

Montreal Hornets

By Wes Cross

One of the more ephemeral entries in the pre-history of the CFL, the Hornets lasted for only one season. Struggling to revive the suspended operations of the pre-war Big Four, officially the Inter Provincial Rugby Union (IRFU), the Hornets were suddenly created in September to join the already running Hamilton Tigers, Toronto Argonauts and Ottawa Rough Riders.

The team was led by president John McFetrick (recently of HMCS Donnacona), general manager George Downs and two "co-coaches": Glen Brown and Bill Hughes. Hughes had coached at both Ottawa and Hamilton prior to joining the Hornets and was a McGill Redmen alumnus. US-trained Brown coached the 1944 HMCS Donnacona Navy team to the Grey Cup in 1944 also served as head coach of the High School of Montreal.

The team surveyed the landscape and hurriedly invited Montreal based players to tryouts. Time and financial limits meant that a number of invitees were local high school products, notably perennial powerhouse West Hill High School of the NDG district. Training began September 1st with the first scrimmages involving a group of 45. Coach Brown estimated that 90% of the hopefuls had been Montreal high school gridders. By September 13th 35 players had been signed to play, although roster limits would reduce the number to 24 by the season opener. A September 19th 1945 directive from the Canadian government suddenly freed up servicemen who were restricted to playing for military teams (and hence the awarding of the Grey Cup to service teams from 1942 through 1944). This allowed the coaches to use experienced players, some of whom had already been training with the team. Led by quarterbacks Johnny Fripp, who had performed well with Ottawa despite his 5'5"-160 lb. size in 1941 and Bill Surplis (a WHHS star from 1942) and halfback Al Stevenson, the Hornets were not considered to be a competitive threat to the other league members. However on the team were future notables punter Doug Harvey (now available from the navy team), a WHHS multi-sport star who would make his mark in the NHL, his brother Alfie and fellow WHHS alumnus Don Loney who would go on to star for many years in football, winning the Jeff Russell trophy and becoming a collegiate coaching legend at St. Francis Xavier.

The season start itself was threatened while the Big Four debated how to share gate receipts in order to help the new Montreal team function during the season. With two weeks to go before the October 5th start, it was finally agreed to pool all regular season receipts. A remaining problem was finding a home field for the Hornets. This was eventually resolved through an agreement with McGill University to use the field for three home games in 1945.

The first Big Four game played in four years was the Hornet's season opener against the Hamilton Tigers on September 29th 1945 at McGill's Molson Stadium. New uniforms, in gold and green, arrived just prior to game day, along with equipment obtained from all over the city, but football shoes were lacking due to wartime shortages. Missing from the team itself were some of the players who had opted for college opportunities. Despite these hardships, the Hornets gave a good account of themselves and fell by a

score of only 5-0 despite a dismal first half. Starting quarterback Fripp showed the effect of his four year layoff and the pivot duties were passed to Bill Surphlis. An interesting problem in the game was the difficulty in determining which team was which. Under the arc lights, the Hornets Green and Gold looked green and orange, and similar to the black and orange of the Hamilton team. At one point Bucko MacLeod player was threatened with an offside penalty for being in the wrong huddle. 3,500 fans turned out to see the new team play.

The second match in Toronto on Oct 7th saw the team perform poorly in suffering a 21-3 loss to Royal Copeland and the Argonauts before 7,500 fans in Varsity Stadium. The loss was so lopsided that Coach Brown decided to add himself to the playing roster. On Oct. 8th they revenged the first game loss by beating the Tigers 10-3 in Hamilton in what was largely a contest of the kickers, the stars for the Hornets being Al Garbarino and Doug Harvey with Surphlis at quarterback. They next faced the Ottawa Rough Riders in Montreal on October 14th, and with injuries mounting and a player shuttle being instituted to fill the gaps, the Hornets lost by a lopsided 25-8 score, failing to score a point in the second half. Poor lighting bedevilled both teams until Soggy Norton intercepted a pass to end any hope of a Hornet comeback, and leaving the team with a 1-3 record. An announced crowd of 3,500 left newspapermen wondering where most of those numbers were seated because they did not appear to be in the stands.

A mid-season exhibition match against McGill on Oct 16th resulted in a narrow 13-12 victory for the Hornets over the Redmen's roster mix of varsity and intermediate players.

On Oct 21 a loss to Ottawa by a crushing 28-5 margin ended whatever playoff hopes they may have entertained. Knowing they would be out-gunned by the Rough Riders, the Hornets introduced a whole new playbook, and managed to score on a sleeper play pass from Alf Harvey to Wally Stiebel. However fumbles, interceptions and a blocked kick did in the Montreal side in.

Despite more roster-tinkering the Hornets came up against the Argonauts for their final game of the season. This time, with the Boatmen bolstered by the controversial re-instatement of Joe Krol, they were steamrollered 31-6 at Molson Stadium. The only score the Hornets could manage – and the last in the team's short history was scored by Johnny Fripp after an Argo fumble. The second half was marked by many fist fights as first downs as the Toronto team continued to outmatch the Montreal team in all departments as the Hornets record fell to 1-5. The team ended the season with a substantially different lineup than they started with due to injuries and losses of players to other endeavours.

Coach Brown concluded the season by saying that the Hornets would be back, and in fact had developed plans for a new stadium to be built on Loyola College grounds in the west end of the city. At the same time coach Bill Hughes was attending the Ottawa-Toronto playoff games trying to arrange a share of the playoff pool. The IRFU pooled gate plan to keep the Montreal franchise alive didn't work out when Ottawa, the biggest revenue contributor pulled out of the agreement citing a loss of \$5,000 from their own regular season gate while the Hornets had collected \$8,000. The Rough Riders declared that they would rather see the Big Four disappear rather than continue with the unsatisfactory status quo. Without the revenue sharing agreement in place the Hornet franchise, which had lost \$4,000 of backers money in addition to the subsidy from the league, disappeared very quietly.

However they were not the only problem child of the league that year. Ottawa and Hamilton were struggling to support two teams (one each in the ORFU and IRFU) and Toronto was trying to make it with three clubs (Balmy Beach, Indians and Argonauts). When collegiate and intermediate leagues were added, it was clear that due to the immediate post war era was heading in too many directions. Sports starved as the population may have been, the financial resources and talent pool were not sufficient to maintain so many entities. As a result teams like the Hornets folded with little fanfare, and other IRFU cities looked to merge their existing franchises.

Oddly enough, the bleak season that Montreal had presented did not end their professional football hopes as some expected. The city was traditionally a member of the "Big Four" and maintaining a central Canadian league without the representation from the then largest city in the nation was a concern. In the coming years the IRFU would begin eclipse the ORFU. And in order to win that struggle they would need a team in Montreal again. In 1946 the call went out to Lew Hayman, well known and perhaps better trusted than the Bill Hughes led Hornet organization. He responded by creating the Montreal Alouettes in 1946.



Cartoon by John Collins, Nov 22 1945 (Montreal Gazette)