

Fourth PFRA Annual (1983)

THAT WONDERFUL YEAR: CANADIAN FOOTBALL IN 1907

By Robert Sproule

It was officially known as the "Inter-Provincial Rugby Football Union" (I.R.F.U.) and was the third oldest organized football league in eastern Canada. It was to be the most dominant of all the "amateur" football unions in the country, and in time the same original teams would form the Eastern Football Conference of the Canadian Football League.

The teams involved in this new union were the Hamilton Tigers, Toronto Argonauts, Ottawa Rough Riders and the Montreal Football Club. And the formation of another league was by the mutual consent of these teams and their current unions. Hamilton was tired of beating everyone west of them and desired better teams. Argonauts controlled the Toronto area and the other teams in the Ontario Rugby Football Union preferred playing clubs that weren't so powerful. In the Quebec union, it was the same for Ottawa and Montreal; always playing weaker teams, and no real competition. And so, after several weeks of discussion, in September of 1907, these four teams withdrew from their old leagues and formed the I.R.F.U. or the Big 4.

Playing under the basic rules of the Canadian Rugby Union, the governing body of the country, the four teams embarked on a six-game schedule in October. Actually the first game almost failed to get underway. Montreal was prepared to play Russell, a noted "professional," and the Argo executive decided not to make the train trip. Only when the players threatened to go as the Toronto Torontos did the owners change their minds and allow the first scheduled match to get underway finally on Saturday, October 5.

At 3:24 p.m. referee Dr. Hendry got the players lined up and blew his whistle. Several scrimmages and exchange of kicks, Montreal started a drive towards the Toronto goal. From the 15-yard line, the ball came out to the fullback Stinson and he plowed through the Argo wingline for a try worth five points. Small's goal-from-the-try was wide, but Montreal had scored the first points of the new union. Toronto came back with their star player Peter Flett, who kicked a touch-in-goal for one point. In the second quarter Montreal kicked the ball into the end zone and following up fast trapped the Argo player for a rouge and another point. Later Kelly, a left centre wingman, was pushed over the line and Montreal lead 11-1 at the intermission.

Toronto started to play like champions, as Flett kicked two rouges and a four-point goal-from-the-field from 30 yards out during the third frame, and Argos dominated the home team early in the last quarter. Another rouge and Toronto narrowed the score to 11-8. Shortly thereafter the Argos advanced and tried to line Flett up for a game-winning drop kick. From a scrimmage, there was a fumble and players stood around thinking play had stopped. Suddenly Reynolds popped up with the ball and started to run the 60 yards to the goal line. Flett gave chase but it was too late. The try and the goal counted and Montreal held on for the first win of the season, 17-8. Attendance was good, as some 4,500 people saw the opening match of the season and it seemed that the new league was on stable ground.

The following week, Toronto played host to Ottawa at the Varsity Athletic Field. Argos scored first on a 60-yard kick-to-the deadline by Flett, but Riders replied in the second quarter with a try and a goal-from-the-try to go ahead 6-1 at half time.

Peter Flett was the story in the third quarter. First he kicked a rouge, then two goals-from-the-field and another rouge. Two tries by Julian Sale and two more goals by Flett put the Argos another twelve points ahead. Another try by a plunge and Flett's third goal gave Toronto a total of 28 points in the third quarter, and total control of the contest. Ottawa tried to make a game of it as Jack Williams kicked a goal-from-the-field, LaFleur scored on a 40-yard run and Gleeson punted two rouges, but the rally was not enough and Argos trounced the Rough Riders 29-17.

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Down the Lakeshore at the Cricket Grounds, Montreal and Hamilton were battling it out. Tigers took the lead on a single point and tightened their defence as both teams went scoreless in the second quarter. A Hamilton fumble proved costly, as Kingston returned it for a score and Montreal took the lead 5-1. Near the goal, a scrimmage took place and Kelly was pushed over for the try. Time and time again, Hamilton kicked over the line, but Montreal returned out of danger until Simpson finally scored a rouge. When Referee Jack Lash called time, Montreal handed Hamilton their first loss in four years, 10-2.

Montreal's trip to the capital city on October 19 brought out a good crowd of 3,000 people, including many in horseless carriages, a fashion of the time. Kingston got the Quebec team going on a plunge through the wingline, and a safety touch made it 7-0. Ottawa managed a single point by Gleeson, but that was all in the first half. Another safety touch and two singles and Montreal appeared to have the game wrapped up, but in the last quarter Ferguson's run and the following goal put Ottawa at only an 11-7 disadvantage. However, Craig's run and the goal late in the game gave Montreal its third win of the season, 17 to 7.

Hamilton was ready when the Argos came to town and completely shut down their offence. Two well placed kicks gave the Steel City boys a 2-0 lead, but a fumble allowed Sale to place the ball behind the post and Flett's kick made it 6-2 for Toronto. The lead was short-lived, however, as McCarthy returned on an Argonaut miscue. Top ran to the outside for another try and then Toronto was forced to rouge on Ben Simpson's kick. Four more points were scored when from 37 yards out Southam's drop kick was successful. In the second half, the Double Blue couldn't get untracked. Hamilton already had enough points to win and so went to a kicking game, recording three more single points en route to a decisive 20-6 victory and a firm hold on second place.

During midweek, the I.R.F.U. Executive announced its decision to adopt a new rule to lower the value of the goal-from-the-field from four points to three for the 1908 season. This proved to be an interesting item in the Hamilton-at-Montreal game on the following Saturday. The match, in front of 6,000 fans, turned out to be a battle of the defences. Each team tightened its back division (secondary line of defence), and all runs, either from scrimmage or on kick returns, were of less than 25 yards. Both clubs played a kicking game and waited for the other to make an error. In the first quarter, Southam's drop kick put the Tigers four points up, and it appeared to be the only scoring in the first half. Montreal finally got the chance they wanted as Molson picked up a Tabbie fumble and returned it for a major score. Small's goal was wide but a safety touch some moments later put Montreal ahead 7-4. All Hamilton could manage for the rest of the quarter was another single point to narrow the gap.

Southam's second drop kick in the third quarter finally put his team ahead to stay, as the clubs went scoreless in the last period. Hamilton won the tight struggle 9-7, and although Montreal was still in first place, Tigers were right behind in second. Hamilton's great punter, Ben Simpson, was lost for the season with a broken collar bone.

The return game in Ottawa for the Argos was not quite what they expected. Having already blasted the Riders once, setting a record for most points in a game, the Double Blue were looking for their second win and perhaps some easy pickings. Ottawa on the other hand had different ideas. Flett had score 14 points against them last time and was very dangerous. This time he was closely watched.

Riders scored first on a rouge by Gleeson, then LaFleur took an Argo fumble and ran it in for the score. Williams converted and Ottawa was ahead 7-0. Flett managed a rouge moments later but Ottawa held for the rest of the half. A sixty-yard run by Ryan during the opening minutes of the third quarter put the Riders another five points ahead, but a 90-yard run in which the ball was held by four different players, with Ferguson finally going over the line, turned the game into a rout. Toronto tried to get going but all they could manage was a drop kick by Flett and another rouge. A 40-yard run to the outside by Gleeson and two tries by O'Brien, and Ottawa defeated the Boatmen 34-6. As they had outscored Toronto in the two games, the Riders took over third place.

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On Thanksgiving, Montreal played the Argos, who were desperate for a win. Peter Flett had a paralyzed nerve in his right foot but played anyway. As such, "Pud" Kent was assigned the kicking chores, and scored the first point of the game. Savage turned a fumble into a score and a rouge gave Montreal a 6-1 lead at half time. Toronto fought back and Julian Sale scored his fourth try of the season. The convert made it 7-6 for Argos. Flett was forced to leave the game when he was kicked in the head for the second time. With five minutes left in the match, Montreal finally tied the score. Two more singles in the dying moments and the Quebec team took the tight contest 9-7.

The Hamilton-Ottawa match was a kicker's delight, as five drop kicks were made, including a three-point penalty boot by Tope. But the main feature was Hamilton's wingline controlling Ottawa's that allowed the Tigers to establish their running game and set up scoring plays. A run by Ballard put Hamilton on the scoreboard first. Then a downfield march resulted in Gordie Southam's first drop kick. Ottawa was running nowhere, but did turn a fumble into a drop by Gleeson for a 9-4 half time lead by the Tabbies.

In the third quarter Art Moore made runs of 25 to 40 yards, and this allowed Southam to kick a single, Tope to make his penalty shot, and then another drop by Southam. Riders failed to make any gains but another turnaround gave them field position. Jack Williams dropped to score again. Moore finished the day with 12 runs for 165 yards and Hamilton won 20-8.

The return match to Lansdowne Park, Ottawa was a very tight struggle and in spite of the rain some 3,200 fans braved the downpour. Tigers were looking for another win that would tie them in first place with Montreal, but Riders wanted revenge. Both teams played with caution, waiting for errors to be made, and consequently there was no score in the first quarter. Hamilton scored first on a mass play and went into the locker room at the half leading 5-0. Two singles in the third got Ottawa moving and they appeared to adjust to the muddy field better than Hamilton. Their wingline was superb, shutting down the Tiger plungers and finally knocking Southam out of the game with an injury. A safety touch, a run by Ferguson, and three singles put the Capital City team ahead to stay and they took the match twelve points to five.

Ottawa then made the trip to Montreal and hoped with the same defence to upset the Quebec club. Again there was no scoring in the first period, but a long punt by Stinson finally put his team on the score sheet. Further kicks put Ottawa deep in their own end and twice they were thrown over the line for safety touches. Ottawa held the red, white and black to another rouge after the half time break, but the game was becoming one of the most brutal contests ever witnessed on the A.A.A. grounds. Time and time again fights broke out between the players and lack of crowd control enabled some of the 4,000 fans to join in. In between the outbreaks, Savage ran a fumble for a score and Stinson made two more rouges to increase the count. Two more touch-down runs through the porous Ottawa wingline and the victory was complete, as Montreal won 25-0 and captured first place.

In midweek Peter Flett announced his retirement, citing "...the demands of business upon the time and attention of the player" as being too much.

The final match of the season found Hamilton at Toronto and although the Argos made good gains, they fumbled much too often. Each club traded rouges but a mishandled ball bounced to Marriott, who returned for a try. Art Moore started to make big gains on straight-ahead runs and this led to Bob Isbister, Sr. punting twice over the line. Another Argo fumble and Wigle put the score at 13-1 for Hamilton at the half.

Toronto tried to come back in the third quarter and got another rouge by Kent. A rare Tiger fumble in Grant's hands gave the Boatmen a score, but then Hamilton played a sharp defence for the rest of the game and finished in second place with a convincing 15-7 win. Moore gained 130 yards.

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Because of their first-place finish, a match was arranged with the O.R.F.U. champions, Peterboro Seniors, to decide the Dominion title. Under partly cloudy skies, the game was played on November 30 at the A.A.A. grounds. No sooner had the contest gotten underway than Peterboro ran a Montreal fumble in for the score. The convert goal made it 6-0, but the lead was short-lived. With the ball on the quarter line Gordon took the leather over the goal and Montreal was on the board. Stinson kicked a rouge and the score was tied. The ball came out to Kelly and he ran it over the line. Shortly afterward Craig followed suit, and when Kelly scored again the quarter ended 23-6 for Montreal.

Colledge was allowed a penalty kick and he was successful, thus giving Peterboro another three points. From a scrimmage the O.R.F.U. team fumbled and Lessor returned for the major, and then another Peterboro miscue gave Gillmor a touch-down. Colledge managed to score a rouge, but by half time Montreal had a commanding lead of 35-10.

The Seniors tried to get something going in the third quarter and actually limited Montreal to one touch-down from a run. But too many fumbles from scrimmage or from punt returns enabled Molson, Savage and Gillmor to return for tryrs and boosted the count to 57-10.

In the last quarter Kelly broke off a long run only to trip before reaching the goal ine. The pigskin bounced into the goal and out of the sideline. Referee Britton registered a single point but the umpire, following up on the play, informed the official that under the current rules the last player touching the ball would get five points, and not one. Britton corrected himself and indicated a try was scored. By now so slow were the Peterboro players in getting downfield to cover their punts that Montreal was able to return them almost as long as they were being kicked. With good position, Reynolds was sent through the line for a score. Then from a mass play Murphy was pushed over. When the final whistle was blown the 6,000 fans gave their players an ear-shattering cheer, as the score was the largest win in Montreal's history, 75-10!

Montreal had indeed scored at will; Kelly had three tryrs for 15 points, Gillmor had two majors on fumble returns, and Molson kicked seven converts. In all Montreal had 13 touchdowns, seven by runs from scrimmage and six by fumble returns. All were records!

The new league was now firmly established both with the media and with the fans. All the clubs enjoyed a good return from the gate and the competition was keen. Its acceptance by the C.R.U. to participate in the championship game with Peterboro clearly made the I.R.F.U. an organization to be recognized and considered in the future development of rugby football in eastern Canada for years to come.

All-Star Selection

Full-back:	Stinson, Montreal
Right-half:	Moore, Hamilton
Centre-half:	Flett, Toronto
Left-half:	Simpson, Hamilton
Quarter-back:	Ballard, Hamilton
Scrimmages:	Walters, Ottawa McCarthy, Hamilton Lessor, Montreal
Right Outside-wing:	Ryan, Ottawa
Right Middle-wing:	Isbister, Hamilton
Right Inside-wing:	Alymer, Ottawa
Left Outside-wing:	Savage, Montreal
Left Middle-wing:	Kelly, Montreal
Left Inside-wing:	Molson, Montreal

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Final Standings

	W	L	T	F	A	Pts.
Montreal	5	1	0	85	33	10
Hamilton	4	2	0	71	50	8
Ottawa	2	4	0	78	102	4
Toronto	1	5	0	63	112	2

Individual Scoring

	TD	Con	FG	Sin	Pts
Flett, Toronto	0	4	4	9	29
Southam, Hamilton	0	0	5	4	24
Sale, Toronto	4	0	0	0	20
Ferguson, Ottawa	3	0	0	0	15
Savage, Montreal	3	0	0	0	15
Williams, Ottawa	0	5	2	2	15
Stinson, Montreal	1	0	0	9	14
Gleeson, Ottawa	1	0	1	4	13
Tope, Hamilton	1	0	1*	4	12
O'Brien, Ottawa	2	0	0	1	11

* 3-point penalty field goal