



1956 Football "Saints"

It would be fair to say that midway through the last century Canadian football was scarcely played or even understood in Nova Scotia, holding tightly to English rugby as indigenous to our culture, the sport of choice between baseball and hockey seasons. There was a smattering of football activity among Canadian professionals who became Halifax-based servicemen during World War II that ended in 1945. Enough to plant seeds of interest among young Haligonians and a decade later a Saint Mary's University team began the harvest that would eventually establish the game in Atlantic Canada. Add another dimension to our sporting traditions.

The "Saints" of 1956, that completed an undefeated season in the fledgling Nova Scotia Junior Football League, swept the Maritimes and went on to become the first east coast team to engage in a national playoff, thereby blazing the trail for the Saint Mary's football greatness that would follow over the next forty years including a national title in 1973. It was also the first sports team made up exclusively of Saint Mary's students, in contrast to previous teams supplemented by non-students to bolster a 300 student enrollment. A collection of 30 young men who played both offensively and defensively with courage and passion, enough to win at regional levels but far short of national standards. Physically beaten and exhausted the

"Saints" became easy prey for Montreal's NDH Maple Leafs in the national semi-finals. But it didn't matter, the mission was an overwhelming success and the best for Saint Mary's was yet to come.

The 1957 edition of the student publication, *The Santamarian*, had this to say: "1956 will always be remembered as a season of glory - a season of thrills - a season made glorious, made thrilling, by enthusiastic student spirit, a superb team of 30 Saints and a soft spoken rookie coach by the name of Reverend Elmer MacGillivray, S. J." The same Elmer MacGillivray who had been a distinguished Saint Mary's student-athlete a decade earlier, majoring in hockey as a member of arguably the greatest junior line in local history with Hughie Campbell and the late Bert Hirschfeld with non-affiliated Saint Mary's Juniors of the late 1940's. Enrolled individually as a member of Saint Mary's Sport Hall of Fame, he enters for a second time as the conscience and inspiration of the first Maritime junior football champions in 1956.

Coach MacGillivray had a gallant cast of players led by quarterbacks George Leach and Ted O'Leary, along with Peter Fraser, Frank Gervais, Kevin MacPherson, Ron Barnes, Barry Devanney, Don Warner, Ed Burke, Tom St. Onge, Bob Barrett, Brian Flemming, John Mercier, Phil Josey, John Richard, Tom Murphy, Frank Cronin, Bill Power, Graham MacDonald, Greg McClare, Leroy Heffernan, Don MacKinnon, Dale Sinclair, Bob Bartlett, Jerry Power, Joe Power, Roy Keast, Bob Hartlen, and Roy Mann. It was not the greatest assembly of pure talent that would grace the hallowed halls of Saint Mary's; but none more greatly inflamed the spirit of the school or fired the imagination of the city.

The "Saints" went undefeated in provincial league play, defeating Shearwater 35-7 and 20-7, Cape Breton 23-20, 49-0, 20-7. They defeated St. Thomas University of New Brunswick 33-20 to win the Maritime championship; then fell 56-0 to the vastly more experienced Montreal NDG in the national semi final. But not before impressing Montreal team officials and fans with a gritty display of heart and determination against long odds; first Maritime team ever to vie for national honors. Sure signs of the football development that would come.

The character of the individual players was evident in all the games where penalties of any nature were rare. This strength of character manifested itself in the career paths chosen after leaving Saint Mary's. Their careers were forged largely as missionary priests, engineers, lawyers, social workers, senior public servants in provincial and federal governments, politicians and foreign-service officers. Many of the 1956 team members continue to support their Alma Mater by attending various fund-raising events, bequests to Saint Mary's and Alumni events. As an example, approximately 65 of the footballers and their spouses, mostly from the '56 "Saints", attended the special 2004 Homecoming weekend, then again in 2007 to join in celebrating Father George Leach's induction into Saint Mary's Sport Hall of Fame. Events largely organized by team member Frank Gervais who has missed very few football games over the last 50 years and was President of Saint Mary's Alumni Association in 1979.

"The Big Red Team" of 1956 can now properly take its place among the athletic greats of Saint Mary's in the Hall of Fame and Heritage Centre. Few indeed are more deserving.