

The cod's all gone, but the Atlantic region could sure use a football team

It's about time the CFL expanded to other parts of Canada—and they should start by giving a franchise to Halifax, a city that has the money and the fans



SCOTT LILWALL

Sports Commentary

Expanding a sports league is always a subject that should be approached delicately; if you're not careful, you're going to end up like the NHL, which started showing some serious stretch marks around the time that Nashville got a team. However, the CFL is showing every indication that it's time to make a modest expansion, and pushing to a nine- or ten-team league is the right call.

For all the courting of Toronto and southern Ontario (this year's Grey Cup being a prime example), the truth is that the area has a lukewarm interest in CFL football at best. Toss in the prospect of an NFL team taking root in The Big Smoke, and Canadian football doesn't seem to have a bright future in the City of Smog. In the rest of the provinces, however, the sport has hit its stride. Television revenues are up, as are ticket sales, and the Grey Cup is consistently one of the most-watched sportscast of the year. Given this, it might be time for the CFL to stop planting their seeds in barren soil and look out for these fresh fields.

The first city that the League has set its sights on is Halifax, and the idea is a sound one. Seeing as professional football in Canada currently

doesn't get any further east than Montreal, there's a huge untapped market in the Maritime provinces and Newfoundland. The area has a population of over 2 million people and, if the team was marketed as a regional product instead of tied to a specific city, it would have no trouble building a fan base and filling a modest stadium for home games. In 2005, an exhibition game between the Argos and the Ti-Cats quickly sold out the 11 000-seat stadium at Halifax's St Mary's University, showing that there was more than enough demand for pro football in the area.

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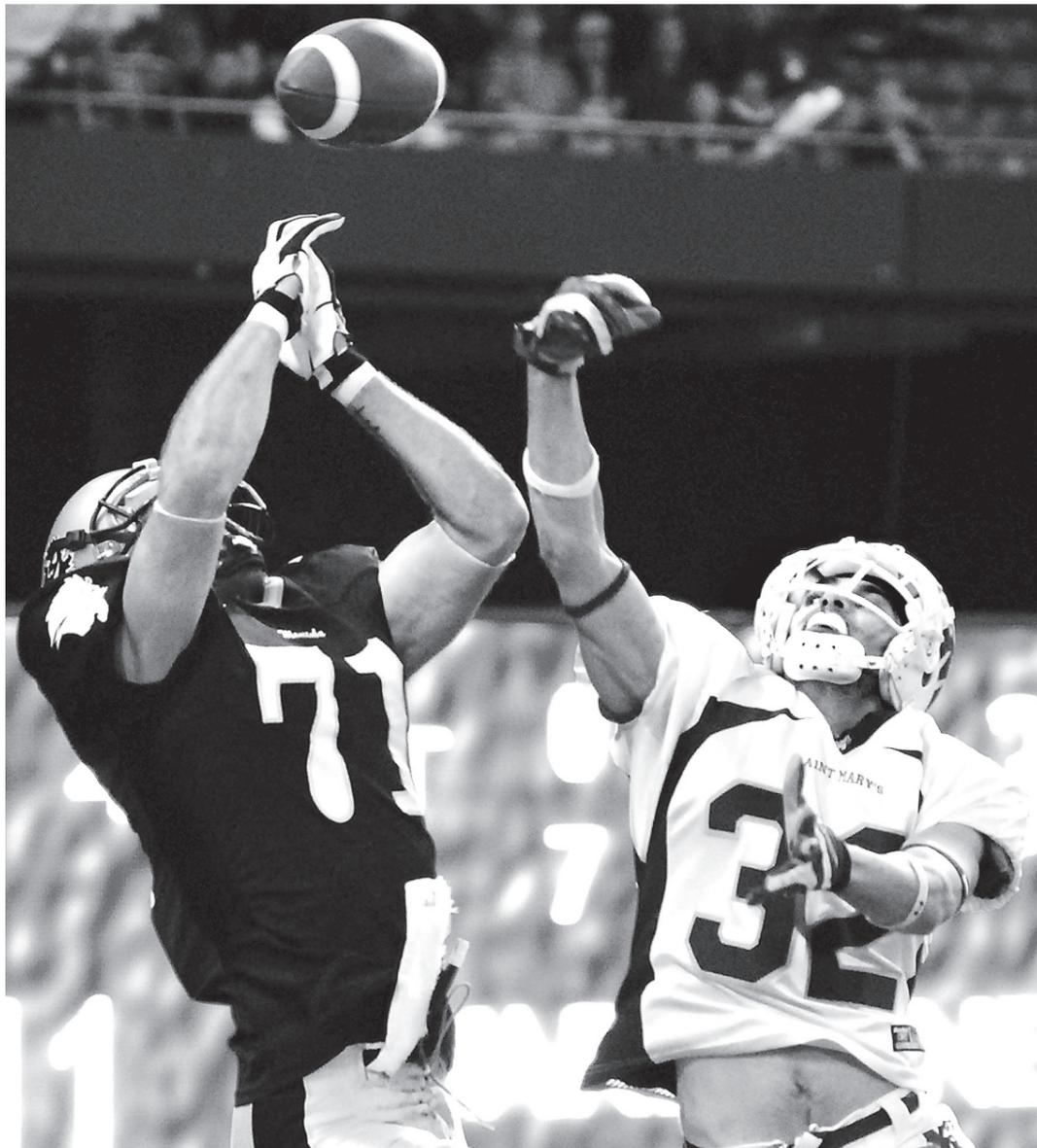
As well, much like Saskatchewan, the number of ex-pats from Atlantic Canada would all but ensure that away games draw in a significant number of fans.

The biggest sticking point for a Halifax CFL team has been that they have nowhere to plant their cleats. The city doesn't have a venue large

enough to pull in the kinds of crowds needed for a successful football team, and the city's recent unsuccessful bid for the Commonwealth Games means that there's no current plan to build one. However, with a bit of aggressive marketing, surely enough corporate sponsors exist in the area to finance such a project: Halifax itself is home to companies such as NewCap Broadcasting and CanJet, while Sobeys' and McCain Foods both have their headquarters in the Atlantic region. The money to build the stadium is there, and both the league and residents have shown excitement in the idea of a Halifax team.

Some argue, too, that the costs of travel for away games would choke the life out of an East Coast team. But really, flying out to Montreal and Toronto from Halifax is really no different than the BC Lions having to fork out airfare whenever they play the Stampeders or the Eskimos.

Once we've got Halifax in the fold, the CFL will finally be a true national league, with die-hard fans from coast to coast. Monitoring how a new Atlantic team does would also give the league an indication of where to look to next. While haphazard expansion will result in pitiful teams and half-empty stadiums, there are still cities in Canada that could easily support a new team. Quebec City has a solid football tradition and could provide the Alouettes with a real rival come Labour Day weekend. Plus it would give the city something to talk about besides the Nordiques.



TOM BARNETT, EXCALIBUR (CUP)

NOW THAT'S A TIP-OFF The Grey Cup wasn't the only important football game played in Toronto this weekend. On Saturday, Saint Mary's and Manitoba played the Vanier Cup, the CIS football championship. Manitoba (12-0) won 28-14.

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