

THE QUEBEC RUGBY FOOTBALL UNION

1883-1906 – Part 1

By Robert Sproule

INTRODUCTION

In truth, the Quebec Rugby Football Union was always considered that “*other*” union and was somewhat of a mystery. It seemed isolated and different from the rest of Canada, as there was little written about it in Ontario papers other than the fact that over the years several teams from the Montreal and Quebec City challenged for the Dominion championship in the 1880’s. Little was actually known about who the different teams were or their star players. Outside of the Montreal core, the rest of Canada had never heard of such names as Arthur Fry, Robert and Jack Campbell, Eddie Gleeson, Jack Savage, the Molson brothers; Herbert, Walter and Perry, Charles Wilkenson or Jimmy Craig. Reports about this union that did enter the sport pages were vague and generally too short to create any interest.

The mystery of this union came right from the start as even the formation date was incorrectly listed. Gordon Currie, in his book “*100 Years of Canadian Football*” states that the Quebec union was set up in the winter of 1882-83. And Dr. Frank Cosentino, noted football player and author, in his book “*Canadian Football*” said “...the first Canadian rugby football union was founded in Quebec. Organized in February of 1882.” However, both dated proved to be wrong. After several months of research, this writer recorded an article that appeared in the January 18th, 1883 sports section of the Montreal Gazette. “A meeting was held on Tuesday evening (Jan 16) for the purpose of forming a Quebec Rugby Football Union...President elected was H. Abbott, Vice-President was S.M. Blaiklock and the Secretary-Treasurer was E.H. Hamilton.” The Quebec union had been formed 10 days after the ORFU.

In comparison to the Ontario Rugby Football Union which comprised of teams from all corners of the province, the Quebec union was more or less centered in Montreal. There were teams from Ottawa by 1894 and one from Kingston and but three of the main teams were right in Montreal; McGill University, the only college club until Ottawa College came, the Britannia Football Club and of course the famous Montreal Football Club. The Montreal team was so dominating and powerful that they won 12 of 24 provincial championships from 1883 to 1906, including 7 consecutive titles. In fact when one talks of the Quebec union, one talks about the strength and influence of the Montreal team. So strong was the presence of the Montreal team that when they left the QRFU in 1907 to join the newly formed Inter-Provincial Union (Big-4), the Quebec union failed to field a senior team. For without Montreal to attract the fans, the QRFU had to be content with playing Junior and Intermediate clubs.

In 1937 several clubs wanted their Intermediate players to move up and there was an attempt to form a senior loop and challenge for the Grey Cup. But the 63-0 bombing of the Westmount team by the ORFU’s Sarnia Imperials in the playoffs ended all speculation of a rebirth.

However, it should be noted that rugby football was first played in French Canada in 1868 and also that the first series of challenge games started here. Montreal Football Club played a Quebec City team at the Esplanade on October 12, 1872 and again on September 26, 1873 with both matches a 0-0 tie. The famous Harvard-McGill series took off in 1874 and that was the end of city football until 1881. Or so it seemed. In an article from the Montreal Gazette newspaper dated November 30, 1882 there is mention in the meeting of the Britannia Football Club as having played 39 matches since 1875 of which 25 were won by the Brits, lost 5 and drawn 9. No doubt there were many spring games between the Quebec clubs. In 1881, Montreal, Britannia and Quebec City embarked on a challenge series with the Brits winning. They repeated in 1882 defeating both Montreal and McGill University.

There were other games. First there was a scheduled Inter-Provincial game on October 28, 1876 between an Ontario and Quebec team but no score was reported. Another Inter-Provincial game, Ontario vs Quebec was played at the Toronto Cricket Grounds on October 16, 1875. Ontario won 1 goal, 14 rouges to 1 rouge. And finally, the last game between Ottawa and the Britannia Football Clubs on October 20, 1877 which the Brits won 2 touchdowns and three rouges to 1 rouge.

There was an earlier attempt to form a governing body of rugby football in Canada. The First Canadian Rugby Football Union formed on June 12, 1880 recommended that the clubs be divided into Ontario and Quebec sections with a final (championship) match between the winners of each section. However, teams in Ontario were ready to organize but not so in Quebec. As such, the CRFU lived but a few short months and then died. There was another attempt to organize another CRFU in 1882 but the Quebec teams couldn’t even organize themselves. McGill was ready to join but only if the Britannia and Montreal Football Clubs would. Britannia would join providing that the Rules of the English Rugby Union be adopted. But that failed to gain the support of the Ontario teams. Thus, there was no Canadian Union, thus there was no Quebec Union.

And yet it was the Ontario clubs that brought about a Quebec Union. With the formation of the Ontario Union on January 6, 1883, the Quebec clubs were not to be undone. Ten days later they formed the Quebec Rugby Football Union and the challenge series involved teams from Montreal, McGill, Britannia and Quebec City. Games were played on a rough field 110 yards long by 65 or so yards wide and the scoring was still by system of trys and goals. Placement of the ball over the goal line (a try) counted no points but allowed the attacking team a chance at kicking the ball over the cross bar and through the uprights. If successful, it counted one goal or one point. Teams could also be declared the winner if they scored more trys than their opponents. Clubs played 15 aside for the better part of 90 minutes divided into two halves. The game, although not pure Rugby as defined by the English Rugby Union was still one in which the ball was placed on the ground. At that moment the teams (lines) came together in an effort to gain control of the ball and eventually work it up the field and over the line. Thus the scrimmage Game.

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THE EARLY YEARS

Challenge football in French Canada began on September 29, 1881 when the Montreal Football Club played a team from Quebec City and won one try to nil. On October 8, Montreal and the Britannia team played to a tie, each club scoring a try. But as Montreal was undefeated, they continued on and played the next challenger, Royal Military College in Kingston. They defeated the cadets 1 goal to nil and then returned home to replay their tie game with the Brits. This time Montreal lost as the Britannia's registered the only score of the game (a try) for the win. The last game of the season was against McGill and the scoreless draw gave the Brits their first championship season.

The season of 1882 opened on May 13 with the Brits and Montreal playing to a 0-0 tie. Next, in the fall on October 4, Britannia and RMC scored a goal but it was another 1-1 tie and the Brits were undefeated. On October 21 they defeated their cross-town rivals, Montreal 1 goal to nil and then defeated McGill 2 goals to nil to once again capture the city championship.

1883: MONTREAL FOOTBALL CLUB

The opening game of the new Quebec Rugby Football Union was another spring day as the defending champions, Britannia accepted the Montreal challenge. In the first half, Montreal kicked over two non-scoring rouges and pushed Louson over the line for the first try of the game. The goal-from-try was missed and at the half the teams were still scoreless. In the second half, Britannia managed to kick over three times but failed to score and the game ended in a draw.

Britannia accepted Montreal's second challenge on September 29 and the Brits scored first on Blaiklock's goal. Montreal rallied in the second half, scored two goals-from-trys by Hamilton and won the game and the right to accept all new challenges.

Quebec City played Montreal next and the teams met on October 13. Within a few minutes, Montreal had scored three trys and kicked one goal, to lead at the half. After the intermission, they managed to cross the line twice more but failed to kick over the bar. Quebec City pressed hard to score but Montreal held on to win 1-0.

The final challenge was from the students at McGill and they gave the Montreal club a tough game. Neither team could score in the first half but Montreal was able to kick two goals-from-trys and win 2-0 for the first ever QRFU provincial championship. It was to be the first of several consecutive titles.

1883 FINAL STANDINGS

	<u>W</u>	<u>L</u>	<u>T</u>	<u>For</u>	<u>Ag</u>
MONTREAL Football Club	3	0	1	5	1
BRITANNIA Football Club	0	1	1	1	2
QUEBEC CITY Football Club	0	1	0	0	1
McGILL UNIVERSITY	0	1	0	0	2

1883 SCORING LEADERS

	trys	goals ¹	p-fk ²	goals ³	sin	pts
Huntly Drummond, Montreal	0	3	0	0	0	3
Hamilton, Montreal	0	2	0	0	0	2
Murray Blaiklock, Britannia	0	1	0	0	0	1

1 - goals-from-try

2 - penalty-free kick

3 - goals-from-field

1884: THE POINT SYSTEM

It should be noted that several articles written on the Quebec Union gave the impression that it was the leader in establishing major milestones on Canadian football when, in actual comparison with the ORFU, research shows that the Ontario Union was the one that brought about important changes to the game. It was the Ontario Union that was the leader and the Quebec Union the follower. For example, in the first year of both organizations Ontario was using a scoring system whereas the Quebecers were still employing a system of trys and goals.

With that in mind, it was then in 1884 that Quebec followed Ontario and introduced a points scoring system to their clubs. This in turn proved to provide more interest to fans and rewarded the attacking with more scoring opportunities. Now, matches were decided by a majority of 2 points thereby eliminating tie games. And finally, the Quebec Union did away with spring games and adopted the ORFU guidelines of a complete fall schedule.

The first match of the season was against old rivals; Britannia and the Montreal-15. Within minutes the fast Brit halfbacks were

up towards the Montreal line and scored a rouge. That score held into the middle part of the second half when Montreal scored three unanswered trys and won the game 14-2.

At the same time, McGill and Bishop's College were going at it in Lennoxville. McGill started the scoring with 7 singles and a try, but this was just the beginning as they added to their score to make it 39-0 at the intermission. Another 11 points were scored in the second half and McGill returned home with a record 50-0 shutout of the opposition. Elliot scored a record 11 single points and Brown had kicked 3 goals-from-trys.

On Saturday October 18, the provincial championship was on the line between the McGill-15 and Montreal Football Club. Both teams opened with a kicking game in order to get better field position and shortly Abbott, former President of the QRFU (it was not unusual for members of the Executive to be players too), opened the scoring with a rouge. Two more trys and another single gave Montreal control of the game 10-0 at the halftime break.

The student pressed to get on the scoreboard in the second half but Montreal held firm. Several McGill kick-overs were returned out of danger and several more scoring plays, including a rare safety touch gave the provincial title to the Montreal club 21-0.

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1884 FINAL STANDINGS

	<u>W</u>	<u>L</u>	<u>T</u>	<u>For</u>	<u>Agt</u>
MONTREAL Football Club	2	0	0	35	2
McGILL UNIVERSITY	1	1	0	50	21
BRITANNIA Football Club	0	1	0	2	14
BISHOP'S COLLEGE	0	1	0	0	50

1884 SCORING LEADERS

	trys	goals	p-fk	goals	sin	pts
Brown, McGill	0	3	0	0	2	14
Holden, McGill	2	0	0	0	4	12
Elliott, McGill	0	0	0	0	11	11
Robert Sterling, Montreal	1	1	0	0	0	8
Huntly Drummond, Montreal	1	0	0	0	1	5

Usually the last game would signal the end of the season; however, earlier in the year both Quebec and the Ontario unions were instrumental in setting up the Canadian Rugby Football Union as the governing body of football in Canada and as such a championship game was arranged for the Dominion title. In Toronto on November 5 of that year the game was played between the Toronto Argonauts and the Montreal Football Club.

Perhaps an edge was given to the Argos as they were credited with a stronger and heavier wingline but after several scrimmages in the early stages of the match, Montreal's line was playing even. Soon Montreal started to take control with the superior speed of their runners and execution of plays. Scoring runs by Huntly Drummond and Robert Sterling gave them a comfortable 14-0 halftime lead. After the break, Argos managed several down the field marches but their play selection near the goal failed to produce any points. Sterling scored another 12 points on two trys and a kick as Montreal, with their sharp passing, won the game and the first Dominion Title 30-0.

1885: MONTREAL AGAIN

Once again, Montreal and Britannia opened the new season. Montreal scored first on a try by James Owen and converted it by Campbell for an 8-0 lead. Another converted try by the same pair gave Montreal the easy contest 16-0 when time was called.

The next game was McGill and Bishop's College, and the Montreal students were looking for a repeat of last year's high scoring game. There was no question of which school was the strongest but rather could Bishop's keep the score down. In fact, they surprised McGill with a strong wingline and only gave up 2 rouges. Just before the half, McGill managed to slip over the line and score for a 7-0 lead. The second half was all McGill as they dominated and scored another 17 points. The only bright spot for

Bishop's was when they were able to move toward McGill's line and push Elliott over for their only score. McGill finally won the match 24-4 and moved on against Montreal.

On paper it might have been thought that McGill was a strong team with good quality players. And they were, except that Montreal was the strongest of the two clubs, and in this final game they proved to have the better and heavier wingline, faster runners and better kickers. They controlled the game from start to finish and gave McGill no quarter in their attack. First Robert Campbell scored a try, kicked his own goal and passed to Drummond for another try. Abbott was next to score a try and Hodgson rounded the half with three singles. Four more points were counted in the early moments of the second half and Hodgson, with Owen scored three trys between them. Another three points ended the game and Montreal had shocked McGill with their exceptional play selection and defense 46-0 for their third consecutive QRFU title.

1885 FINAL STANDINGS

	<u>W</u>	<u>L</u>	<u>T</u>	<u>For</u>	<u>Agt</u>
MONTREAL Football Club	2	0	0	62	0
McGILL UNIVERSITY	1	1	0	24	50
BRITANNIA Football Club	0	1	0	0	16
BISHOP'S COLLEGE	0	1	0	4	24

1885 SCORING LEADERS

	trys	goals	p-fk	goals	sin	pts
Robert Campbell, Montreal	1	3	0	0	0	16
James Owen, Montreal	4	0	0	0	0	16
Wilbert Hodgson, Montreal	1	0	0	0	6	10
Brown, McGill	0	1	0	0	5	9
Robert Sterling, Montreal	0	2	0	0	0	8

There was no championship game this year. Played at the Lawn, in Toronto the match consisted of All-Star players from teams of each union. The Quebec players quickly adapted to playing together and had the advantage whereas the Ontario men were out of place and unfamiliar with one another. As such, the Quebec All-Stars were able to move the ball better. They were unable to score a try or register a big score, but they managed to score three first half rouges to lead the match 3-0. However, the agreed upon rules for this game stated that a win must be by a majority of four points and at the Referee's whistle the All-Star game was declared a draw.

1886: THE SHORT SEASON

While the Ontario Union was enjoying increased popularity with the sports fan and a sixteen team involvement, the Quebec union was for the first time restricted to the Montreal area as Bishop's College dropped out for this season.

Montreal, the recognized provincial champions, had a bye in the first round of the Tie series which consisted of McGill battling with Britannia. And for the first time the students were up against serious competition. Several times the Brits moved toward the McGill line and kicked over and each time the college kids were able to run the ball out or kick it out of danger. Finally, Britannia grassed a McGill runner for the first point of the match. A try and then the first goal-from-field in the Quebec Union and Britannia was away in the scoring. Several more scoring plays, including six consecutive rouges and the Brits won the opening game 17-8.

In the next game, Britannia took the lead with four straight rouges before Montreal woke up and realized they had a serious game at hand. They battled back and replied with three of their own rouges before halftime. After the break both teams tried to move the ball into scoring position. After several plays it was dangerously close to the Brit line. A scrumage took place and then Drummond was shoved over the line and Montreal won the second match 7-5.

For the championship Montreal had the stronger wingline and had little problems with the students. Although the first half was a contest between the winglines resulting in little scoring, Montreal scored first on Sterling's fine run, gave up a rouge to McGill but took a commanding 5-1 score at the intermission. The second half was all one-sided for the Black & Red. Trys by James Owen and Huntly Drummond gave the game to Montreal. They were content to kick singles by Hodgson and take the provincial championship 20-1.

1886 FINAL STANDINGS

	<u>W</u>	<u>L</u>	<u>T</u>	<u>For</u>	<u>Agt</u>
MONTREAL Football Club	2	0	0	27	6
BRITANNIA Football Club	1	1	0	22	15
McGILL UNIVERSITY	0	2	0	9	37

1886 SCORING LEADERS

	trys	goals	p-fk	goals	sin	pts
John Arnton, Britannia	0	0	0	0	12	12
Wilbert Hodgson, Montreal	0	1	0	0	7	9
Huntly Drummond, Montreal	2	0	0	0	0	8
George Blaiklock, Montreal	0	0	0	1	0	6
Peter McIntosh, Britannia	1	0	0	0	0	4

Nobody won the Canadian championship this year. The problems seemed to be two-fold. First, it seemed that the CRFU arranged for another All-Star game to be played at Montreal on November 18. This was fine with Quebec but Ontario Union preferred a championship game between the provincial winners. And it seemed that the CRFU and Quebec were not going to change this format. The other matter was a proposed Law 14 amendment that would allow "...passing the ball back through the scrumage." Since this was a distinct move away from the traditions of Rugby as far as the Ontario clubs were concerned, it did not sit well with them. As such, the Ontario Union sent a telegram on November 15 informing the Quebec winners, Montreal FC, that they would not be able to organize the All-Star players and therefore it would be impossible to send a team for the interprovincial game. Also, at the CRFU Annual Meeting on the evening of November 18, there were only two delegated from the Ontario. Law 14 was discussed and ultimately adopted.

1887: ANOTHER PROVINCIAL TITLE

Bishop's College was replaced by St. George College in Quebec City and they played McGill on October 22. Both teams scored a try in the first half but McGill won 8-4 as they were able to kick a goal-from-try for the margin of victory.

Again, Montreal was too powerful for Britannia as they built up a commanding 24-0 lead at the half on the strength of Arthur Fry's outstanding running. Toward the end of the match, Britannia managed to put some points on the scoreboard but it was too little too late as Montreal won 33-15. Mr. Fry finished the game with 21 points on 4 trys (all rushing) and 5 rouges.

In the championship game with McGill, Fry was a watched player and the students managed to keep him out of the scoring until the final few minutes of the match. McGill limited the Black & Red to 3 points in the first half but Robert and Jack Campbell, along with Hodgson piled on the points and Montreal won another championship with a shut-out victory 19-0.

1887 FINAL STANDINGS

	<u>W</u>	<u>L</u>	<u>T</u>	<u>For</u>	<u>Agt</u>
MONTREAL Football Club	2	0	0	52	15
McGILL UNIVERSITY	1	1	0	8	23
BRITANNIA Football Club	0	1	0	15	33
ST. GEORGE'S COLLEGE	0	1	0	4	8

1887 SCORING LEADERS

	trys	goals	p-fk	goals	sin	pts
Arthur Fry, Montreal	4	0	0	0	7	23
Wilbert Hodgson, Montreal	0	4	0	0	1	17
Jack Arnton, Britannia	1	0	1	0	1	9
Hamilton, McGill	1	1	0	0	0	8
Jack Campbell, Montreal	1	0	0	0	2	6

There would be no CRFU sponsored Dominion championship this year. When Ontario suggested provincial winners play for the championship with Quebec, they found that there was little interest from the Canadian Union. The Ontario clubs did not accept Law 14 and did not play it during the season. The CRFU thus had two problems at hand. First, it was unable to ensure uniform adoption of its rules by the rebellious Ontario clubs. And since these western teams were discussing arrangements for the Dominion final without first consulting the governing body, The CRFU in fact had been discredited and, its main object to establish uniform rules had been challenged. The ORFU therefore had to organize the final match with Quebec and send their team to Montreal at their own expense. This development meant that the national union had, for all practical purposes, ceased to operate by the end of 1887.

On their own the Quebec and Ontario unions were able to arrange a championship match for the supremacy of Canadian football. Part of the solution to the problems that had plagued the same union the year before was that Ottawa College, the Ontario champs, were willing to travel to Montreal and play Quebec rules. On November 5, 1887 on McGill's playing field, Ottawa College engaged the Montreal Football Club for the Dominion title. The students, as they had done with the Ontario teams, demonstrated their superior game and better conditioning, completed all of their scoring in the first half with two tries and a safety touch, and doubled the Quebec team 10-5 for the victory.

1888: SIX STRAIGHT

There were just three teams this year, McGill and the two city clubs; Britannia and Montreal. Perhaps it was a case of too much power as in the opening match, Montreal toyed with McGill. Jack Campbell's fine running and kicking gave his team a 22-0 lead at the half and Montreal again shut out the students 33-0 for the easy win.

Britannia, on the other hand, put up a much stiffer resistance to the Montreal-15. A fumble returned for a try gave the Black & Red a slim 5-0 lead in the first half. However, in the last half, they were able to break over the line, held off an attempted Brit rally and won their sixth consecutive provincial title 14-5.

1888 FINAL STANDINGS

	<u>W</u>	<u>L</u>	<u>T</u>	<u>For</u>	<u>Agt</u>
MONTREAL Football Club	2	0	0	47	5
McGILL UNIVERSITY	0	1	0	0	33
BRITANNIA Football Club	0	1	0	5	14

1888 SCORING LEADERS

	trys	goals	p-fk	goals	sin	pts
Jack Campbell, Montreal	2	3	0	0	5	25
Arthur Abbott, Montreal	3	0	0	0	0	12
Wilbert Cleghom, Montreal	2	0	0	0	0	8
Victor Barry, Britannia	1	0	0	0	1	5

A Dominion Final was arranged by the Executive Committee of the declared provincial winning teams. Representatives from Ottawa College of the Ontario Union and Montreal agreed to play at Ottawa on November 15. Two thousand fans (a high figure in those days) showed up and witnessed a hard fought struggle. Both teams controlled the others wingline and limited the runs to short gains. In the first half, Ottawa College outplayed Montreal but failed to establish any kind of a consistent running or kicking game. In the second half, Montreal outplayed Ottawa college but they too were unable to form an effective attack. Neither team got on the scoreboard and the game ended a 0-0 tie. Montreal, thinking they were staring to get the advantage, suggested a period of overtime. Ottawa College, realizing a good thing, and with their honor still intact, declined further play. Both teams went home undefeated, and it was the first time that the Canadian championship ended in a scoreless tie.

1889: THE CHALLENGE SYSTEM

This was the year that the QRFU adopted the Challenge System. That is, the defending provincial champions accepting all challenges from other teams. And in true form, the Quebec union followed this method of scheduling that appeared to be popular in the Ontario union the year before.

The opening match of the season was a challenge by McGill which was accepted by Montreal. The tempo of the game in the early stages demonstrated the kind of season it was going to be in "*La Bell Province*" as the play selection stressed the relative strength of both clubs. The winglines bogged down to a stalemate but time and time again the swift Montreal running back circled the line and made great gains. Four tries in the first half and Montreal never looked back. Another twenty points (12 by Jack Campbell) and Montreal salted the game away 42-0.

Under a normal challenge system this would have been McGill's last game but, per the rules of the season, the students could challenge both city clubs. Against Britannia, McGill held on to a slim 4-3 lead. The Brits came back after intermission with two tries over the line and won 11-7 to eliminate McGill from further play.

Bishop's College returned to the series, replacing St. George College and challenged Montreal. If anything, this certainly was a mismatch of the schedule; the strong against the weak, the powerful against the helpless. And it was. The match proved to be no more than a light workout for the Montreal boys. Hodgson and Campbell worked their passing combinations to perfection through a porous Bishop defense. Trys, goals-from-trys and rouges scored on a regular basis gave Montreal the game 39-2.

And again it was Montreal and Britannia for the provincial title. The clubs started off with a kicking game that worked to Montreal's advantage as Baird set a record by returning a punt all the way for a try. It was the first punt return for a score in the Quebec union. The goal-from-try put the defending champions up 8-0 and enough for the win as Britannia was limited to a rouge and a safety touch in the match. Two more tries and Jack Campbell's boot into the end zone gave his team the last points and the

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QRFU title 21-3.

1889 FINAL STANDINGS

	<u>W</u>	<u>L</u>	<u>T</u>	<u>For</u>	<u>Agt</u>
MONTREAL Football Club	3	0	0	102	5
BRITANNIA Football Club	1	1	0	14	28
BISHOP'S COLLEGE	0	1	0	2	39
McGILL UNIVERSITY	0	2	0	7	53

1889 SCORING LEADERS

	trys	goals	p-fk	goals	sin	pts
Wilbert Hodgson, Montreal	2	5	0	0	3	31
Jack Campbell, Montreal	5	0	0	0	11	31
Baird, Montreal	4	0	0	0	0	16
Wilbert Cleghorn, Montreal	2	0	0	0	0	8
Percy Miller, Montreal	1	0	0	0	0	4