

SNAP BACK VS. SCRIMMAGE

by Bob Sproule

If anyone was to blame for the idea, it certainly had to be J.T.M. "Thrift" Burnside, for it was he who started the whole damn thing. For years Canadian football was content to play a scrimmage game in which a centre was supported by a player at each side when heeling or kicking the ball back to the quarter-back and blocking at the same time (Coffin Corner, March 1982).

The scrimmage tussle had become such an art and a tactic that a well drilled team could keep the ball in the scrimmage for a considerable amount of time. When the defence waited for the oval to work its way to the pivot man, the attackers had the advantage, as at the right moment they would suddenly pass the ball out and lateral it to the runner.

But this method proved rather boring, especially when the team with the ball played against the wind and kept the defenders and the spectators waiting for the action to begin.

Burnside, a former Varsity (University of Toronto) player, noted this and felt that something had to be done to open up the game. One of his suggestions was to remove the two scrim-supports from the centre and for the centre to snap the ball back to the quarterback, thus putting the ball into play quickly. From this, attackers had to devise fast-breaking plays and defenders had to be ready at any moment to guard their positions.

In their December 1901 meeting, the Ontario Rugby Football Union refused to adopt the Burnside Rules on the grounds that they would Americanize the Canadian game and nobody wanted that. However, the followers of Burnside created the Mulock Cup games in which the new radical rules were played for inter-faculty matches and in two Toronto City championship contests between Argonauts and Varsity. The end result of that was that both players and fans enjoyed the new system.

Finally, on December 13, 1902 the Ontario Rugby Football Union adopted the Burnside Rules for future games. When they failed to convince the other unions to follow suit, the O.R.F.U. found themselves playing an isolated type of football that no one wanted.

Perhaps they had reservations over their choice of game but an interesting article in the Hamilton Spectator of Nov. 6, 1905 seemed to encourage the O.R.F.U.'s decision:

Ever since the O.R.F.U. abolished the scrimmage and adopted the snap back system, thus making the play more open and more interesting from the spectator's standpoint, there has been considerable discussion about the merits and popularity of the respective games. Nothing has occurred to convince the O.R.F.U. that it has made a mistake when it made the change nor has it been able to persuade either the Inter-Collegiate or the Quebec unions to follow suit, although the Collegians have broken away to some extent from the old scrimmage game. This is largely because in Toronto the attendance at the Inter-College games has been larger than some O.R.F.U. games. The reason is that the Tigers in the past two seasons have so far outclassed the other teams that the contests have been so one-sided that they have lacked interest, while the College games have been between evenly matched teams. Yet, the spectators have appreciated the redeeming features of the O.R.F.U. system which gives opportunities for open play, brilliant combination running and passing. They can tell what is going on. Something is happening all the time, and they don't have to guess what fifteen or twenty well trained athletes are trying to do. Baseball is one of the most popular outdoor sports because the spectators can see every play and follow it. In the States there is a strong agitation against the system in vogue there because there is not enough open and too much close and rough play. There is bound to be rough play where there are so many men on the line and in the scrimmage. Most of the wings tug and scrap with their opponent and

seldom figure in the play. One feature of the O.R.F.U. is that they have very little scrapping. The ball is moving so much that they don't have time to scrap. In the east the people have never seen the snap back game, but they will have the opportunity to judge the two systems when the Tigers and [Ottawa] Rough Riders come together. It is also hoped that the contest between the Tigers and the Combination teams at Toronto next Saturday will be close and interesting.

The writer had an opportunity of witnessing the game between Varsity and McGill, the two strongest teams in the Inter-Collegiate union, at Toronto on Saturday, and he is more firmly convinced than ever that the snap back game is the better system because it is not simply a test of strength, but affords more opportunity for brilliant plays. The battle is not simply between the wings and scrimmage, but the half-backs have an opportunity to run and punt and are not smothered by the opposing wings. As mentioned, the Inter-Collegiate union has modified the old game having adopted the ten yards gain rule in three downs. This is an improvement because it does away to some extent with the long drawn out scrimmages, the team having the ball being compelled to make some progress to hold it. But it's a case of two bucks and if the yards are not made then punt on third down. When two teams are evenly matched on the line, it's pretty hard to run up a score by bucking. Varsity was fairly successful on gaining ground on a tandem play, being able to plow through the opposing wingline. The throw-in from touch has been retained, but the writer's opinion is that the O.R.F.U. rule to have the ball brought out (and scrimmage) is much fairer and reduces the element of luck. Frequently when it was Varsity's throw-in, McGill got the ball.

Both teams have fast half-backs and good punters, but they didn't have much chance, being frequently jumped on by the wings. When Walter Camp (the father of American Football), who knows something about the game of football, saw the Tiger and Toronto-Argonaut combination play [Oct. 21, 1905 Hamilton 41, Toronto 7], he expressed the opinion that the half-backs didn't get a fair show, being pressed too closely. But under the old rules they have far less opportunity for brilliant plays than they have under the snap back system. There was some good punting on Saturday's match, but few long runs or combination plays were made. Varsity worked the criss-cross play successfully a couple of times and the spectators enjoyed it. Advocates of the old rules will argue that the reason there was not more open play was that the wings were stronger than they are on teams playing the snap back game. This may be true, but doesn't add to the interest of the game. The spectators would sooner see a half-back punt or run than have him tackled by a couple of wings. It's pretty hard to say how the Tigers would show up against either Varsity or McGill, but the writer's opinion is that they could hold their own playing under the snap back rules.

There was no contest between Tigers and Ottawa for the C.R.U. championship and therefore no game between the old school of scrimmaging and the new one with the snap back system. Ottawa wasn't going to play outside of the city and Hamilton refused to play there. However, Rough Riders and Varsity did play for the championship of the Dominion of Canada, the first half under Quebec rules (5 yards in 3 downs) and the second half under College rules (10 yards in 3 downs). Varsity emerged the victor, snipping the Riders 11-9.

And yet, when Tigers finally were able to challenge for the Canadian final, they had to drop the snap back system and play the scrimmage game. First against a fast, high-scoring Montreal team from the Q.R.F.U. and then against the tough wingmen of McGill, University winners. Hamilton adapted so well that they outkicked Montreal 11-6 and stopped McGill plays before they got going and trounced the college team 29-3 to win the C.R.U. Title Game in 1906.

But the snap back system didn't last long in the O.R.F.U. Later that year the Executive voted to play under the C.R.U.'s scrimmage rules. But even the old game failed to endure, for on April 23, 1921, the C.R.U. changed its mind and voted for the return of the snap back system. Canadian football was finally moving towards the modern game. Only the forward pass was yet to come. [Ed. Note -- See "The Forward Pass Is Here," p. 51 in this volume.]