Holding the line with Marc Lalonde

If, as Ralph Allen once wrote, hockey is our national religion, football is our national pastime. Ever since Earl Grey donated his silver trophy to the Canadian Rugby Union in 1909, the Grey Cup play-off has been the one Canadian event that really gets the whole nation excited about itself.

John F. Bassett's move to introduce the World Football League into Canada with entry of the Toronto Northmen signaled the beginning of the end of distinctively Canadian football. Health and Welfare Minister Marc Lalonde is dead right to try to stop him. Even before Lalonde formally moved against the Northmen, Bassett had declared war on the federal government and Gary Davidson, the WFL president, was calling down the retaliatory wrath of the U.S. State Department.

There is an important principle involved here that reaches beyond the mercenary confines of professional football. It is up to us, not the Americans, to decide whether the issue at hand is worth making a stink about, then to fight it, fully aware that it's going to cost us something. Bassett has been raging against the government's interference in what he regards as a straight business deal. It's been a whole series of "straight business deals" just like this that have made Canada the only country in history that has voluntarily placed itself into something perilously close to colonial status. Lalonde quite rightly perceives the WFL intrusion as the death of Canadian football as we have known it.

Canadian institutions that arouse people's feelings are few enough. We can't afford to desert this one when it needs us most. The puzzling silence of the eastern CFL owners in face of the WFL threat can lead the cynical sportsman into all kinds of murky conclusions. But having just toured western Canada, I can't agree with sportswriters and others in the East who have been suggesting that Lalonde has been equally cynical by using the football issue to try and win Prairie votes for the Liberals. The fact is that the Prairies wouldn't vote Liberal if Pierre Trudeau became water boy for the Regina Roughriders. This seems to be a straightforward, if rare, case of the Liberal government placing the long-term national interest ahead of short-run political considerations.

Entry of the WFL would have a devastating effect on Canadian football. Unlike the old Continental League of the early 1960s (which also had teams in Montreal and Toronto) the WFL has massive financial backing from its U.S. principals. Television is the monetary lifeblood of Canadian football. The CBC already carries massive coverage of NFL games and the Bassett family, which dominates the CTV network, successfully tied up all of Canada to televise the WFL contests. With the WFL being promoted on one network and the NFL pushed on the other, the CFL games would be quickly lost in the scramble. (I have no grudge against the NFL or the fact that we can watch its games on Canadian TV. But given the choice between cheering for Ronnie Lancaster of Regina and Bob Griese of the current Super Bowl champions, the Miami Dolphins, I'll take Lancaster every time. In the 1973 season alone, Lancaster *completed* more passes than Griese even *attempted*.)

Given some vigorous leadership, there's no reason the CFL itself couldn't expand into Halifax, Quebec City, London, Ontario, or form a second Toronto team. Jake Gaudaur, the CFL commissioner has never been seen with tears in his eyes when they strike up *O Canada* before the opening whistle. But he summed up the situation well when the Northmen first came in. "This is a fight to the finish," he said. "If the Northmen lose, Bassett might drop a couple of million dollars. If we give in, we'll lose 90 years of tradition of Canadian football." Exactly.

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