

The First Game of the Toronto Argonauts: A Discussion

By Ian Speers

The presently-accepted structure of the Toronto Argonauts' 1873 season has a game played on 11 October against a University of Toronto team, followed on 18 and 25 October by a home-and-home series against the Hamilton Football Club. An analysis of the primary evidence indicates that this chronology is incorrect, and that the game against the University of Toronto is actually the legacy of a journalistic error on the part of a Toronto newspaper.

The sole record of a Varsity-Argonaut game in 1873 comes from the Toronto *Globe* of 20 November 1873:

FOOTBALL--A match was played on Saturday on the Toronto University grounds between the University and Argonaut Football Clubs, which, after a spirited contest, resulted in a victory for the University, Buchanan sending the ball through the opponents' goal by a well directed kick. The play, which was very even throughout, was witnessed by a large number of spectators; it lasted about an hour and a half.

On the same day, the following report appeared in the Toronto *Daily Mail*:

On Saturday afternoon a game of foot ball, Rugby rules, was played on the University ground, between the Argonauts, of Toronto, and the Hamilton club. After a most exciting contest, one goal was secured at five o'clock by the Toronto men, the ball being kicked through the Hamilton flags by Buchanan.

The return match will be played in Hamilton on Saturday next.

In comparing these two sources, it appears that they both report the same game. In both instances, a game was played on the University of Toronto grounds on the previous Saturday (the 18th), and a skillful kick by one Buchanan results in a victory for his team. One paper has clearly reported the competing teams incorrectly, and the *Globe* of the following day provides a clarification as to which report is in error:

ARGONAUT FOOT-BALL CLUB v. HAMILTON--The above match was played on Saturday, the 18th inst., on the University ground, and as it was the first in Canada under Rugby rules, it was looked forward to with considerable interest. Play began at half-past three; the Argonauts winning the toss chose the west goal. McClaren then kicked the ball off for Hamilton, which was run up by the Argonauts to about the middle of the ground.

For some twenty minutes after, however, Hamilton held the ball near the Argonauts' goal, obtaining two rouges. The ball was then kept by the Argonauts close to the Hamilton goal for the next half hour, and three rouges were obtained by them. A touch down was made, but the try at goal was unsuccessful, the touch down being made too near touch. The ball, after staying near the Hamilton goal, was brought down into the middle of the field, Gosling making some good runs for Hamilton, and Buchanan for the Argonauts. The Argonauts claimed two touchdowns, which were, however, disallowed.

Just before time was called, Buchanan by a good kick sent the ball over the Hamilton goal. Time was then called. Hamilton: two rouges, Argonauts: one goal, one touch down, five rouges. Many amusing incidents occurred, which were duly appreciated by the spectators.

The claim of the article that this marked the first game of Rugby in Canada is open to dispute, as rugger had probably been played in Montreal for the better part of a decade. There is, however, reason to believe that this Hamilton-Toronto game marks not only the first meeting between these great rivals, but is also the first recorded game of the Argonauts.

First, in all three reports cited above, the structure and attributed date of the game is identical, as previously stated. A start time of 3:30 can be established from the second *Globe* article, while the *Mail*

establishes 5:00 as the time the game concluded, supporting the 90 minute estimate of the first *Globe* article.

Second, the University of Toronto did not adopt Rugby rules until 1877. A match played between the Argonauts and Varsity on 20 November 1875 (which is well documented) was played under local, "Canadian rules" (explicitly as opposed to "English rules", i. e. Rugger).

It is unlikely that Varsity would have played under Rugby rules, and the description of the Hamilton game as the first under Rugby rules would seem to eliminate this alternative. As for the Argonauts playing under the "Canadian rules", it would seem rather unlikely that a team, organised only a few weeks before, would have time to prepare for two different sets of rules in a so short a period of time.

Third, the 11 October date of the Varsity game places it far too early in the academic year to be blindly accepted. At this time, University of Toronto fall term began in the first week of October. With the burden of academic work, this would leave barely enough time to organise a team by 11 October, let alone to prepare for the match.

Previous researchers have tried to reconcile all the reports, supposing that the Varsity game was played a week earlier and--for whatever reason--kept from publication by the *Globe*. The evidence is strongly against this theory.

No report of an 11 October game appears in the *Mail*, which is quite significant as that paper had a regular sports section; the *Globe* reports were simply included in its City News column. Furthermore, the *Globe* of this period would almost certainly have inserted a date, e. g. the 11th instant, into a piece that had been delayed for one week, as was generally inserted into *Globe* sports reports of the era that were delayed.

Two possible chronologies emerge. First, the Argonaut-Varsity game could have been played prior to the Hamilton game. If this is the case, why do all of the articles fail to mention a doubleheader? The absence of this statement is itself telling. Furthermore, there is no corroboratory evidence of the Varsity game even being contested.

Finally, what is most certainly the clincher, no student named Buchanan is listed on the roll of 1870s graduates and undergraduates (i. e. failure students) as having attended University College, then the extent of the University.

While I anticipate some hold-out trying to claim that there could indeed have been a student of that name, whose records the University misplaced, such an argument is unnecessarily *ad hoc* and complex, especially considering the evidence regarding a Buchanan scoring the only goal in the Hamilton game.

The unavoidable conclusion is that the 20 October article in the *Globe* improperly records the names of the competing teams. Perhaps because the concept of intercity football was new to Toronto, or because of an inexperienced or downright clueless correspondent, the teams were reported with the Argonauts misidentified as the University club, and Hamilton reported as the Argonauts. The structure of the article, when compared with the other two Toronto reports of the game, clearly supports the theory that it is a garbled account of the Hamilton game, for reasons already outlined.

For these reasons, it is clear to this researcher that the Toronto Argonauts and University of Toronto teams never played each other in 1873, and that the 18 October game of that year between the Argonauts and Hamilton was the first organised game in the history of the Toronto club.