

How the forward pass killed Joe Hall

By Craig Bowsby

Craig Bowsby is the author of several books, including "Empire of Ice, The Rise and Fall of the Pacific Coast Hockey Association, 1911-1926" and "1913: The Year They Invented the Future of Hockey." He lives in Vancouver B.C. To purchase copies, please contact the author at epic@intergate.ca



The Seattle Metropolitans of 1917, who helped change hockey by using the forward pass to win the Stanley Cup. Photo courtesy of David Eskenazi

Hockey Hall of Famer "Bad" Joe Hall died in Seattle during the Stanley Cup finals of 1919. But it wasn't just the Spanish flu that killed him.

Another culprit was the forward pass, a new tactic that was born 100 years ago.

On March 19, 1919 the Montreal Canadiens met the Seattle Metropolitans in Seattle for the Stanley Cup. Though no one realized it at the time, the Seattle Arena on Fifth Avenue was a stage prepared for disaster.

Hall was a relatively new member of the Canadiens, but at 37, he was at the end of his career. The three-time Stanley Cup winner was known mostly for his ability to hack and punch his opponents, yet he was a formidable defenseman who was widely respected as a tough competitor.

The 1919 Cup final was played on the West Coast despite a population reeling from one of the worst plagues it had ever known. Though at least 10 million had already died worldwide, by the fall of 1918, the worst was thought to be over and hockey arenas were opened again after being quarantined for about eight months. The populace was going stir crazy, and hockey was a welcome relief.

Everyone knew there was a chance they would die if they went out to a public event, but they couldn't help themselves. Even as hospitals and morgues overflowed, arenas blossomed with people wearing white surgical masks.

Players felt relatively safe. They were in the peak of health, robust and strong, and many had already fallen sick and recovered. What they didn't know was that the H1N1 influenza was not like other strains. It co-opted the immune systems of the most virile members of the population and used these systems against their hosts. The stronger the immune system, the worse the effect of the virus. The most vulnerable people were the best physical specimens on earth — hockey players.

The new practice of the forward pass elevated that danger.

When the Patrick Brothers of the Pacific Coast Hockey Association (PCHA) invented the forward pass in the fall of 1913, only in the center ice zone, the rest of the hockey world was still passing everything backward or laterally. Players passed with special combinations in a scientific approach. It didn't matter if it was slow, because it confused the enemy in an orderly fashion.

A player could still rush with the puck or shoot it as hard and fast as he wished. He just couldn't pass it forward, and if he did, it was considered unfair to opponents, who would have to chase the play like banshees.

The Patrick family controlled the PCHA and owned the clubs in Vancouver, Victoria and Seattle, so all their teams had to fully employ the new tactic. The National Hockey Association (NHA), meanwhile, recoiled from it.

"It is an absurd rule ... as the teams will discover as the season progresses," the Toronto Daily Star said on Dec. 8, 1913.

When the Victoria Aristocrats forced the Toronto Blueshirts to use the forward pass in one game of the 1914 Stanley Cup final, Toronto captain Jack Marshall noted how much the forward pass changed the pace of the game.

"If we had to play two games a week under these rules we would never finish the season," he said.



*Frank Foyston of the Seattle Metropolitans.
Photo circa 1917 courtesy of David Eskenazi*

Marshall was right. The new hockey tactic was akin to introducing gunpowder to a medieval battlefield. It was misunderstood, and reviled, but one thing was certain: it drained the energy fast of professional players. The "60 minuters," who played the whole game, now took themselves off for a few minutes – for the first time in their lives. They groped for ways to slow the game down to catch their breath, but there was little they could do.

The NHA resisted the forward pass for a long time. When Stanley Cup contests took place between the NHA and PCHA, they alternated their leagues' rules, using the forward pass every second game. Even when the

Vancouver Millionaires and Seattle Metropolitans won the Stanley Cup using the forward pass to its utmost, in 1915 and 1917, the NHA still refused to implement it. Seattle, the first American team to win the Stanley Cup, proved that Vancouver's victory had not been a fluke and ensured that the forward pass would take root more quickly.

It wasn't until the 1918-1919 season that the NHA broke down and applied the new rule to its league. This meant that the 1919 final would be played all out, with the NHL and PCHA both employing the forward pass, and doubling the required energy of the teams.

Seattle completely embraced the new idea. Still, hockey coaches of the time were like generals who had fought World War I without understanding how to use their own new machine guns, tanks and planes. Even after several years of use the coaches and players misunderstood the ramifications.

The pace was grueling and they needed more players as substitutes. Yet players refused to come off. In a sense, they would rather die than come off the ice.

And in 1919 that's exactly what happened.

The West, however, still used seven players in their rules while the East used six. But Montreal carried only nine men, and Seattle only eight. (Seattle's great star, Bernie Morris, was in a U.S. jail undergoing trial for desertion

from the American army.) The Mets could not add anyone to their team at that late date. They had only one substitute available under Western rules.

In the first game of the series Seattle used its superior speed to defeat Montreal, 8-4. In the second, Montreal battled back and by using their muscle, won, 6-2. In the third game Seattle won 6-1 and looked as though it had the upper hand. But in the fourth game, Montreal battled Seattle to a 0-0 draw in regulation.

Seattle only needed one overtime goal to win the Stanley Cup. But it was proving almost impossible as the Mets' strength drained. During the first overtime period, Cully Wilson of Seattle fainted and had to be carried off the ice.



Frank Foyston was trying to replace a broken skate, so Bobby Rowe, the only man available, replaced him, even though his swollen ankle could barely fit into his skate, and he had to churn up and down the ice on basically one foot. The period ended with no goals.

After a second scoreless overtime period, players collapsed onto the ice. Some could drag themselves to the bench, but most were unable to move. No one knew what to do. Finally, the game was called a draw, and another game was ordered, to replay the drawn result.

*Cully Wilson of the Seattle Metropolitans.
Photo circa 1917 courtesy of David Eskenazi*

It was at this point, during their one day off, that the virus probably spread.

When the fifth game started, players had not fully recovered. Dashing up the ice to receive a pass was one thing, but the back-checking required against the forward pass was exhausting. Seattle nevertheless played its game at top speed and built a 3-0 lead after two periods. The result seemed assured.

But that was the end of the Metropolitans' energy. Montreal used superior strength and body-checking to hammer the Mets who could no longer fight back. Hall in particular raced around, slamming into his opponents. Slowly the Canadiens came back, and with four minutes to go, they evened the score, 3-3.

Another overtime began, and the Mets gave everything they had in the first five minutes. But Montreal goaltender Georges Vezina stonewalled them and they were done. At the 15 minute mark, Wilson slumped against the boards, unable to move. Foyston could not go on for him, swooning on the bench. The players were helpless. This gave the Canadiens an unofficial power play. Jack McDonald swooped in and scored, tying the series.

Now the players could no longer play. They could barely speak. Many collapsed.

When officials realized players had the deadly virus, it was too late. Many Montreal players were rushed to the hospital, including Hall, Newsy Lalonde and Macdonald. Several Mets had also had the disease, and Roy Rickey almost died in the hospital.

On April 2, 1919, completely drained, Hall died. Lalonde and several others barely survived.

Despite Hall's death, professional hockey was slow to realize that it needed to make further substitutions. The forward pass revolutionized the game, but would remain an enigma for many years