

Cosentino, Frank. *A Passing Game: A History of the CFL*. Winnipeg: Bain & Cox, 1995. 381 pp. \$29.95.

From the outset, author Frank Cosentino identifies the underlying theme of his latest book, *A Passing Game: A History of the CFL*: the game of Canadian Football has become increasingly Americanized not just of late but since its beginnings almost a century ago. The early arrival of American players resulted in an increase in American coaches, American managers, American rules and, more recently, American teams. The symbolic cover of the book alludes to its contents. The background features American and Canadian flags, the American Stars and Stripes passing over the Canadian Maple Leaf. In the foreground, a Canadian-made Spalding football is shown in flight. This past year the Canadian Football League switched to American-made Wilson footballs. The signature on the Spalding ball is that of League Commissioner Larry Smith, the recipient of a healthy bonus for every American expansion team that joined the Canadian League.

The title, *A Passing Game*, refers to one element which distinguishes Canadian football from that played south of the border: the explosive, wide-open passing game that initially attracted American players and coaches to Canada. The ball on the cover is shown in flight, perhaps moving from north to south representing the shift in the League that Cosentino fears. Undoubtedly the title also refers to the passing popularity of the game in Canada, pushed aside by new and expanded entertainment choices and foreign popular culture.

Frank Cosentino is undoubtedly qualified to assemble a history of the CFL. He was a quarterback in the league for 10 years, capturing two Grey Cups during his playing days. Turning to coaching, he led his university teams to two Vanier Cup championships. He supplied the football-related entries to the Canadian Encyclopedia and wrote the chapter on football in *A Concise History of Sport in Canada*. He is currently a professor at York University

in the Department of Physical Education, Recreation and Athletics where he teaches Canadian sport history and football skills. This latest work is a follow-up to his master's thesis from the University of Alberta which was published as *The Grey Cup Years* and covers the league's history from 1909 to 1968.

The book delves into the history of the league in great detail and not one small anecdote is overlooked. During the course of its 381 pages, Cosentino uses 1,824 footnotes to inform the reader about minute details from rule changes to training camp salaries, from labor agreements to equalization payments. The research, largely comprised of newspaper accounts and minutes from league meetings, is exhaustive, and provides insight into backroom goings on, most of which have never been made public.

The book is divided into chapters of equal length, each corresponding to a two-year time period. The chronological history is quite dry and weighted down with the immensity of the research. This book is not a literary masterpiece—it is not meant to be—its function is to uncover and document the history of the league. It is not a book for a person seeking a good read—indeed, this book is probably only for the most ardent Canadian Football League fans. Casual readers will soon fatigue under the enormous research and the tiresome lists of rule changes or the chronicling of collective bargaining agreement negotiations. The value of this book is the comprehensive research documenting the history of the league. It is a complete text for anyone seeking answers to questions concerning the administration of the league during the past 25 years.

A Passing Game is not concerned with the actual playing of Canadian professional football; there are few tales concerning the likes of Jim Young, Johnny Rodgers and Ron Lancaster. Seldom is there more than a page devoted to seasonal play. More text is devoted to administrators like Harold Ballard than to players like Doug Flutie. The book does, however, provide several interesting stories which might be unknown to even the most knowledgeable fan. For example, the occasion when the Grey Cup was held ransom for Ottawa Rough Rider season tickets, or when the B.C. Lions were to be responsible for supplying shoes to their opponents after the team installed artificial turf in Empire Stadium.

Cosentino devotes more time to issues that have increased in prominence during the past 25 years, some of which are very close to his heart. The plight of the Canadian player is detailed during the course of the book. League rules dictate that American players are termed “imports” and Canadians “non-imports.” The author regards the labelling of Canadian players as ‘non-imports’ as a euphemism for ‘non-important.’ In particular, Cosentino devotes ample attention to the Canadian quarterbacking issue. This work begins in 1969, the year Canadian quarterback Russ Jackson retired and the Designated Import rule, a rule which discriminated against Canadian quarterbacks, was introduced. The author details the problems that Canadian quarterbacks have faced when trying to play their game in their own country. Cosentino was one of the last Canadian quarterbacks in the CFL to play consistently.

The author also examines the role that the federal government has played

during the past 25 turbulent years of the CFL. Canadian Prime Ministers Lester Pearson, John Diefenbaker, Pierre Trudeau and Joe Clark were supporters of the game and the league, each attending Grey Cups, presenting the trophy to the winning team and participating in a ceremonial kickoff now and again. Trudeau's government proposed a law which frightened the World Football League out of expansion into Canada during the 1970s. The interest and support from Trudeau's government is in stark contrast to the apathy of the present Prime Minister. When asked to predict the outcome of the 1994 Grey Cup Game, Prime Minister Chretien inquired as to which teams were playing. Cosentino seems disappointed that recent federal governments have been disinterested in the league, although he acknowledges that Minister Lloyd Axworthy, while in opposition, considered proposing a bill to halt American expansion.

Lastly, Cosentino is critical of the media and their perpetual negative reporting. The CFL is constantly portrayed as struggling, precariously perched on the edge of a cliff, waiting for that final blow to send it plunging to its demise. The "bush league" label some Canadians attach to the league is partially blamed on this negative coverage. Accentuating the negative seems to be engrained as part of the Canadian inferiority complex, and the league has constantly struggled to shed this poor image. Many Canadians feel that activities occurring south of the border are worthy of more attention than local events, and the CFL is not spared this attitude. Cosentino has plenty of ammunition demonstrating the negative media and strongly supports his case that the league is a national treasure, important to the elusive Canadian identity.

While truly an impressive encyclopedic work, the publication is not without its problems. The book may be difficult for the casual fan to digest as the author assumes his audience possesses an adequate knowledge of the designated import rule, gate equalization payments, and the like. He does not adequately explain some terms or the history surrounding them. He quickly glosses over important events like the strikes, or potential strikes of 1969, 1971 and 1974. The text at some points becomes mired in pages of rule changes, salaries and ownership changes. The writing is repetitive in some areas, and incomplete in others where it leaves one seeking answers to questions raised concerning negotiations, draft choices, player signings or trades. A hasty editing job excludes information in the later chapters—on two occasions, paragraphs and sentences end in mid-thought. Perhaps some of these errors are due to the length of the work and the effort required to pare it down to a manageable size. Considering the breadth and depth of this book, an index would be a valuable research tool; sadly this is left out. The strongest part of the book is the epilogue where Cosentino provides his opinions on what has happened and where the future may take the league.

One must salute Cosentino for the tremendous amount of research this book represents. It is a must for any keen fan of the game if only to serve as a reference book. There is a shortage of writing—academic or otherwise—

concerning the Canadian Football League, a problem that does not affect professional hockey in this country. Publishers are not interested in devoting time to projects like this, as the author found when attempting to publish the predecessor to this book. This book successfully adds to the study of the history of Canadian sport by exploring an under-represented area in a comprehensive manner.

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