

Tomlinville

WHETHER OR NOT SASKATCHEWAN ROUGHRIDERS will have a new coach is not the burning question today. It is whether or not Saskatchewan will have a football team in 1961.

Tonight, the club members will meet to discuss the whole situation with particular emphasis on finances. It's no secret the Riders lost a packet this year, with the figure said to be over \$80,000. That just about cleans out reserve coffers and it will need a great deal of courage to face a new season with nothing in the bank.

It's no secret, either, that the club has been skating on thin ice for several seasons and that the drop in attendance, lower season-ticket sales and lower incomes from off-the-field endeavors all contributed to the drying-up of reserves. Behind all that was the drab showing of the team last season and this. The fans no longer would back a loser and this season they more or less adopted a wait-and-see attitude. If the team had got off to a good start, things might have been different.

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Of course, the fans can't be blamed for that although an average attendance of 10,500 was remarkable. But in recent years the costs of operating a Western Conference club has soared so high that \$500,000 is needed by each of them to stay in business. Certainly, a contending team is the first "must" so far as Saskatchewan is concerned. The second "must" is the razzle-dazzle exuberance that featured the 1951 campaign when Riders won the western title.

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There is also the feelings of the other Western Conference clubs to be considered. Riders have benefitted from a split-gate deal although it fell short of what they had hoped to attain from a share the wealth agreement. The Riders cannot hope to find the others in a more generous mood. In professional sports only a certain amount of philanthropy exists and it will take some tall talking to get a better agreement. They'll have sympathy for the Riders but don't expect miracles in generosity.

Actually, the Riders are no longer important to the league. Past history means nothing. The league can operate with four financially sound clubs. If the fifth dropped out, the day of full interlocking schedule with the eastern Big Four could be hastened. The Riders are expendable.

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THE RIDER CLUB, THEN, is very much on the spot. On the brighter side there is the thought that it wouldn't take very much fixing to make a contender out of the squad, that one more year in this next-year province could do the trick. But to sell season tickets in advance, there would need to be almost a guarantee that the club will be a contender and that's exceedingly difficult to deliver.

In 1951 when the fortunes of the Riders were at a low ebb, some men came forward and took over with great vigor and guaranteed better things. The better things did come but one wonders if football would have ended then if the team had not done so well. It was a big gamble that paid off in a league championship and a Grey Cup engagement.

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Facing the financial problems they have, it would appear that the executive members must be prepared to take the gamble again if they want to keep the team in the Conference. They will have to present some solid arguments to the other league members if greater financial help is to be obtained and the arguments, of course, will be those presented to Saskatchewan fans in an appeal for greater support at the home level.

If new blood is needed to get things rolling in this direction, the club must act quickly. Some of the present executive members may feel the jig is up and it is useless to continue; the rest may see a ray of hope. If they do, then they must find others with some enthusiasm and get going.

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Cold logic says that Regina is too small for professional football but the past has refuted this at various times. We will have football as long as the fans want it, as long as their enthusiasm can be whipped up by a team that can win at home for them most of the time.

If the Rider executive is to take the gamble next year, the fans will have to take it, too. There should be no doubts whatsoever about supporting the executive which will guide the club in 1961 if the decision is made to go ahead. It will call for tremendous season ticket sales, a renewal of membership that almost ceased to exist, and a general feeling of optimism by everybody who likes football. It will call for the spirit of 1951 when a gamble paid off.

There can be no halfway measures, no half-hearted support. Everything but the winning of games will have to be on the line many months before the 1961 schedule begins.

It's a tall order, but it's that — or nothing.