

The Suburban

QUEBEC'S LARGEST ENGLISH WEEKLY NEWSPAPER

ESTABLISHED 1963 • VOL. LI, NO. L

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Jean Béliveau: The greatness of grace and grit

"Your ship has weathered every rack, the prize you sought was won..."
 ~ Walt Whitman, "O Captain, My Captain"

How many words are always written when greatness passes. Yet they are all necessary, as much for the living to continue, as to honor the departed. Because it becomes personal. And as much as any man, Jean Béliveau was personal to all of us.

The memories flood back of watching his fluidity and grace as young children sitting next to our parents. Following his career of greatness that was nearly unparalleled, his achievements were almost markers of our lives. For almost two decades, Hockey Night in Canada was Hockey Night with Béliveau as much as anything else.

The effortless elegance of his skills on the ice almost belied the momentous athletic abilities that set so many records. Yet sometimes it looked as if he never worked up a sweat nor had a hair out of place. His talents seemed touched with grace as much as with grit.

But grit there was. He had heart problems, but it was a time when reporters did not prey on weakness. Béliveau astounded his doctors with his feats, but once said he had "a Volkswagen heart in the body of a Cadillac."

But, to continue his metaphor, he had a soul of a Rolls-Royce. It was his grace and elegance that imprinted Jean Béliveau in our consciousness and consciences after his playing days ended. Perhaps that was his even greater legacy. For Jean Béliveau was certainly not everyman, but he respected everyone. And he dared to care. That is the true measure of greatness. And that is why he embodied the best of what we can all be.

From visiting the sick, to taking time to talk to people on the street, to answering every letter and call he received, Jean Béliveau didn't just talk about "giving back," he made it his life's vocation. Tens of thousands got through some of the darkest periods in their lives because he not only took the time for them, but made them feel that at those moments they were the most important people in the world.

It takes a special humanity to be the way he was. A humanity that comes from being comfortable in one's own skin. From measuring life by the quality of the journey not the final destination. This special son of an Acadian labourer knew all about quality.

From the beginning "Le gros Bill" was something special. Many do not know that he turned down the Montreal Canadiens for three seasons at the start of his career because he felt a loyalty to the fans of the Quebec Aces since Quebec had just finished building its new arena and he felt he should be there to strengthen the franchise. And when Prime Minister Chrétien offered him the position of Governor-General, one of the reasons he turned it down was that he felt it was more important to help his widowed daughter with her children than to be called 'His Excellency.'

But then he was "His Excellency" to us already. Many people would only address him as "Monsieur" and never by his first name as they did with other players. Jean Béliveau was a superstar when stardom was measured by character not cash. They were the days before the mega-salaries but they were the days of mega-spirits. And we all knew it.

Jean Béliveau came from us and was always a part of us. He never set himself apart. He taught us that it was more than just about the winning. It was about the striving. And when parents talk about sports building character, they need go no further than Jean Béliveau as a model for their children.

His life embodied the broader, higher yearnings of the human endeavour, the best part of us that believes in co-operation as much as competition. The part of us that values compassion more than contempt. Sport does not take place in a vacuum. It is part of our everyday fabric. It is informed by events around us. Jean Béliveau taught us that knowing the price of something is meaningless if we don't know its value as well.

As his body is laid to its rest, his spirit lives on in us all. Yet, a part of our youth has passed. A piece of each of us has died. A man of great character is no more. We are all poorer today. Jean Béliveau, "Your ship has weathered every rack, the prize you sought was won," Rest in peace...



LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Right to ride: When even public transit is too expensive

Last week, the STM announced hikes in its fare structure. Since 2004, the single ride has been increased by 20% and the regular monthly pass by 40%. We doubt that the average rider's income has increased that much over the same period of time. In fact, in Montreal, there are today over 400,000 of people living under the poverty line. That's why we are against any hike, PERIOD. For instance, a single person on welfare is getting \$610 and is not eligible for a reduced fare!

This high cost of public transportation makes it difficult for the ones who most need public transport to use it, the ones for whom it's their only means of transport. Not being able to afford a bus ticket presents a tremendous obstacle to look for a job outside of one's immediate neighbourhood for people on welfare. For people living in poverty, it could even be difficult to go to a food bank, hard to get involved in the community or to volunteer for a community organization where people could gain work experience, impossible to get around for basic services and medical appointments, not to mention to attend free cultural activities. People can't take advantage of food bargains in the circulars from grocery stores. When you can't afford a bus ride, you're stuck!

When you cannot visit a relative or a friend because you can't afford the bus ride, but your dignity prevents you to ask them to pay for it, they may just stop calling to invite you.

Why is it that when we see increase in fares and reduction in services every year, STM executives receive big salary increases (9.4% since 2012)? Obviously, the budget priorities make no sense at STM: why it takes so much time to accommodate the needs of people for

disabilities? Why hi-tech projects have priority above a social fare for people with a low income?

As members of Project Genesis, we decided to be part of the campaign called 'Right to Ride'. This campaign is an initiative of different Montreal non-profit organizations and it is gaining momentum. One of the first groups that came with the idea of a social fare is Projet PAL, a Verdun-based group working with people who had a lot of trouble keeping much needed doctors' appointments because of the cost of the bus ride.

We are not dreaming in Technicolor because such places where transit is cheaper or even free for certain categories of people do exist... such as Stephen Harper's riding of Calgary where there is a low-income pass. Closer to us, municipalities from the South Shore of Montreal offer free transportation for all, some such as Longueuil offers free transportation for seniors.

If you want to join the collective movement for an affordable public transit, please visit the FB page: <https://fr-fr.facebook.com/pages/Mouvement-collectif-pour-un-transport-public-abordable/354248271356786>

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The absurdity of our government's priorities

Now let me get this straight, the province and city of Montreal deem it necessary to implement severe cuts to health care, education, and other services that contribute to the well-

See LETTERS, next page