

## **THE FIRST LINEUP**

by Bob Sproule

In the game of football as we have come to know it, there are several major stepping stones that must be recognized in order to appreciate how this particular sport evolved from a kicking game to one using the hands.

From a wide open game with twenty or more players, the sport has changed to one with restrictive movement and no more than a dozen players each side. Over the years the principles of possession have been established, the shape of the ball changed and the throwing of the ball legalized.

The American version of football originated with the college students of the day and from that into the "play for pay" boys or the pros. From this set up our cousins to the south kept excellent records of their game and how it changed over the years. However, in Canada things were a bit different. Both the city and university teams played the sport in which the rules were not the same and the governing body of each worked independently of the other.

Because of this there was no record of any standard of rules until well into the 20th Century. Any rule books of these early years have been misplaced or destroyed if not altogether lost to memory.

One of the very first if not THE first major stepping stone has to be the change of the players from a loose formation of putting the ball into play to when they lined up with one team in sole possession. This change would denote the movement from rugby to early football. When William Webb Ellis ran with the ball in 1823 he changed the game as from that point on it could be carried as well as kicked.

To start the game then, one side kicked the ball off to the other and then the players would bunch together and try to kick it out to their teammates who tried to advance the ball upfield. When the ball carrier was tackled both sides bunched up again to repeat the process. This meant that the ball was moved all over the field with neither team in control and a score was made only when the ball carrier made it over the goal line before being tackled.

The Americans have recorded that in 1879 the players started to line up side by side and across from each other with one team in control until a score was made or the half time was called. This then is the First Principle of Possession and later gave way to movement of the ball to a required distance by a required number of times or attempts.

As stated, only our friends to the south have documented records of this change while in Canada, no records exist. The first principle or the line up was used in the "early 1880" but the exact date was not known. The Canadian Football League has no account of this event and neither did any of the universities. There were no rule books and no diagram or pictures to illustrate this. It was therefore left up to this author to search the old newspapers in hope of finding a written account of the change in sufficient detail that would confirm the correct year of the first line up in Canadian football.

Finally, after a three month search, an article of historical importance was found in the sport pages of the Toronto *Globe*, dated November 6, 1880.

To the Sporting Editor of the *Globe*. "...Sir-After both watching and taking part in some of the recent games of football I have come to the conclusion that the feeling of both players and spectators was that the close formation had many advantages which were lacking in the game so lately introduced in Canada from the States. Among these may be mentioned the more proper employment of the energies of the forwards and the more even distribution of the game among the players.

"With the open formation it is simply the duty of the forwards to line up facing one another, man to man, and each and all to charge the back to whom the ball has been directly passed out of the scrimmage; thus the forwards make very little show in the game, for: first. When this side has the ball, their duty is simply contained to resisting the onset of the opposing line of the forwards until their back shall have had

time to get away with the ball; and secondly, when the opposite side has the ball, they have simply to charge through and tackle the back who, on their approach, has already disposed of the ball.

"With the old game, on the other hand, the forwards bunch together, endeavor to take the ball through the scrimmage in order to pick it up on the opposite side and run with it. The duties of the backs contrast no less favorably to the old game, for while in the old game they pick up the ball directly as it emerges from the scrimmage and have simply to reckon with the opposing backs, in the open formation this way is checked not only by the opposing backs but also by the line of the forwards, and so the ball must be passed back and back again before it can be got clear away. It is on this account that many matches under the open formation rules are now played with eleven men a side.

"The employment of the close formation in the recent match at Guelph (Ontario) was most satisfactory, especially to the Toronto players, many of whom at the close of the match declared themselves entirely in favor of the old game.

Yours,

AN ACTIVE FOOTBALL PLAYER"

Now, by the date of this article in the *Globe* this would then mean that Canadian players employing the old method of putting the ball into play used what was known as the CLOSED FORMATION or the accepted rugby formation and that the American inspired method of lining up became known as the OPEN FORMATION. By 1881, the idea from the States spread and by the middle of the decade, all of Canada was using the open formation.

This would also mean that when scheduled matches took place in 1880, city teams were using the open formation as early as October and practicing them by September of that year. However, it should also be noted that during the early 1880's teams by mutual agreement would and did play either the open or closed formation during the game or even switch during the course of the match.

And finally, this article does describe in detail the changing of the bunching of players (rugby scrum) into the offensive and defensive lines and their new function, the definition of the forwards and the backs as well as the coming of the quarterback.