

# MR. TOUCHDOWN

## EVOLUTION OF A CANADIAN RECORD

By Robert Sproule

In the Canadian variety of football kicking has always been the most important method of scoring. In the early days there was no forward pass to complement the run, but when the mass of bodies plugged up the running game there was always the option of kicking over the opponents' heads for a score.

Oh, there were occasions when several touchdowns (or "trys" as they were then called) were scored in a game. But they were less common than the times when the great kickers, who could score five to eight singles in a match, were in top form.

Kicking was a crucial part of every team's offense, but even in the early years there were players who excelled in lugging the ball over the line, and who did it often enough to earn the title of "Mr. Touchdown."

Big-league football in Canada started in 1907, when the four strongest teams in the Quebec and Ontario Rugby Football Unions decided to band together and form the Interprovincial Rugby Football Union, otherwise known as the "Big Four."

The first player to become Mr. Touchdown was Julian "Dub" Sale of the Toronto Argonauts. He finished the inaugural Big Four season with four trys in the six-game schedule: two by rushing and another two by fumble returns (a common means of scoring then). Although he played with the Argos from 1905 to 1907, his last year was the first season of the I.R.F.U. Sale's best game was against Ottawa on October 12, when he scored two trys by rushing and established a record in the new Union.

By 1913 Hamilton's Bob Isbister had become the new Mr. Touchdown by scoring ten trys: six by rushing and four on fumble returns. However, only in the 1908 season (his first) did Bob finish high in the scoring lists. That year he captured second place with 25 points, including three trys by rushing. During his remaining years he scored only an occasional try, but no one was able to surpass his career total while he remained an active player.

Isbister's record didn't last long after his retirement. The Argonauts soon swept into the Grey Cup on the strength of the power running and kicking of Jack O'Connor. By the end of the 1915 season, Jack was the new Mr. Touchdown. He won the scoring title in 1914 with 44 points (a record for six games). Jack had three trys by rushing and kicked 12 of 19 converts, one field goal and 14 singles. The trys were worth only five points at the time, not six as in American football.

By the time Jack retired from the game he had 11 trys: nine by rushing, one by fumble return, and one by the onside kick. The latter method was a holdover from rugby. If a kick from scrimmage was recovered by the opponents, then the kick was classed as a punt. If, however, the ball was recovered by an onside player of the kicking team (any player who lined up beside or behind the kicker), the play was recorded as a run and the gain or loss credited to the player making the recovery. Interesting, eh?

A note about football in western Canada for this period: By 1919 Sam Taylor of the Regina Roughriders had a total of nine tries. This was the record for any player in the Manitoba, Saskatchewan or Alberta Unions.

In 1921 Lionel Conacher took the Big Four by storm. Six feet and 200 pounds of raw power, Conny was the first of the modern fullbacks. He not only had the speed to round the ends, but also the strength to plunge up the middle and break tackle after tackle.

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Whereas the previous record for most tries in a season was five -- all by rushing -- Conacher had six after just two games, five of them by rushing! After three more games he had ten tries, but he saved his best performance for the last game of the season. Against the Ottawa team he ran for three tries and returned a kickoff for another. He finished the season with 12 tries rushing, one by fumble return, and one by kickoff return.

Conacher scored three more tries the following season to establish an I.R.F.U. career record of 17. But out West a new record was in the making.

Brian Timmis of Regina was soon to be the new Mr. Touchdown. By the time Conacher finished his 1921 season Timmis had recorded seven tries in 1920 and another eight in 1921 to give him a total of 15. After the 1922 season he scored another seven and became the all-time record holder with 22 tries. Built along the lines of Conacher, he became one of the great plungers of the West, scoring four tries in a match in 1920. He also had two three-try games, one in 1921 and one in 1922.

In 1923 Timmis, later known as the "old Man of the Mountain," traveled east to Ottawa and scored another two tries there. The following year he went to Hamilton to begin his second great career as one of the greatest runners in the Big Four.

Actually, Brian fell into a scoring decline from 1924 to 1929, when he failed to cross the goal line. But in three Grey Cup appearances with Hamilton during this period he was the main cog in the Tiger ground machine with 251 yards for a 5.6 average.

From 1930 to 1932 he broke out with 12 tries. He won the union's scoring title with 30 points on five tries in 1930. In 1933 and 1934 it became apparent that Brian was moving on in years, as he didn't score nor appear to have his great plunging power. But he came back in 1935 to score his final try. He finished his career in 1936 with 37 tries, 33 of them by rushing.

From 1946 to 1954 a player from Belleville, Illinois in the United States became the new Mr. Touchdown. An American import fresh from the training camp of the Detroit Lions, this swift and shifty running back became the most productive scorer in the history of the Big Four with the Montreal Alouettes.

With the introduction of the 12-game schedule in 1946, Virgil Wagner scored 12 touchdowns, but he had to settle for a tie with Toronto's Joe Krol for league scoring honors with 65 points. However, in the next three years he was the undisputed touchdown and scoring leader. His best season was 1949, when he scored 15 times to power the Als to their Grey Cup win.

When he retired in 1954 Wagner had scored a record 79 touchdowns -- 63 by rushing, 13 by reception, two on interceptions and another by fumble return.

Normie Kwong was born in Canada of Chinese parents. He first played football for the Grey Cup-bound Calgary Stampeders in 1948. Traded to Edmonton in 1951 he established himself as a power runner with four consecutive 1,000-yard seasons. 1957 was no doubt his best, as he scored a total of 15 touchdowns, including at least one in each of the last eight games of the schedule. This boosted his career total to 69.

He scored another nine times the following year to come within one of Virgil Wagner. With five more trips over the goal line in 1960 he had the title. When he hung up his cleats he had a record 83 touchdowns. Seventy-eight times he scored by the run; the other five were on receptions.

But records are made to be broken. By the end of the 1960 season, Dick Shatto of the Toronto Argonauts had scored 46 touchdowns. By the time he retired, he had wrestled the title from Normie Kwong.

Actually, Shatto was a Mr. Everything; he could run, pass and kick the ball. Twice in the late fifties he rushed for over 950 yards. In his later years with the Argos he won the Eastern Conference reception title in 1962, 1963 and 1964. He had several games in which he scored two TD's, but his best game was in 1958 against Hamilton when he recorded four to equal the team record.

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From 1962 to 1964 Dick scored 12, 13 and 11 touchdowns to set a record of 89 in the Big Four. When he retired after the 1965 season he had scored twice more to raise the mark to 91. Holding Argo records in rushing and receiving, Dick Shatto had scored 39 times by the run and another 52 times on pass receptions.

At the start of the 1966 season George Robert Reed from Washington State was coming off a banner year with the Saskatchewan Roughriders. He had rushed for 1,768 yards to become only the second C.F.L. player to "go over the mile," and he had won the Schenley Award as the Most Outstanding Player. Never before in the history of the Canadian Football League had one player dominated both the rushing and scoring records of the game the way George Reed did.

In his first season he scored five times, then 10 and 12 times for 27 career touchdowns in three years. He dropped to seven in 1966, but then followed with 15-, 16-, and 12-TD seasons to push his total to 77. Injured in 1970, he was held to only five touchdowns and his string of 1,000-yard seasons was broken at six. However, he came back the next three seasons with 12, 13 and 14 touchdowns; in the process he broke Dick Shatto's career mark with a grand total of 121 touchdowns.

Reed scored five more times in 1974. Before he retired in 1975 he added another 11 to his total to establish an all-pro record of 137 career touchdowns. In addition to his scoring, Reed became the all-pro rushing leader with an incredible 3,243 rushing attempts for 16,116 yards. Of his 137 touchdowns, three were by pass reception and the remainder by the run. And that's against defenses that were geared to stop him!

It seems that the TD record may have reached a plateau; it's unlikely that George "Mr. Touchdown" Reed's remarkable records will be broken -- at least not in this century!