

OPINION

# No one scored with such flair and drama as Montreal Canadiens superstar Guy Lafleur



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A fan pays their respects at a statue honouring Guy Lafleur in front of the Bell Centre in Montreal, on April 22. RYAN REMIORZ/THE CANADIAN PRESS

It is an iconic hockey image now lost to a changed game.

The Montreal Canadiens' No. 10, Guy Lafleur, is flying up the wing, soars over the blueline and blasts a slapshot that sends the goaltender sprawling, the goal light flashing and the Montreal Forum crowd exploding.

Hockey as it was for decades played in the dreams of small players who still couldn't tie their own skates.

There were others who could do this – Bobby Hull and Frank Mahovlich come to mind – but such a play is so rare today as to be considered extinct.

Perhaps it is because goaltenders today are twice the size of goalies in the sixties and seventies. Perhaps it is because defenders are quick enough to keep up. Perhaps it has to do with coaching philosophy that has shifted from “Let the goalie see the puck” to “Block the shot with your teeth if you have to.”

No matter. It's gone. And now, too, is Guy Lafleur, dead at 70.

”GUY!

GUY!

GUY!”

No one scored with such flair and drama as the one some called ‘Flower,’ others ‘Le Demon Blond.’ His hair was like the tail of a rocket launch, screaming speed even in the still photographs of the day.

He was the superstar who led the Montreal Canadiens to five Stanley Cups, four of them in a row in the late 1970s. He won three straight scoring titles and back-to-back Hart Trophies as the NHL's most valuable player. In 1977, he was awarded the Conn Smythe Trophy as the MVP of the playoffs.

Hall of Famer Guy Lafleur, dead at 70, brought flair to the Canadiens in team's glory years

Guy Lafleur made hockey appear iconic in a way no one had before

He, Gordie Howe and Mario Lemieux are the only three “retired” players ever named to the Hockey Hall of Fame – and then return to play again for a while longer.

Ken Dryden was on the radio Friday morning saying his long-time teammate was “a natural” on the ice, but anything but a natural off the ice.

“The Flower is a very strange person,” Lafleur’s roommate Steve Shutt told me back in 1978. “He’s the farthest thing from an athlete that you’d ever want to see off the ice.”

True enough. Following a morning skate, we went to lunch where Lafleur chain-smoked cigarettes, drank beer – Molson’s of course – played that night, smoked between periods and was, as usual, dominant.

It was no surprise to those who knew him well that there would be health problems later in life. “He’s so hyper,” Shutt said those many years ago. “He winds himself up like a coil.”

Lafleur put himself under absurd stress – each preseason writing down what he expected accomplish during the season and leaving his prediction in a sealed envelope with his agent – was loathe to work out in summer and regularly skipped optional practices.

For a while, he tried switching to a pipe but soon returned to cigarette after cigarette. Three years ago he had quadruple bypass heart surgery and soon after more surgery for lung cancer. He seemed clear for a year but then, in the fall of 2020, the lung cancer returned.

His death still comes as a tremendous shock to the Quebec fans who so worshipped No. 10, coming but a week after the passing of Mike Bossy, another francophone hockey superstar.

Canadiens president Geoff Molson released a statement Friday that expressed deep sadness and spoke of how such a star “always remained simple, accessible.”

“You didn’t need to see Guy Lafleur’s name and number on his sweater when ‘The Flower’ had the puck on his stick,” added NHL commissioner Gary Bettman.

Like Wayne Gretzky in later years, little Guy Lafleur was a recognized star before he became a teen. In 1962, he was but 11 years old when he scored seven goals in a single game at the prestigious Quebec Peewee Invitational.

The native of Thurso, Que., a mill town on the Ottawa River downstream from Ottawa was so obsessed with hockey his parents would find him asleep, already fully dressed for morning practice. He had dreamed that night, as he

did every night, that he would grow up and one day play with his idol, Jean Béliveau. Like Béliveau, he wore No. 4. When he went off to Quebec City to play junior hockey, he kept a poster of Béliveau by his locker.

Lafleur led the Quebec Remparts to the Memorial Cup in 1971, scoring an unbelievable 130 goals in his final season of junior hockey. He knew that, ironically, his great success would likely keep him from ever playing with Béliveau, as he was obviously going to be drafted at or near the top. In those days, the team with the worst record got to pick first, meaning he might be wearing No. 4 with the California Golden Seals, a team that had sunk to the bottom and no longer exists.

But Montreal general manager Sam Pollock had a plan. He engineered a trade that brought the Golden Seals' first pick of the 1971 draft to the Canadiens, and he also sent a veteran player to the Los Angeles Kings, who were the only threat to finish with a worse record than the Golden Seals. The strategy worked: the Golden Seals finished last – meaning Montreal could claim the prize from Thurso.

Lafleur would never, however, play with his idol, as Jean Béliveau chose to retire that summer after winning yet one more Stanley Cup. Béliveau would stay on with the Canadiens in an executive position, meaning the two would meet often and quickly formed a strong father-son relationship.

“He came to me and asked me what I thought about him taking my number,” Beliveau told me 44 years ago. “If you want it, take it,’ I told him. ‘But don’t you think you already have enough on you? Why don’t you pick another number and make it famous yourself?’ ”

Soon enough, No. 10 was not only the most exciting new jersey on the Montreal Canadiens roster, but it was itself a product, No. 10 selling everything from soap-on-a-rope to cologne.

Success, however, did not come as quickly as fans expected and Lafleur wanted. Many Montreal fans thought Pollock should have picked another junior sensation, Marcel Dionne, after Dionne had outperformed Lafleur that first season.

It was also being said about the league that Lafleur was afraid to battle for himself. He became reclusive and his production slipped. He took to writing melancholy poetry. And he often found himself crying on the big bleu-blanc-

rouge Canadiens couch in Béliveau's office. Fans were disappointed. The Montreal media wanted to know what was wrong with him.

In the spring of 1974, Béliveau stopped being a sympathetic ear and challenged the young Lafleur. He castigated him for not working hard enough. Hearing such words from his idol changed Lafleur overnight. "I'll show the bastards," he told Béliveau.

He threw away the helmet that had prevented his then flowing locks from forming that iconic breakaway image. And he quickly became Guy Lafleur, perhaps the greatest player in the world in the last few years of the 1970s, all the while remaining a kind and gentle soul, gracious to his fans and beloved by his teammates.

The 1980s were not as glorious. He barely escaped serious injury in a car crash. He stubbornly refused to change his flamboyant, all-attack style of play to a more defensive style demanded by his former linemate and now coach, Jacques Lemaire. He asked for a trade, the team refused, so he retired at the beginning of the 1984-85 season having scored but three goals in 19 games. He was only 33.

Four years later, Lafleur was called to the Hockey Hall of Fame. No surprise – but a great one would shortly follow, as he signed with the New York Rangers, playing a season there before finishing off his career with two seasons with the Nordiques in his beloved Quebec City. He retired one final time in 1991. He and his wife, Lise, decided to open a restaurant.

In total, he played 1,126 games and scored 560 goals and 793 assists for a total of 1,353 points.

The flowing mane of the iconic years largely vanished, but never the collective memory.

"GUY!

GUY!

GUY!"

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