

## THE FORWARD PASS IS HERE

By Leslie Roberts

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### **What Will It Do to the Canadian Rugby Game – First and Foremost, Says Shaughnessey, It Will Introduce the Element of Threat That May Qualify the Whole Method of Play**

**The one and only Shaughnessey emerges from retirement to prove that the play  
that he has urged for years will improve the Canadian Rugby Game.**

Amongst the numerous people who adorned the campus of McGill University a good many years ago were a sorrel-thatched man standing about six feet and two inches above the ground on slightly bowed legs, and a pimply adolescent some three inches shorter, whose general appearance conveyed the impression that he ought to go on a diet of egg-nogs. The tall, broad-shouldered gentleman of the sun tan hair was the football coach, Shaughnessey by name. The skinny youth of pimples and blotches was your correspondent.

In those dim days before the war Frank Shaughnessey had just become the storm centre of the football firmament. Like a cyclone he had descended on a world which hitherto had regarded the Two-Bucks-and-a-Kick theory as infallible and he had driven his opponents to the verge of desperation by hurling trick plays into the eyes of the linemen and secondary defence like dust to blind them. Equally important had been his discovery, on the far side of the campus, of a gentleman rejoicing in the name of Billington, a young man capable of booting an egg-shaped oval from here to there, without apparent effort, just as long as the quarterback would pass out to him. Billington was playing the English style of rugby when Shaughnessey came on him, but Frank wasted little time in persuading him to walk across the avenue which separated England from Canada, football wise, in those prehistoric times. And Billington-cum-Shaughnessey, an educated toe plus the brain of a born gridiron tactician, soon swept McGill to a championship, while denizens of Kingston and Toronto viewed with alarm the introduction of novelties into Canadian football which -- so they cried -- could only have one possible result, the destruction of a pretty good, made-in-Canada game. Our grandfathers had been satisfied with two-bucks-and-a-kick and we ought to be, the calamity-howlers wailed. It is just possible, of course, that the lack of a rapier wherewith to puncture Shaughnessey's bag of tricks may have been responsible for all this anguished gnashing of dentures. Vocal protesters are human beings, even at Toronto and Queens, though a McGill man has to be pretty broadminded to admit it.

#### Stepping On Athletic Toes

The next season saw the introduction of those two devices of Shag's football brain, his X and Y formations; methods for aligning his attack which would probably appear as simple and obvious echelonings in these days of advanced learning, but which struck terror into opponents in distant 1913 as the Red crashed through -- and around, and over, and under -- her ancient enemies to another college championship. By that time the Die Hards were in full hue and cry. Shaughnessey was ruining Canadian rugby. Shaughnessey was converting Canadian youth into a pale imitation of its American cousin. With the Reciprocity Election and its attendant outburst of patriotism scarcely behind us, one could almost conceive the McGill coach -- and probably the Governors, if the truth were known -- as being in the direct employ of Washington and under contract to render us athletic bond slaves to our Uncle Sam. Soon, proclaimed the stalwarts who

abhor all change on the high ground that it does away with established customs, this man Shaughnessey will go so far as to desecrate the last of our altars and start to throw forward passes when no one is looking. And where would Canadian football be then?

The foregoing, or much of it, appears as addled and idiotic when regarded from the high hills of 1931, but it was a very serious business in 1913; sufficiently serious at least to provide a young gentleman of pimples with a number of dollars and cents wherewith to pay his day-to-day expenses, thanks to the columns he was able to extract from a wheezy typing machine in the Herald office.

### Opening Up the Game

Almost two complete decades have gone since this red-headed tornado of the gridirons set to work to tear up old shibboleths and open out the game to the extent that the occupant of a grand stand seat might witness the ball in the act of being transported from one point to another on the field. Little by little and bit by bit Shaughnessey's ideas were incorporated into the play. Some of them that were well within the interpretations of the code as it existed were quickly absorbed into the texture of football. Other quirks necessitated changes in the rules and the changes usually came, albeit with pained gruntings from some of the solons when they foregathered to edit the game and prepare for the season to come. Meanwhile star performers from Shaughnessey's camp were graduating, some to play for the Big Four [International Rugby Football Union, one of the forerunners of the Canadian Football League] teams, others to appear in the role of coaches. They, too, spread the gospel. There was Bill Hughes, for example, who gave Queen's its string of Dominion and College championship teams. The groundwork of Hughes's football knowledge was acquired on the campus at McGill, immediately before the war, and his teams have always trotted out a brand of football savoring of the sort that was played at the school in Montreal when Billington, Laing, Montgomery and Jimmie Lee were names to conjure with. Mike Rodden, title-winning [Hamilton] Tiger mentor, wore moleskins under Shag. McEvenue, who coached Argonauts, was one of Shaughnessey's early quarterbacks. So, as his men scattered here and there, the gospel according to Shaughnessey went with them to the Ephesians and the Colossians and the Corinthians in Toronto and Hamilton and Kingston, until little by little they came to accept his ideas as their own. Football is on the move, and Frank Shaughnessey, McGill's dynamic coach is the gentleman who released the brakes.

It was only natural that we should come in due course to the forward pass. For years it has been the bone of contention of every football debate between the elderly and the young, between those who wanted to keep Canadian football as it was in the old days, when there were thirty men on the field, and the hopeful few who longed for the kind of game where the ball would keep moving in full view of those who had come to watch. With the game on the move it was the inevitable destination. The broadening of interference and other so-called reforms -- or heresies -- were merely stepping stones. For years we have tinkered with the rules in the hope that we could give the public open football without the forward pass, but without the constant threat of a suddenly thrown ball, little could be done to break down the glutinous concentrations of humanity along the line of scrimmage. If it is successful there will be many to cry "I did it!" Western teams no doubt will lay claim to paternity. Various and sundry gentlemen in the east will try to look self-conscious and proud of it. But whatever ultimate credit there will be in the days to come for those who have opened out and pepped up the game called Canadian rugby, most of it will belong to Frank Shaughnessey and to athletic officials at McGill who backed his judgment when the pass hadn't a friend to the west of [Montreal's] Molson Stadium. The forward pass in Canada is the natural child of sorrel-topped Frank Shaughnessey. No doubt about it.

### Shaughnessey Dons Moleskins Again

Only natural, too, that Shaughnessey should emerge from retirement on the eve of the season that is to see the new key play worked into the woof and warp of the game. And equally natural that he should turn a deaf ear to the blandishments of other clubs with more money to offer, and return to his old love, McGill. If you had been with Shaughnessey in the days of pimples and blotches, if you had come back to his haunts after the war to play bridge with him in top-storey bedrooms in the Union and in the sleepers of football trains; if you have known him since you were a boy, in short, you would realize that Frank Shaughnessey could never refuse McGill when McGill wants him, for it is part of him, this old school under the hill. And most natural of all is it for a scrivener to turn to this auburn-haired dean of Canadian coaches for a key to the game that is to be. What have we done to Canadian rugby? What difference will the forward pass make in this year's game? Have we gone American, or is there still such an athletic enterprise as Canadian Rugby?

As Shaughnessey sees it, we have not turned American. True, he says, we have taken from Uncle Sam a number of things which seemed to be of good report and adaptable to our own brand of football. Turning back to history we reduced the number of men in play, but that was done with the idea of breaking down the mass formations of twenty years ago, certainly not with a view to copying the laws of the Medes and Persians who dwell south of Rouses Point. Later on we granted a certain amount of interference, again to help the play and to give the attacking team the opportunity to get the ball moving, rather than see two plays out of three pile up against the inevitable stone wall of beef and bone. But we have never yielded to any temptation -- I seriously doubt if the temptation has ever existed -- to incorporate the wide open interference that is permitted across the line. Once the ball carrier is in motion he must make his own going.

### No Loophole For Interference

We have not receded from that position in bringing the forward pass into being, for we have not touched the question of interference. Actually all that we have done is to permit forward passing as well as lateral, or onside, passing, but we do not afford any further protection to the team making the pass than it has been our custom to accord to the team in possession of the ball under the old rules. In fine we are opening out the Canadian game by taking advantage of a play long used across the border, but we are adopting that play to Canadian football, not Canadian football to the play. There is a vast difference. The reason for incorporating the new pass in our code ought to be obvious to every fan. Nevertheless I put the simple question to Shaughnessey, seeking corroboration of my own views. And this, he tells me, is what it will do, the first thing that it will do, long before the senior teams are adept in the use of the pass itself. Let Shaughnessey tell you:

### Its Virtue Is a Threat

"Its greatest service is as a threat. If a forward pass is likely to be thrown at any juncture of a game the very threat of the play in the minds of the team not in possession causes both the primary and secondary defences to open out. You cannot huddle on a close line about centre if the ball is likely to snap out and over the heads of the defending team without a moment's notice. Consequently we are bound to get away from congestion. Further we shall take away some of the premium which was granted by the old rules to the beefy bruiser and grant it to the man with speed. The game is bound to open up. Under cover of the passing threat a smart team will get innumerable plays away that would jam and be unworkable otherwise.

"Notice that I haven't spoken about the forward pass, as such, at all. I have simply said that its existence as a permanent threat is sufficient to open up the game as a whole and to bear down on the mass formations we have had in the past. I think you can take it for granted that football will be more open this year. That means there will be fewer

injuries. And it also means that there will be more ball for the man in the grand stand seat to see during the course of the afternoon."

"But what about the pass itself?" I asked.

Shag looked as though he were hunting for words to put his meaning as simply as possible.

"Don't take it too seriously this fall," he said.

"Why not?"

"Let me put it this way," he replied. "Most of the people who go to the games this year are going to arrive in a spirit of expectation. To the average fan the forward pass is simply a case of one man throwing the ball ahead of him to another player of his own team. But there's a great deal more to it than that."

### An Untried Experiment

"The first thing to remember is that a great basic change has been made, but that the men who must become its exponents are completely uninitiated to its use. In the States the senior football players are all men who have grown up with the forward pass from their short trousers days. In their minds they have always accepted it as part and parcel of the game of football. Our players have not. They have reached places on senior league teams and some of them have become star players, but they have never thrown nor received a forward pass in a game of football. Naturally there will be mistakes; mistakes in the passes and mistakes in strategy.

"Probably some coaches will train their men to throw passes until the final whistle blows. Others will develop their machines around the idea of sticking pretty close to the old game and waiting for the other fellow to make mistakes with the new rules. It will be a year of watching and development, a year likely to bring out a crop of new stars and, to look at the negative side of the picture, a year likely to bring about the decline of some others.

"But the public has got to be prepared to give the pass a chance. They'll have to remember that last year's players are green to the new rule and have only their years of experience of the old style to guide them. The forward pass in Canadian football will not be brought to its true position for two or three seasons at least.

"Meanwhile there will be one immediate benefit, already mentioned: the threat. That is sure to make for free, open play and give the public more football to see. Brawn will begin to make way for speed the light man will have a better chance against the heavy man.

"In addition the public will be sitting in on a laboratory study in forward passing. There will be a great many breathless moments, some brilliant plays and here and there a perfectly good boner. It ought to be a great season from the spectator's viewpoint."

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As you read these paragraphs a sorrel-thatched fellow, standing better than six feet on his slightly bowed legs, will be moving about the grass in Molson Stadium, or standing before a blackboard in the Field House, lecturing his young regulars and aspirants on the new day in Canadian football. For this is Frank Shaughnessey's year, not in the sense that his knowledge of the forward passing game, gained at Notre Dame in the first four years of the century, will enable him to ride rough-shod over his opponents, but in the sense that it is his year of dreams come true. Literally speaking, he has been living for 1931 since the days when lightweight Red teams ran circles around their ancient foes with Shaughnessey-devised trick plays that were just inside the borderline of legality under rules that were made to order for the mountains of beef who used to play in the line and for the once infallible theory of Two-Bucks-and-a-Kick.

But there's the whistle. Operator, make that first sentence read: "Varsity trotted on the field at 2:05 and began to warm up. Shaughnessey's Red team was close behind."

Let's go! And watch for that forward pass when the team's in a tough corner!

