

**THE TORONTO ARGONAUTS
To World War I**

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Greater Toronto is the twelfth largest metropolitan area in North America above the Rio Grande. Over the years, it has supported many amateur and professional football teams, but not so long-lasting as the Toronto Argonauts. Formed in 1874 as an amateur rugby team, the Argonauts are the oldest major-league football team in North America.

This article is intended to recount the history of the Double Blue through the First World War and also to introduce American readers to the early history of Canadian football.

Pre-League Play

The Argonauts were not the first non-college football team organized in Canada, but they are the oldest such team which still survives. The team was formed in September 1874, just four months after the famous Harvard-McGill match, as an adjunct to the Toronto Argonaut Rowing Club. The team was intended to provide off-season activity for the scullers, in order to keep them in shape for the next competitive rowing season.

The first season consisted of a series of games with a team in Hamilton, Ontario, but in 1875 a loosely organized proto-league was formed with additional teams from Guelph, London, Port Hope, St. Catharines and Stratford (all in Ontario).

In 1882 the traditional rugby scrum was abandoned in favor of a scrimmage in which the ball was put into play by the foot of a player known as the "centre scrim". So that he could more easily maintain his balance while trying to pass the ball back with his foot (and simultaneously fend off charging opponents), he was assisted by a "scrim support" on each side. These players actually held the centre scrim in a vertical position while he put the ball into play.

The O.R.F.U Years

Honest-to-goodness league organization had to wait until the 1883 season. (This is still nearly forty years before the city teams in the United States became organized into a league.) That year representatives of the Argonauts, the University of Toronto, Upper Canada College and Trinity College met in Toronto and organized the Ontario Rugby Football Union. The Canadian Rugby Union had been formed the previous year. Until 1958 it sponsored the postseason interleague tournament which determined the Canadian national champions. William H. Merit of Toronto was the first president of each of the unions.

In two playoff games with the University of Toronto at the end of the 1883 season, the Argos won the O.R.F.U. championship series 23-3, making them the first champions of any organized football league in North America. They then went on to defeat Ottawa City of the Quebec Rugby Football Union 9-7 for the first Dominion championship.

In 1884 the Argonauts blasted the University of Toronto 24-4 in a two-game league championship series, but in the Dominion championship game they lost 30-0 to the Montreal Football Club.

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Playing a five-game schedule in 1885, the Argos needed a late-season win over the University of Toronto to get into the title game, but Varsity proved too strong, stopping the Scullers 33-0.

Toronto was completely dominant in the O.R.F.U. the next season, as they won all four games. They encountered a surprisingly strong Ottawa College team in the title game, losing 13-1. Eighteen eighty-seven was a bad year for the Argos, as they were eliminated by a strong Trinity College team. The following year proved no better as the Argos won only two of five games. However, in 1889 they played only two games and won them both. Stratford fell 45-0 and the Hamilton Football Club was trounced 46-0. Halfback Gordy Muntz scored four tries against Hamilton. In the 1889 title match Ottawa College stopped the Double Blue 17-2.

Eighteen ninety and 1891 were low years for the Argonauts as other teams in the schedule proved too strong and the Scullers were eliminated after the first two or three games. The games in the 1880's and 1890's were elimination games to determine the top two teams for the title match. A.H. Campbell, Jr., former Argo player and Toronto's representative to the C.R.U. was elected president of that organization in 1891.

In 1892 the scoring system was modified. Four points were awarded for a try (touchdown), two for a goal from a try (convert), five for a goal from a drop kick (field goal), four for a goal from a flying kick or a free (penalty) kick, two for a safety touch and one for a rouge, touch-in-goal or deadline kick (single).

The Argonauts fielded a strong team in 1892. They were 4-0-0 in league play, including a 94-0 victory over the London Rugby Club. This is the largest score ever recorded in a Canadian senior game, and the thirteen touchdowns also constitute a record. It was in this game that Jimmy Parkyn scored an all-time record 43 points on two tries, ten converts, one field goal and ten singles. Nevertheless, the team again lost in the playoffs, this time 15-1 to Hamilton.

Queen's University, Kingston, Ontario was the problem in 1893 as they dispatched the Argonauts 28-3 as they dispatched the Argonauts 28-3 and 27-7 in the playoff series. Billy Wood retired after the 1893 season. He held the team career scoring record with 84 points until Lionel Conacher surpassed that in 1921.

In 1894 and 1895 the Argonauts and a Hamilton entry were the only O.R.F.U. members and Hamilton won the championship both years. Games were shortened to 80 minutes from 90 minutes in 1895.

Halfback J. Cartwright rushed for four touchdowns in a game against Hamilton and Male had four in another game, but the University of Toronto Varsity later eliminated the Argonauts 43-6 and 18-16 in the 1896 playoffs. Pud Kent, who was later to coach the team, joined as a player in 1897.

The Argonauts' next postseason appearance was not until 1900, when they lost to the Ottawa Rough Riders 20-12. The outstanding performance of this season was by Pug Hardesty, who was later to gain fame with the Calgary Tigers of 1911. Against Hamilton October 18, Pug ran 12 times for 180 yards, including one 75-yarder. He scored 12 points in a 27-12 victory over the Tigers.

Controversy and Change

The O.R.F.U. was down to two teams (Toronto and Ottawa) again in 1901, when the Hamilton Tigers dropped out midway through the season. Apparently a dispute over player eligibility was involved in Hamilton's withdrawal. The Argonauts compiled a 5-1 record, only to lose 30-15 to Ottawa College in a two game playoff series.

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In 1902 one of the earliest of many disputes over professionalism in Canadian football occurred. Two of Ottawa's players were suspended and one was actually expelled for being "professional sportsmen". There was no evidence that the three had played football for pay, but they had apparently received compensation as baseball or hockey players. In spite of their weakened team, the Ottawa Rough Riders were able to win the Canadian senior championship in 1902. Toronto had another bad year, winning only one game in three.

More disputes over professionalism before the beginning of the 1903 season led to the temporary collapse of league organization. The Double Blue played exhibitions only, beating a team called the "Torontos" 40-1 for the city championship. Eddy Hamber scored four times in the game. There was no Dominion championship series.

In 1904 the value of a try was increased from four to five points and the convert was decreased from two to one in the Ontario Union. Hamilton rejoined after an absence of two and one-half years.

Hamilton won the league championship, but there were no further playoffs, since each of the three eastern football unions played to a different set of rules and only Hamilton was willing to compromise. The Tigers had offered to play Ottawa City, the Quebec Union champions, one half under each set of rules, but Ottawa declined. Later this was to become a common means of compromising on the rules between east and west and even between Canadian and U.S. teams.

Laurie Boyd retired this year after twenty seasons with the Scullers (1885-1904), still the team record. Toronto finished in second place with two wins and three losses.

Nineteen five was a controversial year in Canadian football. The Ontario Rugby Football Union unilaterally adopted the so-called "Burnside rules" this year. Names for Thrift Burnside, former captain of the University of Toronto team and the proposer of the rules changes, the Burnside rules made sweeping modifications in the direction of American football. The major changes included the following: Teams were reduced from fifteen to twelve men per side. The "snap-back" system was introduced in place of the scrimmage system (in which the ball was heeled backward by the centre scrim); consequently, the two scrim supports were among the positions eliminated.

Additionally, a team was now required to make ten yards in three successive downs or lose possession of the ball, and the offensive side was required to have only six men (instead of eight) on the line of scrimmage when the ball was put into play. The system of scoring was changed so that all goals (by placement, drop kick, flying kick or free kick) were worth two points. The throw-in from the sidelines was abolished.

Ottawa Rough Riders had by now left the O.R.F.U. for the Quebec Union, where they won the 1905 championship. Hamilton won out over Toronto for O.R.F.U. honors, but was banned from the playoffs because of the Canadian Rugby Union's pique over the Ontario Union's rules changes.

The field goal was changed to four points in 1906. Toronto finished the season with three wins, two losses.

The Big Four

Hamilton Tigers had withdrawn from the O.R.F.U. for two and one-half seasons in 1901-1903 and Ottawa Rough Riders quit to join the Q.R.F.U. in 1905. In part, at least, these decisions had been made because of the O.R.F.U.'s strict interpretation of the ban on professionalism.

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The Argonauts, too, favored a looser interpretation of player eligibility rules, and so, in 1907 teams from Toronto and Hamilton of the O.R.F.U. and Montreal and Ottawa of the Q.R.F.U. formed the Interprovincial Rugby Football Union or "Big Four" as it was popularly known. The nickname was apt, since these were the four powerhouse non-collegiate teams in all of Canada at the time. Among other things, the new league effectively eliminated the Q.R.F.U. from any further Dominion championships, although the Quebec winners continued to challenge for awhile.

The I.R.F.U. had abandoned most of the O.R.F.U.'s Burnside rules, returning to fourteen-man teams and heeling the ball rather than snapping it back. Burnside's suggestions eventually won out in 1921, but it was a long, hard struggle.

The first ever Big Four game was played Oct. 5, 1907 between Toronto and Montreal at Montreal, and it resulted in the new league's first dispute over professionalism.

Ernie Russell of Montreal had been prohibited from playing by the Canadian Amateur Athletic Union because he was considered a professional hockey player. After arriving for the game, however, the Argonauts discovered that Montreal intended to play Russell in spite of the ban. The C.A.A.U. had threatened to suspend every player on either team if he played, so Toronto held a team meeting to decide whether to participate. They voted to play the game as the "Torontos" rather than as the "Argonauts", but the subterfuge did them no good -- the C.A.A.U. suspended every player in the game. The Big Four, however, counted the game and the C.A.A.U. eventually had no back down.

Peter Flett of the Argonauts led the league in scoring with 29 points, although he played in only four league games. On Oct. 19 at Hamilton he rushed for 195 yards and also punted 25 times. Toronto, however, finished last in the inaugural season.

In 1908 the value of a field goal was reduced to its present value of three points. Hamilton Tigers won the Big Four and went on to defeat Toronto Amateur Athletic Club and the University of Toronto for the Dominion championship. The Argonauts finished in a tie for third at 1-5-0. Mert Kent kicked a team record twenty single during the season.

In 1909 Earl Grey, then Governor-General of Canada, donated a silver trophy to be completed for by amateur football teams throughout Canada. The University of Toronto Varsity won the Grey Cup the first three years in succession, in 1911 beating the Argonauts 14-7.

Ross Binkley, phenomenal kicker for the Argos, played with them in 1910-13. He led the Big Four in scoring in his first season with 34 points on two converts, six field goals, and fourteen singles. In 1911 he kicked a 52-yard field goal against Hamilton, and in 1913 he also took on the duties of head coach. "Big Train" Smirle Lawson, former University of Toronto Varsity star, also joined the team in 1911. In 1963 he was elected to the Canadian Football Hall of Fame.

A game with Ottawa November 9, 1912 produced the greatest punting duel in the history of football. Toronto punted 41 times for 1300 yards and Ottawa 48 times (37 by Eddie Gerard) for 1460 yards. The Argonauts also had 14 fumbles, 7 of which they lost. Nevertheless, they won the game 23-11 and then went on to repeat as Big Four champions. They beat Toronto Varsity in the eastern semi-finals before losing to Hamilton Alerts in the Grey Cup game, 11-4.

Nineteen thirteen was something of a disappointment for Argonaut fans, the team ending with an even split and dropping to third place. The participated in the I.R.F.U.'s first tie game, a 10-10 contest with Ottawa. No one knew quite what to make of the tie -- because of the single point, ties have always been less common in Canada than in the U. S. -- so the game was replayed at the end of the season. Toronto won 30-12, bringing their season record to 3-3-1.

1914: Argos Cop the Grey Cup

In 1914 Toronto and Hamilton each finished with 5-1-0 records. Toronto had lost to Hamilton 20-5 at home, but then went on to win 7-5 at Hamilton. In a playoff to determine the league's representative in the eastern finals, the two teams played to a 9-9 draw. The following week Toronto was finally able to eliminate the Tigers, 11-4. The game was decided on kicks, with Jack O'Connor's two field goals winning for the Argonauts. O'Connor set a new seasonal scoring record with 44 points. The team also broke or tied several scoring marks during their six-game schedule: most points (145); most touchdowns rushing (12); most touchdowns on fumble recoveries (7); and most converts (12).

On Wednesday of the following week the Argos met O.R.F.U. champion Hamilton Rowing Club. Going into the third quarter Toronto held a slim 5-3 lead, when

...on the Toronto 25 yard line, McKelvey of Hamilton punted into the goal for a sure point. Everett Smith caught the ball 20 yards deep and ran it out to his 30 yard line. As he was tackled, he lateraled to Clad Murphy who took a few steps and ran into the arms of McKelvey. The two tugged at each other for about ten yards and finally Murphy broke free and scored . . . a 130 yard punt return!

Toronto scored again and held on to defeat the Rowing Club 16-14.

In the 1914 Grey Cup game the Argos scored on two University of Toronto fumbles and led 14-0 at the half. The final score of 14-2 game gave them their first Grey Cup -- a fitting conclusion to one of their finest seasons ever!

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Such then is the early history of the Toronto Argonauts. From a means of keeping the rowing team in shape after the summer months to the senior football championship of the Dominion, the club produced many great players and many exciting moments. It was a part of Canadian football from the beginning and made no small contribution to establishing the game among players and spectators alike.

True, the Toronto Argonauts were the team that had the most ups and down, but as one player put it around the turn of the century, "Hamilton would win by great scores, but Toronto was always tough and the final score was never settled until the final whistle."

All things considered, the Argonauts are not only the oldest city team on the North American continent, but also one of the most illustrious.

Sources

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