

CFL Contract Agreement, May 2022

During the negotiations between the Canadian Football League (CFL) and the Canadian Football Players' Association (CFPLA) for a new contract agreement, one of the divisive issues was the Canadian player content on the field. The previous agreement provided that 21 players on each team must be Canadians with at least seven Canadians on the field for each snap. In new agreement initially offered the players, the League called for the number of Canadian starters to be increased to eight, but with the proviso that one of the Canadian positions would be reserved for a 'naturalized Canadian', an American football player with five seasons of play in the League, or three seasons with the same team. In addition, the CFL wanted 'naturalized Canadians' to be eligible to play 49 percent of the snaps during a game.

Clearly, this initial CFL proposal was aimed at dramatically reducing the Canadian content of the teams fielded by the CFL under the guise of supposedly increasing the number of 'Canadian starters' by one. For this, and other reasons, the CFL players rejected the initial offer. (It was rumoured that in an earlier proposal, the CFL had had in contemplation the dropping of the Canadian starters content rule, and within the CFL management there has been a recurring talk of adopting four-down football.) The final agreement between the CFL and the CFPLA improved the financial offer to the players, and provided for eight Canadian starters, but one of whom may be an American player, a 'naturalized Canadian' as per the earlier definition.

What the American GMs and coaches don't realize is that converting the CFL into an inferior American football league will destroy the league. Canadians will not turn out to attend games in a second-rate American football league when a first-rate NFL product is readily available on TV or that they can travel to see. People, whether Canadians or Americans are not interested in second-rate products. Witness the fate of the XFL and the USFL in its second revival.

What Canadians turn out to see, and tune in to see on TV, is a CFL game that is distinctly Canadian, and they want to see Canadian players excel. Teams that have put an emphasis on developing Canadian players, and that have Canadians 'stars' who are hyped in the media, are the ones that pack the stadiums – witness the Saskatchewan Roughriders success over the years. Witness the large fan base of the former Ottawa Rough Riders when they had Canadians Russ Jackson at quarterback, Ronnie Stewart at running back, Whit Tucker at receiver, and other Canadian players in prominent positions, whom the local sport press hyped in their coverage. Granted, Canadian fans will flock to see a CFL team with an American superstar – a Warren Moon, a Doug Flutie, or a Bo Livi Mitchell -- but will not flock to see no-name American players. That is why the CFL is struggling to attract fans today: the lack of Canadian star content.

If the CFL wants to expand its fan base, the league needs to shift its focus to developing Canadian players, rather than focusing almost exclusively on recruiting American football players. American players have had the best of coaching from early childhood, and 'what you see is what you get'. Only occasionally does an American player emerge as a late blooming superstar, as was the case with Anthony Calvillo. However, a Canadian football player, who is an outstanding college athlete, is a diamond in the rough with an undeveloped high upside. All the Canadian players need is good coaching and time to develop. Outstanding Canadian college players have the potential to become CFL superstars -- a Russ Jackson – if given the chance to develop and play. They are the ones who will pack stadiums and draw high TV ratings. Fans will respond to 'local heroes' with whom they can identify. Moreover,

nationalism is a strong emotion that the CFL needs to tap into. Witness the success of the Canadian national soccer and hockey teams, both female and male. They are filling stadiums and arenas and their games attract a high TV viewership across Canada.

CFL Road to Success:

- 1) Hype 'Canadian rules football' as the Australians hype their 'Australian rules football'. Canadian football is distinctive from American football and that is part of its appeal to Canadian fans, and it is way to appeal to non-Canadians in being a product that is distinct from American rules football. Having a second-rate American football league in Canada will not appeal to global football fans who can tune into NFL games on TV.
- 2) Restore the former rule that one of the three quarterbacks on each team must be a Canadian, and work to develop the Canadian kid to have a chance to compete for and win the quarterback position.
- 3) Require the practice squad to have a high Canadian content and use it as a developmental tool for coaching up Canadian players, such as the earlier agreement that a team must have 21 Canadian players on its roster or require that a majority of the players on a team roster must be Canadians.
- 4) Revive the former rule that at least one coach on each team must be a Canadian to provide a career path for Canadian college coaches. American GMs and head coaches have numerous contacts in the U.S., and understandably will hire their assistant coaches from among individuals whom they know, unless they are required to conduct a search for a Canadian coach.
- 5) Where a Canadian and an import player are relatively equal in ability in competing for a position, favour the Canadian player who has more of an upside.
- 6) Put a focus on retaining Canadian players with whom your fans identify, rather than engaging in wholesale team re-buildings each year in a player exchange merry-go-round that confuses fans and destroys team loyalty among your fanbase.
- 7) On TV broadcasts hype the Canadian players and their university affiliation, rather than listing the number of CFL teams they have played for in the turnover of players in the CFL merry-go-round. NFL teams realize how important the university affiliation of players is to fans – even to fans who have not attended their local university -- and the NFL team broadcasters always mention what school an outstanding player comes from.

If the CFL is going to survive with a strong fan base, to fill stadiums and attain high TV ratings, it needs to be a 'Canadian' football league, with Canadian rules and a strong Canadian content on the field. Canadian want to cheer for Canadians, and ever more so 'local heroes' from their community.

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