The Canadian Football League: The Phoenix of Professional Sports Leagues

By Steve O’Brien. Published in 2204 by Lulu Press, Morrisville, NC (508 pp. $25.00 U.S.).

Reviewed by John Valentine, Grant MacEwan College.

In his 1981 book, Huddling Up: The Inside Story of the Canadian Football League, author Jeffrey Goodman posed the question why the CFL, if it is so important to Canadian sporting heritage, has rarely been written about (Goodman, 1981). There have been less than five dozen books published in the past six decades that explore Canadian Football, a figure approximately equal to the number of books published annually about hockey. The most recent examination of Canadian Football, “Canada’s second sport” according to sociologist Robert Stebbins (1987), is The Canadian Football League: The Phoenix of Professional Sports Leagues, by Steve O’Brien. The book, a product of his research conducted for a PhD. in history, is added to the very short list of perhaps a half-dozen academic works exploring football in Canada.

The true strength of the text is the diverse, extensive, and thorough research. O’Brien has left no stone unturned and has uncovered many obscure but valuable resources. The author references an exhaustive list of works that have been published on the CFL, and uses many newspaper accounts from across North America. With the latter he is able to provide views from the United States (something Canadians seem to be infatuated with), and this allows him to recount American expansion, CFL–NFL alignments, and American views from a unique perspective. In addition, O’Brien conducted 284 interviews with players, coaches, administrators, officials, and members of the media to provide original, unique material. The interviews provide great insight into a history that is under-explored. The extensive chapter endnotes and the bibliography are also very valuable parts of this lengthy work.

The title of the book refers to the fact that Canadian football at the highest level seems to always be teetering on the precipice of extinction, moving from crisis to crisis while periodically being forced to rise from the ashes. With teams folding, crooked owners, bankruptcies, and failed expansion, the entire league has been at risk of collapsing. The author does a very good job of demonstrating the abysmal state the league has been in, seemingly surviving in spite of itself, particularly during the previous two decades. O’Brien provides insight into what led to the downfall and near collapse of the League in the ‘80s and ‘90s. The book is suitable for historians, the general reader with an interest in Canadian football, and those with an interest in Canadian studies (particularly the latter part of the book). There are chapters that provide a very strong history, as well as others that explore the Canadian sporting culture, the Canadian inferiority complex, Americanization, and the sports media. It documents an unlikely league serving as a metaphor in a
country that has had too much to divide it and not enough to unite it, as well as a distinctly national sport in a culture demanding world-class sport-entertainment.

The book is divided into thirteen chapters comprising two very different sections. The first provides a comprehensive history of football in Canada whereas the second uses the CFL to analyze Canadian popular culture and age-old concerns about the omnipresent inferiority complex and Americanization. The historical first part of the book represents chronological or narrative sport history. Essentially, it is “one damn fact after another” presented in a chronological fashion. The impact of the depression, the World Wars, and even the development of television are not examined. That is not to dismiss its contribution to the field of Canadian sport history, however, as there is a scarcity of material examining the history of football in Canada and the development of the Canadian Football League. The author states that it is too great an undertaking to provide 140 years of history in 264 pages. In fact the first chapter of 44 pages covers 122 years of history. The author justifies his work arguing that the goal in this portion of the book is not to provide an extensive historical account but, instead, an adequate account in order to make his point that “certain themes have continually woven their way through the history of Canadian football albeit by manifesting themselves in different ways” (p. xv). The strength of the historical section of the text is the focus on the game since 1983, a time for which very little material exists.

O’Brien does a particularly good job exploring topics that previous works concerning Canadian Football have ignored. In exploring the role of the state in protecting Canadian culture, in particular the CFL, the author examines parliamentary debates and other primary sources. In addition the book looks at francophone culture in Quebec as a challenge for the League, how the development of American leagues influenced the CFL, and the general decline of the game in Canada. This is also the first book that comprehensively examines the failed CFL expansion into the United States.

In the second part of the book O’Brien ventures into unknown territory, using the CFL to touch on themes of Canadian Studies including the survival narrative, the Canadian inferiority complex, the Canadian sporting culture and media, and American influence, hegemony, and resistance. The CFL, which requires that each team have a certain number of Canadians, is the only professional league with all teams located in Canada. Yet Canadian players face discrimination and stacking, and, as is the case in many countries throughout the world, athletes would jump at a chance to make it in the United States. The latter part of the book is very important because O’Brien breaks new ground in exploring the CFL as a Canadian institution and examining the League in relation to the aforementioned themes. The author discusses how the league is under-appreciated because of the Canadian inferiority complex. Although he does not use the term, O’Brien explores American hegemony and devotes a great deal of material to covering American football leagues. He also successfully questions the idea of Canada as a sporting culture, offers solutions to some of the League’s problems, sheds light on some contentious issues, and raises questions for more research.

If the research is the strength of this book, it is the lack of a strong editor that detracts from the book in several places. The writing is at times choppy, some terms are undefined, and there are spelling and grammatical errors or inconsistencies. In a few cases the writing is not academic and in others the author writes in