

LIONEL CONACHER: Canada's Answer to Jim Thorpe

By Bob Braunwart and Bob Carroll

In 1950, while the Associated Press in the United States was selecting Jim Thorpe as the greatest football player and the greatest male athlete of the half century, a select Canadian panel of sports reporters and broadcasters was honoring Canada's native son, Lionel Pretoria Conacher, with the same impressive titles.

There were other parallels in the lives of these two superb athletes. Although Conacher was a few years younger than Thorpe (he was born in 1901, Thorpe in 1888), their careers overlapped considerably. Thorpe entertained American spectators for more than twenty years from 1907 to 1929; Conacher starred in Canadian sports from 1916 to 1937.

Both were all-around athletes excelling, it seemed, in any sport to which they set their minds -- Thorpe in track and field, football and baseball, Conacher in football, lacrosse, hockey, baseball, wrestling and boxing.

Lionel first played organized football in 1912 with a Toronto junior team, the Capitals. Canadian football was different then from what it is today. There were fourteen players a side and a touchdown was worth only five points (as it had been in the U. S. before the 1912 season).

Lionel played middle wing (tackle) with the Capitals in 1912- 15. They won the city championship each of these years. Lionel continued to play in the junior ranks with various Toronto teams through 1918.

By this time he was also active in other sports. In 1916 he won the amateur lightweight wrestling championship of Ontario.

In 1919 he was moved out of the line, playing halfback on the Ontario Rugby Football Union intermediate champion Capitals. He was also a defenseman on the Toronto Canoe Club junior hockey team, Canadian champions that year and he also found time to play amateur lacrosse and baseball.

Lionel entered the big leagues in 1920 when he joined the Toronto Rugby Club in the senior division of the O.R.F.U. His new team won the union championship and went on to meet the Interprovincial Rugby Football Union ("Big Four") champion Toronto Argonauts in the eastern semifinals.

The play-off game resulted in one of many heated disputes in Canadian football during this period. In the second half the Torontos scored a touchdown, which according to the referee was unearned. Under the rules in force at the time, this meant it was worth only three points, not five. Only the unearned variety was to be awarded for a touchdown resulting from a fumble behind the goal line.

Conacher's team protested the ruling. This was understandable, since the final score would have been 7-6 in the favor of the Argonauts if the score was unearned, 8-7 in favor of the Torontos if earned. The Canadian Rugby Union, which conducted the interleague play-offs, was unable to establish the precise nature of the score and ruled that the second half of the game would have to be replayed.

One week after the initial encounter the Argonauts, carrying a 2-0 lead into the second half, finally dispatched the persistent Torontos, outscoring them 3-2 in the replayed second half and winning the game 5-2. The two extra quarters had not only confirmed the Argonauts' victory, but also caused a one-week delay in the Grey Cup game.

In order to retain his amateur eligibility, in 1920 Lionel turned down an offer of \$3,000 to play for the Toronto St. Patrick's hockey team. He did continue senior amateur competition in hockey, lacrosse and baseball, however, and he won the 1920 Canadian amateur light heavyweight boxing title.

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Apparently the Argonauts liked what they saw in the eastern final that year, because by 1921 they had recruited Conacher. In his first game with the team he scored 23 of the Argos 27 points and "had as much fun as a pickerel in a minnow pond." He led the Big Four in scoring with 85 points, including 14 touchdowns. This accomplishment is even more remarkable when you consider that the Argos played only a six-game schedule in those days.

The Argonauts swept through all regular-season opposition (they were 6-0-0, scoring 167 points to 35 for their opponents) and then met the University of Toronto Varsity and Parkdale Canoe Club in the eastern play-offs. Victories in those games put them in the Grey Cup, where they defeated Edmonton Eskimos 23-0. This was the first Grey Cup game ever played between the eastern and western champions. Lionel scored fifteen of the Argonauts' points.

The following year in an early-season game in Montreal, Allan Arless, one of the local players, was killed while attempting a tackle. Although Lionel claimed afterward that he was not the ball carrier on the play, at least one sportswriter thought that he was. A few weeks later the Argos played a benefit game in Montreal, raising \$12,000 for Arless' widow.

Lionel was captain of the Argonauts this season. The team went undefeated again, although they were tied once. In six regular-season games, Conacher rushed for 950 yards! In one game against Ottawa he carried eight times for 215 yards. Talk about a pickerel in a minnow barrel!

He also set a season record (still current, although Canadian teams now play sixteen games rather than six) by scoring 33 singles, including eight on 25 punts in another game versus Ottawa.

The team defeated Toronto Parkdale in the semi-final but lost a 12-11 squeaker to Queen's University in the eastern final. The defeat was at least partially attributable to Lionel's uncharacteristically poor showing -- he fumbled seven times.

Also this year Leo Dandurand, manager of the Montreal Canadians, offered Conacher \$5,000 plus help in setting up his own business if he would turn pro. Once again he declined.

He was still active in amateur baseball, hockey and lacrosse. He was forced to weather a scandal when he and a teammate were accused of point shaving in a hockey game. The Ontario A.A.U. suspended his entire team, the Aura Lees, on "serious charges of infringement of amateurism," but the Canadian A.A.U. absolved the players.

Also this year Lionel boxed a four-round exhibition with Jack Dempsey.

His second season with the Argonauts was also his last. While he played for them, the team was 15-1-1 in regular-season and play-off competition, winning one Grey Cup.

In 1923 he moved to the United States and enrolled in Bellefonte Academy, a prep school just outside of Pittsburgh. He was older than the other students, but he had some academic deficiencies to make up before he could apply to a university. However, he was eligible for the football team, and did play.

In 1924 he played for Duquesne University, also in Pittsburgh. The following year he interrupted his football career to play professional hockey. He continued to play in the N.H.L. with Pittsburgh, New York, Montreal and Chicago every season through 1936-37, twice playing for Stanley Cup winners.

In 1926 he played professional baseball as an outfielder for the Toronto Maple Leafs of the International League. His team won the pennant and the Little World Series.

The following year he was an assistant football coach at Rutgers University. In 1931 he added his third professional sport when he played for the Montreal Maroons in the International Indoor Professional Lacrosse League. (Indoor lacrosse was also known as "box lacrosse" or "boxla".) In 1932 he also wrestled professionally, winning 26 matches and losing none.

Conacher was now a professional in four sports and consequently ineligible to play Canadian football, which was still exclusively amateur.

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So in 1933, ten years after he had last been active in the sport, Conacher organized the first professional football league in Canada. He played halfback and captained the Toronto entry, the Crosse and Blackwell Chefs. The team was named for its sponsor, a food products company.

The Chefs played teams from Rochester and Buffalo. There was also a professional team in Montreal for the first time this season, but whether or not they met the Chefs on the field is not clear.

In 1934, now in his mid-thirties, Lionel continued to play for the Toronto pro team. Because of a change of sponsors, it was known this year as the "Wrigley Aromints." This was his last season in football, although he continued to play in the N.H.L. for several more years.

In May 1954, while a member of the Federal Parliament, Conacher was stricken by a heart attack in the course of a softball game between the M.P.'s and the press. Just fourteen months earlier Jim Thorpe had died.

In 1963 Lionel Conacher was chosen one of the charter members of the Football Hall of Fame.