

*Sam Etcheverry, an American in Montreal, isn't bothered by the language barrier. His French isn't fluent, but his passing is precise and as long as he keeps throwing for touchdowns, the fans will continue to idolize him*

## CANADIAN FOOTBALL'S SLINGIN' SAM

By **CHUCK ROUNTREE**



In eight Canadian League seasons, Sam has set a hatful of passing records. He can throw long or short, and he likes to take a chance with daring maneuvers.

**A**LTHOUGH HE HAS been playing pro football in Montreal for eight seasons and now makes his home there, American-born Sam Etcheverry still hasn't mastered the French language spoken by most of his fans. They do not care, though, if Sam never learns a word of French, just so long as he keeps throwing touchdown passes. In fluent French and halting English, the fellows who root for the Montreal Alouettes insist that quarterback Etcheverry, Canada's personal star, is no less a passing hero than Slingin' Sammy Baugh, the top quarter-back ever produced in United States' football. What's more, the record books back them up.

Baugh played 16 seasons for the Washington Redskins and set these National Football League career records: 3,016 passes attempted; 1,709 completed; 22,085 yards gained passing; and 187 touchdown passes. Etcheverry's totals, as he gets ready for his ninth season in Canada's Big Four League, are 3,029 passes attempted; 1,708 completed; 26,810 yards gained passing and 159 touchdown passes.

A touchdown threat every time he fades back to pass, Etcheverry is a natural target for enemy tacklers. The five-foot-eleven, 185-pound Montreal star has been hit hard and often but not enough to keep him

out of action; he has played in 147 consecutive games since joining the Alouettes in 1952. "I still get nervous before every game," Sam says, "but I'm all right after I throw a few passes."

Etcheverry has been throwing passes for a long time. Born in Carlsbad, N.M., 30 years ago, he played four years of football for the University of Denver before heading north to the Canadian League. He passed up a chance to play in the NFL and has never regretted his choice.

"The pro football grind in the United States is murder," Sam explained a while ago. "They hold two drills a day, starting in the middle of July, and then wind up every evening workout with chalk talks and football films. The regular season runs through mid-December and the playoffs come later. That's too much.

"On the other hand, here in Canada we work out only once a day. Practice is held in the evening, which means that the players can hold down regular outside jobs if they want. Our season is shorter, too. We train for six weeks before the first game and then finish our 14-game schedule by the end of November."

Does a shorter season make things easier for a top-notch quarterback

like Etcheverry? Not at all, the Canadian fans insist. They point out that he has it tougher than his NFL counterparts because he cannot rely entirely on his passing arm. He must also be able to run, kick and even play defense.

And when the Big Four quarterback decides to run with the ball, he must go it alone because the Canadian rules prohibit downfield blocking. Also, with only three downs in which to engineer his team's drive, the Canadian quarterback cannot afford the luxury of wasting a down in order to set up a special play. Every play he calls must count, or his team will surrender the ball.

Of course, a fine passing arm makes the signal-caller's job much easier. And Sam (The Rifle) Etcheverry has a fine passing arm, as Montreal's opponents in the Big Four League—Toronto, Ottawa and Hamilton—have learned. Alex Webster, a star halfback for the New York Giants of the NFL and a former Alouette player, says: "Sam is one of the greatest quarterbacks I have ever seen. He does everything well and I'm sure that he could make any team in the NFL."

When Sam graduated from Denver University, few people thought he would ever amount to much as a professional. Even though he had broken several Skyline Conference passing records and had been named to the All-Conference team twice, Etcheverry was rated as a second-stringer, at best, when he reported to the Alouettes' camp in the summer of 1952.

The year before, the Alouettes had imported George Ratterman as quarterback. They had paid a large-sized sum to the former Notre Dame star in the hopes that he would be the messiah who would lead them out of the gridiron wilderness. Ratterman, though, led the Alouettes nowhere. They finished last in the four-team league, and George hastily sought reinstatement in the NFL. The Als were once again in the market for a quarterback whose passing could win games and make them strong challengers for the league championship.

Coach Doug (Peahead) Walker, making his debut in Canadian football, figured he had just the man for the job, Fran Nagle. Etcheverry was invited to the camp only to fill in when Nagle needed a rest. However, just before the club left for a series of exhibition games in the West, Nagle got hurt and Etcheverry was shoved into the quarterback slot. No one has been able to push Sam out since.

"I guess I've been pretty lucky," Sam says, "and in more ways than one. I have never suffered an injury serious enough to keep me out of a game. And, just look at the great receivers I've had in Canada, starting with the old reliables, John (Red) O'Quinn and Harold Patterson. Then there's been Alex Web-



Etcheverry, left, says that his job has been a lot easier because of top pass-catchers like Pat Abbruzzi, right, and Red O'Quinn, center.

ster, Chuck Runzinger, Ray Poole, Joel Wells, Pat Abbruzzi and a lot of others. I've had some terrific linemen in front of me, too. Fellows like big Tex Coulter, Jim Staton, Herbie Trawick, Billy Shipp, Ray Cicia, Bill Hudson, Tommy Hugo and Jacki Simpson. All great players and great guys."

The Rifle shook his head. "Man," he said, "with that old redhead (O'Quinn) out there catching them, I think even my eight-year-old son could be a successful passer. I don't know how many times in the last eight years Red has come to me before a game and told me that he felt real great and that if I would toss to him, he'd be much obliged. You know what? Most of the time he was right. He not only felt good, he looked good. It's guys like O'Quinn and Patterson who have made my pro football career so successful up here."

Patterson, an end, and Etcheverry combined on a pass-and-run play in 1956 that Canadian football fans are still talking about. The daring play covered 109 yards and, of course, scored a touchdown. Montreal had been stopped for no gain on first down by the Hamilton Tiger-Cats. On his own one-yard line, Etcheverry knew that the book called for a punt. But Sam doesn't abide by the book; he's much too daring.

He called signals, took the snap from center and faded back into his own end-zone. Patterson dashed downfield. With the Tiger-Cats rushing him, Sam calmly threw the ball to Patterson, who made a leap-

ing catch, sidestepped two tacklers and raced to a touchdown.

"I figured that the last thing in the world the Ti-Cats would be expecting would be a pass," Sam explained later. "Maybe we were lucky but if the situation came up again, I'd try the same thing, provided, of course, I figured the opposition wasn't expecting it."

Maybe Sam was lucky on that play, but his passing still has earned him many honors. In 1954 he won the Schenley Award, given annually to the most outstanding player in Canadian football. He also has made the Big Four All-Star team seven times and has participated in all four Shrine East-West All-Star games.

Only one major honor has escaped the Denver dandy. He has never played on a Canadian championship team. Three years in a row (1954, '55, '56), Sam led the Alouettes into the Grey Cup Game (national final), but each time they lost to the Edmonton Eskimos. Last season, Montreal fell below .500, winning six and losing eight, but Sam was as good as ever. He completed 231 of 402 passes, ten of them for touchdowns.

"We were a little disappointed with our showing last year," Sam said, "but we're in the process of rebuilding our team. That takes time, possibly a long time."

Even if it does take a long time, the Alouettes know that their fans will not desert them. Not so long as Slingin' Sam Etcheverry keeps exciting the crowds with his daring, precision passing.