to handle negotiations with the players and Frank's job was to coach the material I provided him with. If the players were no good it was my responsibility, not his. One other stipulation was that Wirkowski was not to be retained as quarterback; it was nothing personal, we were simply convinced that our fans were down on him."

Clair, according to Sonshine, agreed to these terms. The following Sunday, as they scouted a game in Chicago,

Clair spoke glowingly of Wirkowski in comparing him to the quarterbacks on the field. The next week, in Detroit, the same thing happened.

"Look, Frank," Sonshine recalls saying to the coach, "Wirkowski is out. Our fans figure he's colorless and they're down on him. There's no point in us arguing about him. The real point is that you agreed to come along on the basis that Wirkowski wouldn't be back."

Sonshine called a meeting between Clair and Ross and himself at six o'clock on a Monday night in Clair's office in Toronto's Varsity Stadium. "I'd heard Frank had been publicly criticizing our attitude on Wirkowski and I wanted to set the thing straight. I phoned him Sunday to remind him of the meeting. On Monday night Bill Ross and I waited until 7.30 at the stadium and he didn't show up. I phoned him and he said the meeting must have slipped his mind."

Thus, when they did meet, Sonshine was disturbed, and this was the backdrop to his startling announcement that none of the 1954 imports would be retained. "You've criticized us publicly and I won't go along with that," he says he told Clair. "You're our coach if you want the job, but you've got to adhere to club policy. We can't argue about Wirkowski all season. You've agreed he's to go but you apparently don't want to comply with the contract."

A clause was inserted to the effect that Clair could be released on one week's notice.

"We had to find out if Frank intended to go along with our idea to get new players, or if he even wanted to sign his contract," says Sonshine. "There could be no repetition of the Wirkowski business, or of the players I'd tried to get him in September."

A Curious Coincidence

On December 11, Sonshine leaped overnight into prominence under headlines that shouted of the thirteen firings. Sonshine did not name the replacements but he declared that he'd signed "or gave my bond" to seven NFL players. Two weeks later the Big Four showed what it thought of fans who step out of the stands and go shopping. The delegates agreed at the league's annual meeting in Montreal that no player currently under contract or option to an NFL club would be eligible to play in the Big Four in 1955. Ostensibly, this move was to restore peace with the NFL but by a curious coincidence no team except the Argos had signed an NFL player currently under NFL option, and all teams except the Argos had signed them at one time or another over the previous five years.

But Sonshine and the Argonauts stood firm, declaring that they were bound to pay their seven players and were determined to retain them even if it meant playing a whole season of exhibition games. The Big Four, which then would have been reduced to a sort of Medium Three, modified its decision

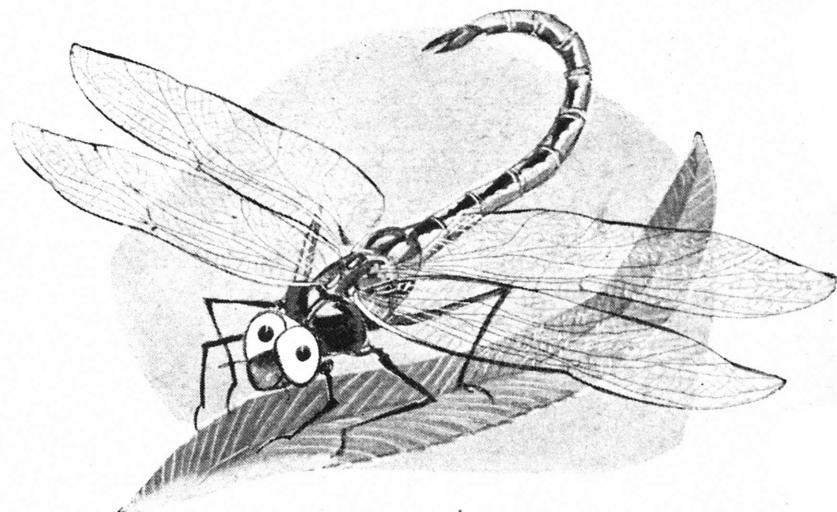
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and declared that each team could keep four NFL players. Sonshine offered three of the players he'd either signed or to whom he had given "my bond" to any of the other Big Four teams that wanted them. But before these negotiations were consummated the three players decided to stay with their NFL teams. "And all of them got raises," says Sonshine.

The four players he retained are quarterback Tom Dublinski of the Detroit Lions, whom Sonshine signed for seventeen thousand five hundred dollars for one year; Gil Mains, a tackle from the Lions who got an eleven-thousand-dollar contract; and two linemen from the Giants, Bill Albright and Bill Shipp, who got a reported ten thousand dollars each. All were highly recommended by other players in Sonshine's dinner conversations in NFL cities, and all came big. The quarterback Dublinski is six-feet-two and weighs two hundred and five pounds, replacing five-foot-eight, one-hundred-and-eighty-pound Wirkowski. Shipp, one of the linemen, is six-feet-six and weighs two eighty-five. All were signed to no-cut contracts, which means that the Argonauts are committed to pay them whether they are retained by the club or not, an extremely rare kind of contract in football where competition for jobs is keen and only the players who "make the team" after a long fall-training period still have jobs.

For his personally selected coach, Sonshine again turned to the New York Giants. "Everywhere I'd gone to talk to football players I'd heard Bill Swiacki's name mentioned. He was the fellow who mapped the Giant offense last year, and it was one of the most diversified in the NFL." Sonshine landed the thirty-two-year-old Swiacki for a basic fourteen thousand dollars, plus a bonus of one thousand dollars if the Argos win the Big Four championship, and another thousand if they win the Grey Cup. Then he added two assistants to the coaching staff for a reported eleven thousand each. These were Jim Martin, a tackle last year with the Lions, and Bill Earley, an assistant to head coach Terry Brennan at Notre Dame University last year.

"The game has become so complicated," says Sonshine in explaining an outlay of about thirty-five thousand dollars for a coaching staff, "that one man simply can't handle all the details. One of the main jobs of all these men will be to develop Canadian players."

At this writing, court cases are pending involving two of the players, Dublinski and Mains. The Detroit Lions have asked for an injunction to restrain them from playing with the Argonauts and have slapped a fifty-thousand-dollar breach of contract suit on each man. Sonshine has announced that the Argos will carry the financial responsibility for both. Sonshine is riding out this judicial tempest with the dogged persistence and unwavering confidence that marked his attitude under earlier assaults. Whether he is seated with friends talking football in his luxurious five-room apartment in the northern reaches of Toronto, or at the wheel of one of his two Cadillac sedans, he remains calm. He is a big unhurried man of six feet and two hundred and sixty pounds, with thinning black curly hair, dark eyes and an olive complexion. He doesn't smoke, drinks if he thinks of it although it's unimportant to him and, aside from weekly poker sessions with a few old friends, has few interests other than business and football. He lives quietly with his second wife, the former Ailene Craig, of New Westminster, whom he married in 1946, and his two sons—David who is fifteen and Reg, ten—by a first marriage that ended in

divorce. Sonshine turned forty-one last April 28.

He was born and brought up in Toronto in well-to-do surroundings, the second oldest of five children. His father was Ben Sonshine, a manufacturer of interior fixture fittings. Harry was a tall thin one-hundred-and-forty-pounder when he played flying wing for Queen's University from which he graduated as a bachelor of commerce in 1937. That fall he joined the Argonauts but a broken jaw kept him out of the Grey Cup final against the Winnipeg Blue Bombers. In December the Bombers were training at Ann Arbor, Mich. Sonshine secretly scouted them. He wore a University of Michigan freshman's tam on his head and struck up a conversation with Fritz Hanson, a renowned Winnipeg halfback from North Dakota.

"Hey, this game's not so different from our game, is it?" he remarked to Hanson.

"Fundamentally the same game," said Hanson.

"Where's the difference?" asked Sonshine.

"Well, I'll tell you," replied Hanson, and he went into a detailed discussion of Bomber plans and plays, which Sonshine duly relayed to Argo coach Lew Hayman. To Hanson's utter consternation, the first man he saw as he trotted onto the field at Varsity Stadium in Toronto the following Saturday was the black-jowled "freshman" from Michigan, sitting beside Hayman on the Argonaut bench. The Argos won that day, four to three.

"Shrewd Bunch of Bandits"

Sonshine worked for a stockbroker for a while, then joined his father as a salesman for six years. In 1943 he was made general superintendent of a truck-transport company and he still regards his three years there as the most constructive of his life.

"The guys driving inter-city trucks in those days were the toughest, shrewdest bunch of bandits in the world," he reflects. "Handling them was a murderous job because if one of them figured he could beat you he'd steal your socks."

In 1946 he joined his friend Harry Tepperman who owned the Hart Equipment Corporation, which manufactured furniture, as sales manager. Six months later he bought into the firm and today he and Tepperman are equal partners. When plastics began to appear on the market Harry talked Tepperman into risking most of their capital—one hundred thousand dollars—to purchase a plastic press to make table tops, the first such press in Canada. He worked sixteen to eighteen hours a day to push the table tops, and his pretty wife Ailene remembers taking a book to the plant night after night and reading until 2 a.m. when Harry would drop into the car beside her and immediately fall asleep.

Business came his way and he expanded. Today he owns a plywood-door manufacturing company, a steel-tubing company, a steel-door and hardware company and, of all things, a bowling alley in Niagara Falls, Ont. He estimates his business assets at three million dollars. His wife, generally opposed to his expansions—"He'll ruin his health; what's the point?"—actually urged him to join the Argonauts as unpaid team director last fall. "I thought it would be a hobby," she says. "I thought he'd finally do some relaxing. Little did I know!"

Thus, when Sonshine answers his critics it's with the confidence in his judgment that made him successful in business. He does not agree, for

example, with the charge made by Jake Gaudaur, president of the Hamilton Tiger-Cats, that his methods threaten the financial structure of the Big Four.

"Our total expenses won't be ten percent more than they were last year," he claims. "Look, since we know the calibre of our players we won't be bringing twenty to twenty-five Americans to camp to try out. To get the ten we're permitted, we'll look at twelve boys. I was reading the other day where Hamilton plans to look at five quarterbacks. It'll cost them as much to finally select one as we're paying the one we've got."

As for pricing the league out of existence, another of Gaudaur's charges, Sonshine says the main reason the Argonauts agreed to a split-gate this season was to help the smaller cities—Ottawa and Hamilton—with their finances. Split-gate is a system whereby the visiting team collects fifteen cents on the dollar for all gate receipts; the smaller cities would therefore participate in the larger receipts in larger centres.

"No league is stronger than its weakest team. So the point is, are the smaller cities going to come up to our level in player material, or are we going down to theirs? The surest way for us to have Canadian football is to give our fans terrific football in a balanced league. I feel it's the Americans who made our game the national attraction it is today. Therefore, the better the Americans, the better our attraction. And if we get them teaching Canadians, as the Argos are definitely going to do, we'll have a better game, and a better-paying game, for all the Canadian kids who want to play football."

He admits he might be partially responsible for the football war between the Big Four and the NFL but he insists that the NFL's price for peace is too high. "They want everything their way. They treat us like poor relations, expecting us to take their castoffs and unripe rookies and be grateful. If they want to give us an equal voice in their annual college draft, okay, let's have a working agreement."

In one regard, Sonshine feels he made a mistake. "I thought the best way to handle the newspapers was to tell the writers, off the record, exactly what players we were counting on, and everything that we planned. For various reasons some of the boys broke stories before we were ready to release them. We lost a backfield coach from Notre Dame we were counting on heavily, because the news broke before he had informed the school of his intention to move. He phoned me his regrets; he said Notre Dame wasn't the kind of school you pulled that stuff on. Luckily we later were able to interest Bill Earley, another fine Notre Dame coach, in joining us.

"I don't think the Detroit Lions would have sued us over Dublinski and Mains if we'd had both boys up here, firmly established in jobs, before the Lions learned that they were signed by us. The Dublinski thing hit the papers while Tom was still at home cleaning up his affairs, and that set the Lions loose on us."

And as he answers the broadsides, Sonshine goes determinedly ahead with his plans. "We'll see," he says. "We'll see this fall. The one guy in all this fuss who isn't being overlooked is the fan." As the fan who's running the show, he ought to know. ★

How to Cook Without a Stove

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 15

a three-inch steak with half an inch of damp coarse salt, grill over a very hot fire twenty minutes to a side, crack off the charred salt, slice steak into melted butter and serve on French bread.

Other barbecue specialties are lamb chops rubbed lightly with garlic; bacon with some of the fat melted off first to

cut down on flare-ups; fish; spare ribs rubbed with sage and flour and swabbed with a barbecue sauce; chicken split and barbecued inside first, skin-side last; power-sawed cross sections of hard-frozen turkey, thawed in cooking oil; corn cobs; tomatoes; hamburgers fancied up with chili beans; hot dogs stuffed with crushed pineapple; trout wrapped in bacon; oysters broiled on their shells till the edges of the oysters curl; and bananas barbecued in their skins.

A *shishkebab*—a Turkish term for roasting food over a fire on the point of

a sword—is a barbecued skewer-load of meat and vegetables (for example, chunks of lamb, tomatoes and peppers). A hamburger *kebab* is made of balls of hamburger, peppers, tomatoes and Bermuda onions. Lamb *shashlik*, the Russian word for *shishkebab*, is made of marinated lamb cubes. *Barbemush* is an appetizer of slightly scorched cornmeal mush containing chunks of pork.

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