

The History of Football in Alberta

The Origins of Football in Canada

1823- The first ever report about the emergence of football was recorded in 1823 in Rugby, England. Evolving out of what is known in North America as soccer, William Ellis was said to have caught a kicked ball and then sprinted to the opposing teams end disregarding the traditional soccer rules, transforming soccer into the new sport Rugby. The sport was brought over seas to Montreal where a British army garrison introduced it to the students at McGill University in 1865 when the rules gradually began to change until a new sport had emerged.

Rules:

The first official code of rules for Canadian Football was set in 1884 by the Canadian Rugby Football Union. The code was a hybrid of rules set forth by the Ontario Rugby Football Union and the New English Rugby Union Rules. Since then, the rules have evolved and rules variations can be found across leagues and divisions. For more information on the rules regarding professional football in Canada, please refer to the official Canadian Football League website at <http://www.cfl.ca/CFLRulebook/home.html> and for information on the rules for amateur football in Alberta, a complete rulebook can be acquired from Football Alberta.

Stadiums:

1938- \$ 50,000.00 is invested in the new Clarke Stadium named in honor of former mayor Joe Clarke, and 1 year later the stadium was fitted with 10 70- foot poles to hold the 1500-Watt flood lights that would light up the field during night games. It would not be until 1951 that the stadium would be renovated with washrooms and then only because of a visit by the Queen of England and Prince Philip.

1960- The University of Calgary leased 40 acres of land from the city to build the stadium. McMahon Stadium was built in record time propelling the sporting facilities in Calgary from the worst in the CFL to the best. The largest donations for the project were received from Frank and George McMahon, making them the namesakes of the new stadium. The caliber of the new facility would allow Calgary to host the Grey Cup three times, the first in 1975, the second in 1993, and most recently in 2000; as well as numerous play off games. However, one of the biggest events to grab the World's attention and focus them squarely on McMahon Stadium were the Opening and Closing ceremonies for the 1988 XV Winter Olympic Games hosted in Calgary.

1978- Commonwealth Stadium was built in response to the City's bid to get the 1978 Commonwealth Games. Providing the Edmonton Eskimos with a home, the Stadium had a building cost of \$20.9 million and is the only field that can boast an all-natural grass surface in the CFL as well as the most advanced Sony JumboTron scoreboard at a cost of \$6.2 million. With an additional \$22.17 million in renovations, the

Commonwealth Stadium was transformed into a premier facility to host the 2001 World Championship in Athletics, making it an excellent venue for multiple International sporting events as well as a stop for many major concert stops in Edmonton. The presence of the Stadium also brought the Grey Cup to Edmonton in the 1984, '93, and 2002 football seasons.

The Timeline for Football in Alberta

1862- A kind of football was being played at Fort Edmonton, heavy rugby influence.

1871- A code of rules for the new sport was developed in London by representatives from 20 teams across Canada. They also used the opportunity to form the first Rugby Union.

1883- Officers in the Calgary based North West Mounted Police (NWMP) were in the habit of playing the townsmen football (Rugby rules), generally playing games on the barracks field. The NWMP are also acknowledged as having a hand in promoting the new sport all over the Territory.

1891- First competition between Edmonton and Calgary, when a new team of rugby players from Edmonton challenged an already established rugby team from Calgary. Edmonton's victory served to ignite the beginning of a life long competition between Edmonton and Calgary on the football field. This inter-city rivalry can also be credited for the nicknames associated with each city. In a subsequent media write-up about the two rivals, a sports journalist from Edmonton described the team from Calgary as wild "Cowboys" after a win in Edmonton. Conversely, after Edmonton beat Calgary on their own turf, a writer from Calgary described the winning team as "a bunch of Esquimaux from the North." Apart from a change in spelling, the names stuck.

1901- The Calgary Rugby Football Club was formed, with a membership fee of \$1.00 per person. All games were played at Victoria Park in Calgary.

1907- The Edmonton Thistles, one of the Alberta's first football teams, can be credited with the early start of victories of the province as they enjoyed a 19-3 season winning both the Alberta and Saskatchewan Championships.

In 1907, "Deacon" White arrived in Edmonton to play rugby and stayed on with the team as coach leading the Eskimos to their first Grey Cup Finals in 1921. However, in 1923, after two years of disappointing losses, and influenced by the Depression, the Eskimos pulled out of competition. In 1938, the Eskimos joined the Western Inter-provincial Football Union (WIFU) wearing blue and white, but withdrew from the league in 1940 after a few unsuccessful seasons with next to no wins. In 1949 the 'Green and Gold' tradition began once again thanks to Mr. Maury Van Vliet. The director of Physical Education at the University of Alberta provides the Eskimos with new uniforms crested with the gold emblem on a dark green background.

1908- Edmonton Club won the Belanger Cup, the trophy presented to the winner of the Canadian Rugby Championship of Alberta.

1909- The Calgary Tigers join the Alberta Rugby Union and by 1911 had won a three-year succession of the Canadian Rugby Championship of Alberta (CRCA), as well as the Hugo Ross trophy awarded to the winner of the Western Canadian Rugby Football Union (WCRFU); formed by the Manitoba, Saskatchewan and Alberta Rugby Unions in 1911. Hugo Ross, a Winnipeg based businessman who later perished on the S. S. Titanic donated the trophy to the league. 1909 was also the year that Canada's Governor General, Lord Albert Henry Earl Grey, donated the Grey Cup to award to the winners of the Senior Amateur Football Championship in Canada.

1920- During the First World War, there was no official football league in Calgary, due to the province's focus on the War Effort.

1923- The first team to be assembled after the First World War was the Fiftieth Battalion in Calgary, named after the military battalion that provided organizational support during the war. In 1924 the Fiftieth won the Alberta title but was beaten by Winnipeg at the Western Championship Finals.

1931-34- The Calgary Football Club was known as the Altomahs, playing at the Mewata Stadium. In 1935, the Altomahs turned into the Calgary Bronks, and became part of the Western Inter-Provincial Football Union (WIFU) after it was formed in 1936. The Bronks won the League Championship in 1938, but four years later, senior football in Calgary came to an end with the onslaught of the Second World War.

1936- The Western Canadian Rugby Football Union (WCRFU) is transformed into the Western Inter-provincial Football Union (WIFU).

1945- The Calgary Stampeders were born out of a name change for the Calgary Bronks, and in 1948 the Stampeders won Calgary's second Western Championship and their first Grey Cup beating the Ottawa Rough Riders in Toronto. That year, the Stamps went undefeated and Calgarians celebrated with a week long party that evolved into the Grey Cup Week Festivities that are celebrated nationally every year by the supporters of the teams that make it into the finals. Calgarians can also be credited with the introduction of the half time show during the Grey Cup, as they brought out horses and chuck wagons at half time to entertain the fans. Calgary would not claim the Grey Cup again until 1971 when they beat out the Toronto Argonauts. The Calgary Stampeders are not a team that is unfamiliar with the Grey Cup Finals. Over the course of their existence, the Stamps have made it into the final as many as 11 times. With the support of their faithful fans, the Stampeders have fought back from the verge of folding twice due to financial debt. Thanks to an 'S.O.S.' campaign (Save Our Stamps) run by fans, increased regular season ticket sales saved the team the first time that they were on the brink of folding. The second time the team was close to going under, a local businessman, Larry Richman, bought the team converting it from a community owned franchise to private

ownership. Consistent sell outs at McMahon Stadium for the annual Labour Day Classic as well as good regular season ticket sales kept the City from losing their beloved team.

1948- Calgary wins the Grey Cup in Toronto and the level of celebration from the Calgary supporters is attributed to beginning the tradition of week- long pre-game parties leading up to the Grey Cup Final.

1951- The Eskimos put themselves on the map by making it into the Western Conference Finals. For the next two years, the Esks made it as far as the Grey Cup Finals but just fell short having to wait for the 1954 season to bring the Cup home, where it would remain for the next 3 years. The 1970's proved to be an exceptional decade for the Edmonton Eskimos. Winning 3 straight Western Conference Titles between 1973 and 1975. 1975 was also the year that the Esks brought home the Grey Cup after defeating the Montreal Alouettes. The Eskimos went on to win the Western Conference title every year from 1977 through to 1982. And, during that time, the Eskimos also managed to take their winning streak to the Grey Cup, bringing the beloved trophy home for 5 years starting in 1978. To date, the Eskimos can boast more Grey Cup victories/appearances than any other CFL team.

1958- The Canadian Football League (CFL) was officially formed. Under the jurisdiction of the Canadian Rugby Union (CRU), the Inter-provincial Rugby Football Union (IRFU), comprised of the Big Four: Montreal, Ottawa, Toronto, and Hamilton; and the Western Inter-provincial Football Union (WIFU) consisting of Winnipeg, Regina, Calgary, Edmonton, and British Columbia, formed the Canadian Football Council. The objective of the new council was to institute an independent organization to oversee the development of professional football in Canada.

1959- The Big Four became the Eastern Football Conference (EFC), and the Western Inter-provincial Football Union (WIFU) became the Western Football Conference (WFC). Until 1972, there were two game total points for the teams in the East to advance to the finals. For the teams in the West, two out of three games were required to make it to the finals. Currently, the top three teams in each division move in to the playoffs. However, if the fourth place finisher in one division has a better record than the third place team in the opposing division, then the fourth place team can 'cross over' into the other division to replace the third place team in the playoffs. The second and third place teams then play off for the right to play the division winner in the division finals.

1992- During the '90's, the Stampeders held an All Star line up, leading off with their talented quarterback Doug Flutie who would take the record as the only player in the history of the CFL to be awarded the league MVP four years running. The decade started off well when in 1992, Flutie led the team to their first Grey Cup victory in over 20 years. Over the next decade, the team would boast a contingent of players who would represent the majority of players nominated to the league All Star team.

Canadian Intercollegiate Athletic Union (CIAU) Teams

1910- First University of Alberta football team was formed.

1914- The Golden Bears win their first City as well as Alberta Senior Provincial Championship. The University of Alberta also managed to take home the Canadian University Football Conference Vanier Cup on three times, the first in 1967, then in 1972, and the last time was in 1980.

1922- Unable to compete with out of province teams because of transportation problems, the first intercollegiate game between the University of Alberta and the University of Saskatchewan finally took place in 1922.

1927- The first Intercollegiate league was formed and called the Western Canadian Intercollegiate Athletic Union (WCIAU), and the Hardy Cup was donated as the award to the winner of the WCIAU. The U of A Golden Bears have claimed the title an unprecedented 18 times, more than any other team in the league. However, things did not always run smoothly for the Golden Bears. Problems with funding the football program stalled the Golden Bears twice over the course of their history. The first time was for a ten-year stretch between 1949 and 1959. The second time was during the early 1990's. In 1991, Dale Schulha, the Athletic Director at the University of Alberta announced that the football program was going to be dropped due to a lack of funding. However, thanks to the Football Alumni that had joined the Executive that year, enough funds were raised to keep the team a float for at least the next 2 years, at which point the team ran into the very same problem once again. In 1993, when the University auditors predicted the football club's running financial deficit was going to double over the next two years. The Golden Bear's new head coach Tom Wilkinson, a former Eskimo and star quarterback, managed to raise enough money through his 'Friends of the Golden Bears' donation program to keep the program running. The Department of Athletics at the University of Alberta then managed to take full responsibility for funding the football program.

1965- The Canadian College Bowl was established creating a national invitational championship for university football in Canada. Winners of the four university leagues in existence at the time: The Atlantic Universities Football Conference (AUFC), the Central Canadian Intercollegiate Football Conference (CCIFC), the Ontario-Quebec Athletic Association (OQAA), and the Western Intercollegiate Football League (WIFL), were invited to compete for the Vanier Cup Trophy. The Vanier Cup was named for the former Governor-General of Canada, Georges Vanier.

1967- First University of Calgary Dinos football team was formed and found success in the Canada West Conference winning the conference championships on nine separate occasions between 1975 and 1995. The Dinos also went on to win the Canadian University Football Conference on four separate occasions taking home the Vanier Cup in 1983, 1985, 1988, and most recently in 1995.

Alberta Junior Football

1947- Junior football in Alberta went through many changes to get to the point where it is today. Evolving from the Edmonton South Side Athletics, the Edmonton Huskies was one of the first teams to play in the Alberta Junior Football League. At present, Huskies Football is a Not-For-Profit team playing in the Prairie Football Conference, and has proven to be an effective starting point for young men to gain skills that will lead them to professional football.

1948- The Edmonton Wildcats, Alberta's first junior football team is formed around the same time as the Alberta Junior Football League (AJFL). The AJFL consisted of four teams, two from each of Alberta's biggest cities: the Edmonton Wildcats, who started out as the Maple Leafs; the Edmonton Huskies, the Calgary Westend Tornados, and the Calgary Northhill Blizzard, who went on to become the Calgary Broncos.

1952- The Edmonton Football Association was formed and sponsored both the Huskies and Wildcats into the Alberta Football League.

1958- Named initially in reference to oil workers, the Wildcats emblem now reflects the image of a mountain lion. The Wildcats started out wearing green and gold but in 1958 decided to change their colours to blue and white, and two years later, the Football Club incorporated itself as a self-governing body.

1967- The Calgary Colts Junior Football Association is formed, competing in the Alberta Junior Football League (AJFL). The team's successes include the AJFL Championships in 1972 as well as the Canadian Bowl National Championships in 1989 and 1990. The Colts can also claim to be the starting point for more than 25 football players who moved into the professional league.

1976- The Edmonton Wildcats had to give up their practice space as construction for the new Commonwealth Stadium began, and the team had to relocate to Tiger Gold Stick Park. The Prairie Junior Conference was formed and six of the initial eight members were comprised of teams from across Alberta: Edmonton, Red Deer, Calgary, and Medicine Hat. The Wildcats found success in the new league winning the National Finals in its first year, as well as on two other separate occasions in 1977 and 1983.

1994- The Prairie Junior Football Club drops the 'Junior' from their name and is known as the Prairie Football Conference. The Wildcats made their last and final move to Rundle Park where they set up a permanent home for the Wildcat Lair.

High School Football in Alberta

1922- First High School Championship was won by Victoria Composite High School.

1968- The idea of a Senior High School football All-Star game was conceived but did not manifest until 1990. The Senior Bowl was to be a competition between the best high school football players from the North pitted against the best players from the South.

The Senior Bowl also acts as a selection ground for the Alberta Provincial All-Star team, who then go on to the National Championships.

1985- High School football provincial competitions begin for football through the Alberta Schools' Athletic Association (ASAA). The AASA was formed in 1956 in order to provide high school students with a centrally organized body that would oversee provincial competitions.

1995- First ever Provincial All-Star high school team is selected and wins the Canada Cup. As well, Alberta Summer Games offers Bantam tackle football making it the first competition of that caliber to offer tackle football.

Football Equipment

1900's- During the early 1900's, the leather helmet was produced, but was hot, heavy, and provided such little protection that the majority of players chose not to wear it. Since then, helmets have gone through quite a few changes in terms of design, and the materials used. As well, players used a little bit of leather underneath their uniforms, but again were provided with little protection. Currently, the equipment worn under football uniforms is specialized and consists of different pieces that protect individual body parts such as shoulder, chest, elbow, hip, thigh and kneepads.

1910's- With the addition of ear flaps, helmets could be modified with a chin strap as well as an extended rear panel implemented to protect the back of the neck.

1920's- Canadian football experimented with using different football helmet colours in order to distinguish each playing position. The idea had to be abandoned because many of the players played multiple positions, and it also meant that a lot of different masks had to be produced resulting in a huge cost for each team.

1930's- A metal face mask covered with rubber was screwed to the helmet to protect the players' faces, however because the helmet itself was leather, it would collapse on impact pushing the screws into the players' faces.

1939- The plastic helmet was invented by Mr. Gerry E. Morgan of the Riddell Corporation in Chicago Illinois. The new helmet contained a web suspension made of leather and acted to keep the helmet suspended just above the players' heads so that it was not sitting directly on the player's head. The design was adapted from that of the military helmet.

1940- Plastic facemasks were introduced in place of the previously used rubber coated wire masks. Logos started appearing on helmets in the National Football League (NFL), in order to raise team spirit.

1949- Football helmets become mandatory on the field in the CFL. And the following year, plastic helmets are allowed into the NFL for the first time. Currently, the design for the shape of the football helmets is based on the billiard ball and they are

equipped with ample padding, as well as high tech material such as is used for the face masks which now have the capacity to bounce back after impact.

The Role of the Media in the Early Days of Football

1909- Descriptions of games were received over the telegraph and transmitted locally.

1952- The Canadian Broadcasting Company (CBC) began telecasting the games and soon was attracting upwards of 5 million viewers with the Grey Cup coverage. The CBC bought the rights to televise the Grey Cup for \$7500.00.

1953- The price of the rights to broadcast the Grey Cup increased to \$20,500.00, with three television stations carrying the game. Presently, the cost for televising the Grey Cup game has turned into a multi-million dollar industry.

1987- The Canadian Football Network was organized from a number of Canadian Television Stations. The CFL also began using the TV blackout policy, by not broadcasting games in the same city as where they were being played, thereby increasing attendance at each game.

Resources

For more information concerning the history of football in Alberta, please refer to the following references:

- Football Alberta located at the Percy Page Centre, 11759 Groat Road, Edmonton, AB.
- The City of Edmonton Archives: Edmonton Journal, Edmonton Sun, and the Edmonton Bulletin
- Sport in Early Calgary. (1983). William M. McLennan.
- Grey Cup Tradition: The Official Commemorative Book of the 75th Anniversary of the Grey Cup. (1987). Published by E.S.P. Marketing and Communications Ltd. In Cooperation with the Canadian Football League.
- Decade of Excellence. (1980). Executive Sport Publications.

As well, the following websites can also be accessed for searches related to Football in Alberta:

- The Official Site of the Canadian Football League found at:
<http://www.cfl.ca/CFL/home.html>

- University of Alberta Golden Bears Football
http://www.bears.ualberta.ca/content.cfm?seas=5&div=0&team=0&pt=act_home_pub&act=51
- Canadian Interuniversity Sport website:
<http://www.universitysport.ca/e/index.cfm>
- Calgary Colts Alumni/Team History:
<http://www.calgarycolts.com/history.htm>
- The Official Website of the CBC News:
<http://www.cbc.ca/sports/>
- The Official Web Site of the Edmonton Eskimos found at:
<http://www.esks.com/default.htm>
- The Official Web Site for the Calgary Stampeders found at:
<http://www.stampeders.com/>
- The official website of the Alberta Schools' Athletic Association at:
<http://www.asaa.ca/pages/news.php3>

The following is a composition of the Top 10 players who ever came from Alberta (Note: the qualifier for us is that they had to have played their high school football in the province), provided by the Technical Director of Football Alberta, Mr. Tim Enger.

1) Normie Kwong (Western Canada High School in Calgary, Calgary Jr. Broncos)- A runningback who came right out of junior football onto the Calgary Stampeders roster in time to win the 1948 Grey Cup. Normie was traded to Edmonton in 1951 and went on to play in five more Grey Cups with the Eskimos winning three from 1954-56. Over his career he recorded 9,022 yards rushing and was named the CFL's Top Canadian in 1955 and 1956. He was elected to the CFL Hall of Fame in 1969.

2) Dave Fennell (Victoria High School in Edmonton, University of North Dakota)- From 1974-83, "Dr. Death" prowled the defensive line for the Edmonton Eskimos and left with six Grey Cup rings. During his time he was named a CFL All-Star for five consecutive years from 1977-81 and was named the Top Defensive Player in the country in 1978 and Top Canadian in 1979. He was named to the CFL Hall of Fame in 1990.

3) Joe Poplawski (Archbishop O'Leary High School in Edmonton, University of Alberta)- A slotback who was named CFL Rookie of the Year in 1978, Joe spent his entire career with the Winnipeg Blue Bombers and before he retired in 1986 was named a CFL All-Star five times and Top Canadian twice in 1981 and 1986. He won a Grey Cup with the Bombers in 1984 and was named to the CFL Hall of Fame in 1998.

4) Larry Robinson (Western Canada High School in Calgary, Mount Royal College)- A receiver who switched to defensive back and also was a place kicker, Larry was runner

up for the CFL's Top Canadian twice in 1964 and 1965 during his career with the Calgary Stampeders from 1961-1974. He was a Western All-Star in 1965, 1971 and 1972, went to three Grey Cups winning one in 1971. He retired (and still is) the leading scorer in CFL Playoff History with 196 points. He was elected to the CFL Hall of Fame in 1998.

5) Lloyd Fairbanks (Raymond High School, BYU)- Over a 16 year professional career as an offensive lineman, Lloyd was named a CFL All-Star twice and was selected the Calgary Stampeders best offensive lineman a record 7 times. He also was runner up for the CFL Most Outstanding Lineman in 1982. During his time in Calgary from 1975-82 and 1989-91 he was a Western All-Star four times and during his stint in the Eastern Conference from 1983-88 with Montreal and Hamilton he was an Eastern All-Star three times.

6) Hank Ilesic (St. Josephs High School in Edmonton)- Hank burst into the CFL in 1977 straight out of high school and went on to an amazing career as a punter. Joining the Eskimos he immediately went to 5 straight Grey Cup games, winning four before being traded to the Toronto Argonauts. He was named to the CFL All-Star team an amazing eight times (four times with the Eskimos and equally as many times with the Argos) and leads the league in punting average 5 times. Hank retired with six Grey Cup rings.

7) Leo Blanchard (Queen Elizabeth High School in Edmonton, University of Alberta)- From 1979-90 Leo was named a Western Division All-Star in the CFL six times while playing offensive line for both the Edmonton Eskimos and Calgary Stampeders. During that time he was also named a CFL All-Star twice in 1983 and 1986 and won five Grey Cups while a member of the Eskimos.

8) Tom Forzani (St. Francis High School in Calgary, University of Utah)- A glue fingered receiver who was a three time Western All-Star in the CFL during his career with the Calgary Stampeders from 1973-1983, Tom was also named a CFL All-Star in 1977. Tom was a runner up for Top Canadian in the CFL in 1975 and his team's nominee another two times.

9) Trevor Kennerd (Bonnie Doon High School in Edmonton, University of Alberta)- For 12 seasons with the Winnipeg Blue Bombers, Trevor was one of the most efficient kickers in CFL history and retired the leagues all-time leading scorer in 1991(a mark since broken). He was named to the CFL All-Star team in 1981 and 1985, a Western Division All-Star three times, and won two Grey Cups with the Bombers in 1984 and 1988.

10a) Ken Nielson (Strathcona High School in Edmonton, University of Alberta)- One of the top receivers ever for the Winnipeg Blue Bombers, Ken was named Top Canadian in the CFL in 1968. He was also named a CFL All-Star twice in 1968 and 1969 and three times as a Western Division All-Star.

10b) Brian Fryer (Strathcona High School in Edmonton, University of Alberta)- A receiver who after winning the Hec Crighton Award in 1975 as Canada's top university football player became the first Canadian ever drafted by the NFL. After two seasons with the Washington Redskins he returned home for a run of five straight Grey Cups from 1978-82 with the Edmonton Eskimos where he was twice nominated as his teams Top Canadian.

Honorable Mention:

- Ken Moore (Winston Churchill in Lethbridge, U of Hawaii, Calgary Stampeders /Saskatchewan Roughriders)
- Stu Laird (Lord Beaverbrook in Calgary, U of Calgary, Calgary Stampeders)
- Leon Leskavich (Grande Prairie, U of Alberta, Toronto Argonauts)
- Greg Peterson (E.P. Scarlett in Calgary, BYU, Calgary Stampeders)
- Bill Stevenson (Jasper Place in Edmonton, Drake University, Edmonton Eskimos)
- Tom Towns (Bonnie Doon in Edmonton, U of Alberta, Edmonton Eskimos/Ottawa Roughriders)
- Kent Warnock (Lord Beaverbrook in Calgary, U of Calgary, Pittsburgh Steelers/Calgary Stampeders)