

THE CURIOUS CASE OF THE 13th IMPORT

By Bob Braunwart & Bob Carroll

Quick! What major league pro football team went into a regular season game with the LEAST chance of winning? The 1976 Tampa Bay Buccaneers? The 1960 Dallas Cowboys? Perhaps the 1943 Chicago Cardinals, a mob so mopey that the players had faces redder than their jerseys? Although these fabled aggregations managed to stumble through their seasons without once tripping over victory, they each had a mathematical chance of winning every time they were able to find their way out of the locker room before kickoff. They had at least a prayer.

The only major pro team ever to trot out onto the field with absolutely no -- read that "zero" -- chance of triumph was the 1959 Saskatchewan Roughriders of the Canadian Football League. They played their last two games of that year AFTER the contests had already been recorded in the loss column. More surprisingly, they turned around and won one of those losses -- sort of.

Most U.S. fans think the Canadians' grid game is a little odd, anyway. Up there they get only three tries for a first down, and there's an extra back cavorting around the field. The field's the wrong size. Too big. They even have something called a "rouge" which goes on the scoreboard rather than the cheerleaders. But to see their favorite team playing a game already officially lost would set most fans on either side of the border to scratching their heads. Talk about rooting for an underdog! It was a confusing situation to say the least.

Bud Grant, later the highly successful coach of the NFL's Minnesota Vikings, had the dubious honor of coaching the team that lost to Saskatchewan despite winning the game. Or, to put it another way, Grant's Winnipeg Blue Bombers won the game they lost to the Roughriders. Or

Well, let's go back a bit. 1959 was not a season that football fans in the province of Saskatchewan can remember with much joy. When the province is called "Canada's breadbasket," the reference is usually to its bountiful wheat crop, but in 1959 the "breadbasket" seemed to be where every other CFL team was kicking the Roughriders. Fans staggered out of Taylor Field at Regina, the Riders' home park, shell-shocked from seeing their heroes ridden roughshod over by such scores as 0-55, 8-61, and 13-53. It was disaster time for a team that had been a power in the CFL's Western Conference for almost a decade.

Seven years earlier, in 1953, things had been better. That's when the Roughts hired Frankie Filchock, the old Washington Redskin tailback as coach. Filchock's first move was to import another American, former Notre Dame All-America Frank Tripucka, to do his quarterbacking.

Frank Tripucka is better known today as the father of Kelly Tripucka, the pro basketballer, but back then he was a talented signal caller and passer. By the time he got to Canada, Frank was a proven commodity, having seen service with several NFL teams before coming north. He had a knack for the big play, and he could handle pressure. At South Bend he'd succeeded all-time Irish great Johnny Lujack at QB in the late 1940's and kept the team undefeated for still another year. Once Filchock installed him as the Roughriders' triggerman, he led Saskatchewan to four straight second place finishes.

The Roughies had an off-year in 1957 and Filchock was let go. George Terlep, another American with Notre Dame credentials, took over as coach and with Tripucka still calling signals, immediately returned the team to respectability in 1958.

Unfortunately, Regina fans had grown impatient over so many good-but-not-good-enough finishes. The particular object of their ire was their quarterback, proving that Canadian and U.S. fans have a lot in common. Tripucka was on the wrong side of 30. According to some Rider fans, his pitching arm hadn't aged gracefully. Criticism from the stands didn't upset Frank so much as it bothered the Roughriders' front office. Over the '58-'59 winter Frank gave them an out; he requested and received a trade -- a one-way ticket to Ottawa.

The change in personnel was followed by a change in the Riders' fortunes. With a new man at quarterback, Terlep's Roughies stormed through the 1959 season the way Custer stormed through those Indians. Defeat piled on drubbing, and before long Saskatchewan bigwigs decided they could solve all the problems by changing coaches, proving that Canadian and U.S. front offices have a lot in common. Terlep was sent packing to Ottawa where he became the new backfield coach. The twist came with his replacement.

Named as the new Roughriders' coach was -- of all people -- Frank Tripucka! Proving God knows what!

Unfortunately for the Roughies, Tripucka was only allowed to prowl the sideline. He couldn't play. Under CFL rules, each team was limited to no more than twelve U.S. players. At the time of Frank's return, the Roughies already had an even dozen imports cluttering their roster. For Coach Tripucka to send in Quarterback Tripucka was *verboden* unless another American was dropped. And, after the thirteenth game of the season, the Roughies lost even that option. At that point, league rules froze the rosters and no new imports could be added or subtracted.

In the FOURTEENTH game, Saskatchewan lost every eligible quarterback it had! Unbelievably, all three -- count 'em, three! -- Rider quarterbacks went down with injuries as the Roughies were humiliated 45-6 before their home fans. First, regular Don Allard separated a shoulder. Then, second-string Ron Adam aggravated an ankle injury. And, finally, third string Jack Urness made it a not-so-grand slam with a badly gashed leg. Saskatchewan faced the unappetizing prospect of playing its final two games with, perhaps, a goal post at quarterback.

To make matters worse, if possible, the final two opponents had treated the Roughriders like badminton birds in 1959. The Edmonton Eskimos, scheduled for a Saturday game, had clinched second place in the west; Bud Grant's Winnipeg Blue Bombers, slated to close the season two days later, were the division champs. Already in '59, the Eskimos and Bombers had racked up three victories apiece over the Roughies and an aggregate total of 260 points to 51! It looked like this time they could phone in their victories.

In fact, had they been allowed, the Roughriders might have simply closed up shop and called it a season. However, in addition to fulfilling league obligations, they also had their own season-ticket holders to placate. Those folks had already paid for their seats and they expected to see, if not a Saskatchewan win, at least a semblance of a contest.

In desperation, Roughrider president Sam Taylor announced that the quarterback for the final two games would be --who else? -- Frank Tripucka!

The idea was about as legal as clipping the referee. As the thirteenth import, Tripucka had no more eligibility than he had feathers. However, neither Edmonton nor Winnipeg minded very much. After all, by playing an ineligible quarterback, the Roughies automatically forfeited the game, giving the Eskimos and Bombers each one more win. Besides, Tripucka's presence would be worth about 2,000 more fans at each game.

All things considered, everyone figured to gain. Saskatchewan had a quarterback, Edmonton and Winnipeg had victories, and the fans had games to watch that promised to be more sporting than hunting rabbits with dynamite.

The only one who complained was Edward H. LaBorde, president of the Calgary Stampeders. Although his team was mired in fourth place and could no way be affected by either Roughie game, he wrote a long, angry letter to CFL president G. Sydney Halter ranting about the "dignity of the game." In as much as no one else saw anything very dignified in letting the Roughriders get clobbered by a score that would make a better telephone number, La Borde's letter had all the impact of hitting an elephant with a butterfly.

On Saturday afternoon, Edmonton came to town. Regina fans, 8,000 strong, cheered Tripucka as they hadn't done for years. Although he was a bit rusty, Frank responded by passing the igloos off the Eskimos. He actually had the Roughies in front up to the closing minute. Then, one of his tosses went astray, and Edmonton turned the interception into a last-play field goal to win 20-19. Later, Coach Tripucka second-guessed Quarterback Tripucka, suggesting that the field general should have played things safe. But, win or lose, the Roughie fans hailed it as their team's best showing of the season.

The real payoff came on Monday night at Winnipeg as 14,282 fans turned out to watch their division champs take on Tripucka. Grant's Bombers worked hard, but they had their own injury problems, with several regulars out or slowed. Meanwhile, Tripucka was magnificent.

He zinged the Bomber defense for a lusty 208 yards, completing 17 of 29 passes. When he wasn't passing the Bombers blue, he handed off to Ferdie Burket, an American out of East Oklahoma State, who ran for over 100 yards and five touchdowns, one short of the CFL record. When it was all over, the Roughriders, who hadn't scored more than three TDs in any game all season had defeated the champs 37-30 -- on the scoreboard.

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Officially, of course, because of Tripucka's ineligibility, the game went into the books by the forfeit score of 2-0, Winnipeg. But try telling that in Saskatchewan!

Perhaps it was in the stars. The province was named for the Saskatchewan River which flows through its heart. The Cree Indians called it "Kis-is-ska-tche-wan," meaning "river that turns around when it runs." In 1959, the biggest "turn around" in Canada was provided by the Roughriders in that last glorious game.

The next year, Frank Tripucka showed up at Denver to become the Broncos' first quarterback under his old coach Frankie Filchock. That was the famous crew with the vertically-striped socks, and some of their performances were rather strange. But it's doubtful that Tripucka ever played in anything that topped the lost game he won as the thirteenth import.