

Roughriders' reign ends in snow

By DARRELL DAVIS
L-P Sports Writer

EDMONTON — The Saskatchewan Roughriders, Grey Cup winners 50 weeks ago, ended their unpredictable championship defence on a snow-whipped field against the Edmonton Eskimos on Sunday.

Led by quarterback Tracy Ham, who threw for three touchdowns and scampered for 62 yards, the Eskimos defeated the Roughriders 43-27 in the Western Division semifinal before 23,006 spectators at windy, snowy and cold Commonwealth Stadium. Edmonton visits Calgary on Sunday to play the Stampeders in the Western final.

"We shot ourselves in the foot when we didn't get second place," said Roughriders guard Roger Aldag. "Our offence, with our receivers, on our turf, that would have been a great advantage as opposed to playing a scrambling Tracy Ham in this weather."

Saskatchewan lost 35-28 to the last-place B.C. Lions in the season finale and finished in third place with a 9-9 record, one game behind the second-place Eskimos. Saskatchewan's final five losses came on the road, where it compiled a 2-7 record.

Last season the Riders won three playoff games on the road to win the Grey Cup.

"We found out how hard it is to defend a Grey Cup championship," said Roughriders head coach John Gregory. "Everybody turns it up a notch when they played us."

"Why doesn't any team repeat? It's easy to say, tough to do. But I thought our players gave the greatest effort and I'm proud of them for lots of reasons. As you go through the good times and the bad times, not many teams are able to show the class this team showed."

One more victory during the regular season would have given the Roughriders second place and allowed them to play host to the Eskimos, who lost five of their last six games to finish 10-8. Saskatchewan won seven of nine home games this season.

"Shudda, cudda, wudda, if," said Roughriders defensive end Bobby Jurasin. "If we cudda stopped the run we wudda won."

"We learned that if we don't play well for one game in the playoffs, it's over. One series can make a difference. The one series, when I think about it, was the one with all the penalties. That did it."

Jurasin was recalling a penalty-filled Eskimos drive late in the first quarter. Both teams had already scored touchdowns — Eskimos linebacker Jeff Braswell opened the scoring by intercepting Kent Austin's first pass and running 23 yards to the end zone and Saskatchewan replied two minutes later with a 48-yard pass from Austin to Jeff Fairholm.

Dave Ridgway had kicked his first of two field goals to give the Roughriders a 10-7

WHAT'S IN A GAME?

SCORE: Edmonton 43, Saskatchewan 27.

CONSEQUENCES: Eskimos advance to Western final; Riders eliminated.

NEXT WESTERN PLAYOFF GAME: Sunday in Calgary between the Stampeders and Eskimos.

WEATHER WARNING: Snow fell virtually the whole game, which was played in a -9 C chill with winds gusting to 32 km-h.

THEY SAW A SEE-SAW BATTLE: A crowd of 23,006 watched the lead change six times, but once the Eskimos were up 28-24 in the third quarter they never relinquished their advantage.

MILSON THE MUCKER: Roughriders fullback Milson Jones carried 12 times for 114 yards and two touchdowns.

DESTINY'S DARLING: Brian Walling, playing tailback for the Eskimos despite wearing a brace on an injured knee, carried 10 times for 87 yards and caught five passes for 74 yards. Last season Walling was with the Riders and ran 50 yards for a late touchdown to defeat the Stampeders in the Western semifinal.

BLOWING IT: Officials called 13 penalties for 100 yards against Edmonton and 15 for 121 yards against Saskatchewan.

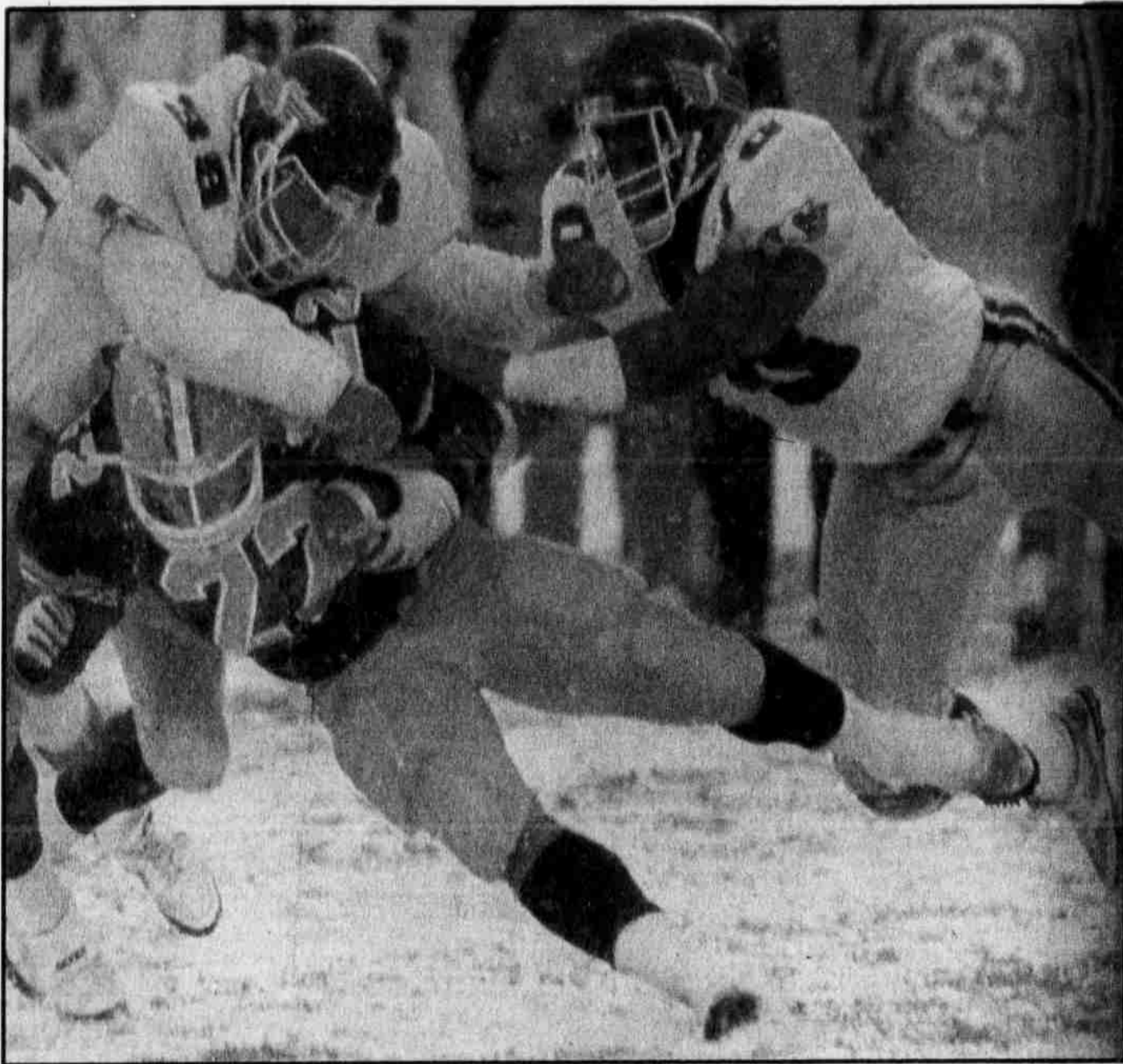
lead, but Edmonton used five plays and three Saskatchewan penalties before Michael Soles scored a 10-yard touchdown on a pass from Ham.

"Crappy calls," said Austin, who left the game late with a minor right leg injury. "You guys saw it. Something's got to be done about the officiating."

Austin was most upset about two non-calls, one in the first quarter and one in the second quarter.

"That pass to (Roughriders wide receiver Don) Narcisse in the end zone," said Austin. "It landed in bounds. He gets tackled and the ref says it's uncatchable. That's ridiculous! Lucius (Floyd, Roughriders tailback) gets tackled going for a pass. (Eskimos middle linebacker) Danny Bass makes an interception and nothing's called. Edmonton didn't do anything to stop us. They weren't the ones who stopped us."

Milson Jones' 10-yard touchdown run early in the second quarter revived Saskatchewan's lead, but Edmonton took a 21-17 lead at halftime because the Roughriders tried an ill-advised return of a missed field goal. Trailing 17-14 with two minutes remain-



CP Laserphoto

Blake Marshall bulls his way through Riders' Dan Rashovich (39) and Vince Goldsmith

ing in the half, Edmonton's Ray Macoritti missed a 36-yard field goal attempt. Saskatchewan's Albert Brown, rather than concede a single, returned the kick to Saskatchewan's one-yard line. Two plays later the Roughriders had to punt, setting up a 34-yard TD pass from Ham to Craig Ellis.

"The coaches told us to bring it out," said Brown. "I don't know why. I don't question the coaches' decisions."

Gregory admitted that the Roughriders returners had been instructed to return the

ball out of the end zone in the hope of breaking a long return.

Saskatchewan rallied again with a 40-yard touchdown run by Jones to take a 24-21 lead. But two short scoring runs by Eskimos fullback Blake Marshall gave Edmonton a 35-27 lead after three quarters. Ellis, on a 14-yard pass from Ham, scored the final major late in the fourth quarter.

"We can't be a roller coaster," said Jones, who pulled his left hamstring and missed most of the fourth quarter. "That's

been our downfall. Even today we were too hot and cold. We never established anything."

"This isn't a slap in the face for us. It proved that Commonwealth Stadium is the toughest place to play. Why didn't we play at home? That's one of our inconsistencies."

"This was a great learning year for showing us what we have to accomplish. I'm not pointing fingers at anybody, but it showed us that it's a lot harder to be a winner than a loser."

Eskimos overcome long list of problems



CP Laserphoto

Danny Bass (30), Keith Gooch and Enis Jackson celebrate a job well done

By DARRELL DAVIS
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EDMONTON — They ain't dead yet.

Those Edmonton Eskimos, the CFL team with the much-maligned quarterback, the coach with his neck in the noose, the outside linebacker with the price on his head, the border in the dressing room dividing the black players from the white players, the team that wasn't supposed to recover from its problems, has advanced to Sunday's Western Division final against the Calgary Stampeders.

"We needed a little light to get rid of some of the things that were hanging around," Eskimos head coach Joe Faragalli said after his team defeated the Saskatchewan Roughriders 43-27 in the Western Division final at Commonwealth Stadium on Sunday.

Faragalli's future was apparently on the line because the Eskimos had lost five of their last six games.

"If we hadn't won I'd have gone ice fishing," said Faragalli.

Eskimos quarterback Tracy Ham, who was recovering from toe and ankle injuries, had been chastised for the team's performance. Ham also stopped talking to the media in the wake of stories stating that the Eskimos were aswirl with racial tensions. Most players denied the stories.

"You won't see our guys sipping wine tonight," said Ham. "We'll be talking about playing Calgary."

Linebacker Jeff Braswell, whose on-field taunting cheap shots made him the league's most despised player, scored the game's first touchdown. On Saskatchewan's first possession, Roughriders quarterback Kent Austin threw a quick-hit to tailback Lucius Floyd.

Braswell dropped into coverage, intercepted the pass and ran 23 yards for a touchdown.

"Last time they came here, beat us and left," said Braswell. "It was a long winter."

"I woke up (Sunday), saw the snow and thought this would be a long winter if we didn't win. We owed them one."

Last year the Roughriders upset the Eskimos 32-21 in the Western final. Saskatchewan later defeated the Hamilton Tiger-Cats 43-40 in the Grey Cup.

"The guy who turned the game the whole time was Tracy Ham," said Roughriders head coach John Gregory. "He scrambled, he did all kinds of things that he shouldn't have been able to do with that sore toe. He sure played a good football game."

Eskimos tailback Brian Walling, who played for the Roughriders during last year's playoffs, also had a lot to do with Edmonton's victory. Walling had 87 rushing yards and 74 receiving yards. And middle linebacker Dan Bass had 11 tackles, one knockdown and one interception.

"It sometimes takes one little play to win in the playoffs," said Walling. "I want to give them that one little play. Although I didn't score, I like to think I helped out."

The Gregorian rant drones on and on and . . .

The title defence is over, and if you're not happy about that, you should be.

It's not a dancing-in-the-streets kind of happiness, like the one you experienced 12 months ago when the Saskatchewan Roughriders won the Grey Cup and whipped the entire province into a frenzy. But in a subtle, more subdued form, it is happiness nevertheless.

Losing the Western semifinal to the Edmonton Eskimos on a cold and snowy November afternoon was simply the best thing that could have happened to the Roughriders. They have been relieved of a terrible burden. A tremendous weight has been lifted from their shoulders.

In all of professional sport there is no more difficult a task than defending a championship, and when you look back at the 1990 CFL season from a Saskatchewan perspective, the only logical conclusion you can draw is that the crown was too heavy for the heads that wore it.

That goes for the players, the coaches, and the general manager. The crown was not a good fit. It slipped down over their



Nick Miliokas

eyes, and obscured their vision. It blinded them to the things that should have been done but weren't.

Since last November, they've been a team in suspended animation, and there's nothing like a season-ending loss to snap them out of it. That's no consolation now, but if they use it as a point of departure, it should give them a head start on 1991.

Winning the Grey Cup left them with the feeling that things were just fine the way they were. It distorted reality. It numbed the senses. It discouraged them from taking any meaningful action. That shouldn't be a problem anymore.

It's time for the general manager to get to work, and I would suggest that Al Ford

begin by inviting head coach John Gregory to take a metaphorical walk to the woodshed. The man deserves a spanking.

Gregory's childish behavior on the sidelines at Commonwealth Stadium was an embarrassment to the organization. He ranted and raved at the officials. He let his emotions get the best of him. He did his team a disservice.

Even if he's convinced that the officials are making incorrect decisions, a coach can't let himself get caught up in that stuff, as Gregory often does. He has no control over the officiating. He should forget about it and concentrate on the game.

You can go crazy wondering why Albert Brown was instructed to return a missed field goal from 15 yards deep in his end zone. He was tackled at the one and, instead of giving up a single, the Riders wound up surrendering a touchdown.

You can grow old trying to figure out why the Riders gambled on third down from the Edmonton 32 when they needed more than a yard and their most effective running back, Milson Jones, was on the

bench with a pulled hamstring.

They were stopped short — it wasn't even close — and the opportunity to cut the deficit to six points with a field goal (albeit against the wind, on uncertain footing) was lost.

Gregory has less time to make those decisions than we have to second-guess them, but that's what he's paid to do and, at times like this, you have to wonder if he's the man you want calling the shots when the game is on the line.

If Ford chooses to retain the present staff, he should at the very least impress upon his coaches the importance of upgrading their performance in two critical areas — strategy and motivation.

Motivation was a problem, and the coaches have to take some responsibility for that. This team was up and down all season, and the coaches were unable to stop the roller coaster. They can't afford to let it happen again in '91.

Strategy was also a problem, admittedly to a lesser extent. I have no quarrel with the offence, but that defence is another

story. Enough of this gap-control pass rush, dropping the linebackers, soft zone coverages in the secondary. They have to get back to playing an aggressive, attacking style.

If they don't have linemen who can rush, linebackers who can blitz, and backs who can cover one-on-one, they should go out and get them. Which brings us to the most important point of all — recruiting. Maybe they should do some.

The homegrown talent is fine. Ford has drafted and signed and traded for young Canadians who seem capable of stepping in when the aging veterans retire.

The import talent, however, is barely adequate. It must be improved, especially on defence, where 10 of the 12 starters are imports. Fred Glick, the former CFL coach, was recently hired as U.S. scout. That's a good place to start.

There's nothing like winning a championship, but sometimes a championship gets in the way. This is no longer a problem for the Saskatchewan Roughriders, and we should all be happy about that.