

# From the archives: American-football debut proved disappointing

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A series of Harvard vs. McGill matches during the 1874-75 academic year, which helped to define modern American football, were more eventful than the Syracuse vs. McGill game of 1921. PHOTO BY WILLIAM NOTMAN (1826-1891) /McCord Museum

*The first time that the forward pass was used in Canada was on Nov. 5, 1921 in a football game between McGill and Syracuse at Percival Molson Stadium*

*The Gazette, Friday, Nov. 4, 1921*

Marking a revival in international intercollegiate Rugby in Montreal, after a lapse of 45 years, the Syracuse University eleven and McGill squad will play an exhibition fixture at the Percival Molson Memorial Stadium on Saturday afternoon, the game being scheduled to go the full 60 minutes under the American rules.

The game promised to be a highlight of the football season in Montreal. Though it had lost the previous weekend against the University of Toronto, McGill was very much in the hunt for the senior intercollegiate championship while Syracuse could field one of the stronger U.S. college teams. And of course there was the curiosity value of seeing how a Canadian team would fare under American rules.

Football in the United States had its roots in a series of McGill-Harvard games, under rules resembling those of English rugby, that began in 1874. The Americans liked this new sport that had been evolving in Montreal for a decade or so and, ever inventive, were quick to make it their own with innovations like blocking and the forward pass. By the time Syracuse came to Montreal, the American game was not that different from today's, while in Canada the shift to gaining long yardage mainly by running rather than punting and to scoring by touchdowns rather than field goals and singles had only recently begun.

McGill knew it would have its work cut out that Saturday afternoon 80 years ago. The legendary Frank (Shag) Shaughnessy, who had come from Notre Dame to coach McGill in 1911, was well versed in the American game, but for this occasion, he needed extra help. He turned to a former Syracuse player, Eddie Brown, and to Tim Callahan, who had captained Yale the previous year. Callahan had played centre and so was assigned to work with the McGill linemen. They would have to be weaned away from the Canadian style of grappling with their opposite numbers while standing up in favour of crouching down low and blocking in the American fashion as play began.

Shaughnessy, Brown and Callahan concluded McGill needed more work on defence than offence. "Particular attention will be paid to train the team in defending against the forward pass

and in getting through on the running interference, both of which types are strange to Canadian players,” The Gazette reported.

The Syracuse players arrived in Montreal the day before the game and, after checking into the Windsor Hotel, made their way to Molson Stadium for a light workout. Hundreds of fans were in the seats to see them.

“That the visiting team presented a war-like appearance was granted by all,” we said. “The visitors showed up as a much heavier aggregation than the light McGill eleven, though little could be judged of the ability of the squad as the players only indulged in limbering up.” Several first-stringers on both sides would not be able to play, mainly because of injuries. In addition, the late Dink Carroll, a sports reporter and columnist with The Gazette from 1941 to 1969, would be dropped from his starting halfback position because Shaughnessy deemed him out of shape.

For all the buildup that week, the game proved to be something of a disappointment. Things were not helped by the snowy conditions, which not only kept the crowd down but also hampered the players themselves. There were long, dull stretches of play that “failed to bring forth the enthusiasm usually displayed at intercollegiate encounters,” though the fans did come alive when the McGill backs occasionally broke through the heavy Syracuse line.

Well into the final period, there was still no score. However, by this point, McGill was barely hanging on, and the advantages the Syracuse players enjoyed in size and familiarity with the rule book finally had their impact. “McGill players ... cracked after being gradually worn down, which enabled their opponents to secure their only scores.” To be sure, “cracked” sounds a little harsh, for McGill never quit. Cyril Flanagan, with whom Carroll usually lined up at halfback, “provided the running feature of the game with a spectacular dash of 35 yards to the Syracuse 20-yard line, but the referee’s final whistle ended any chance of the red and white turning the play to advantage.”

The final score was 13-0. Syracuse got a touchdown, which was unconverted, on a four-yard pass and another after a series of withering plunges into the line.

The Gazette was not much impressed with the spectacle of American football. “On Saturday,” we said in our postmortem, “the main object was to cross the opponent’s line, and in an effort to do that, the ball was smothered and hidden from view the greater part of the hour’s play while men were continually found in piled-up masses in their efforts to recover or retain possession of the ball.” Recent rule changes had made backfield play in Canadian football much more sparkling, we added, but if the Canadian game was still not good enough, better to retreat toward the rules of English rugby than to go for the American version.

In fact, there was a faint air of satisfaction in our report that the McGill-Syracuse game was not simply an on-field loss for the home side. “It was estimated that thirty-five hundred witnessed the game, which,” we sniffed, “would hardly cover the expenses of the fixture, as thirty-five hundred dollars went to the visiting team and other expenses totalled about seven hundred.”