

Corey to enter Quebec Sports Hall of Fame

BY BRENDA BRANSWELL, THE GAZETTE NOVEMBER 15, 2012 8:18 AM



"I didn't see where the club's future would be if there wasn't the new building," says former Canadiens president Ronald Corey, who will be inducted into the Quebec Sports Hall of Fame on Monday.

Photograph by: Allen McInnis, The Gazette



MONTREAL — When the Canadiens were still playing at the Forum, Ronald Corey looked to the future, studied revenue figures and ultimately came to a conclusion — the club really didn't have a choice but to move.

Players' salaries had risen and the options for boosting revenue at the popular old venue were limited, Corey said in an interview this week.

He announced in 1991 that Molson Cos. Ltd. planned to build a new arena near Windsor Station.

Five years and three public hearings later, the Molson (now Bell) Centre opened to glowing reviews

from Habs players and grumbling from some fans about its congested corridors.

“It was long,” the former Canadiens president said of the process.

“I didn’t see where the club’s future would be if there wasn’t the new building.”

Corey’s role as the big advocate for building the 21,273-seat arena downtown is one of his achievements noted by the [Quebec Sports Hall of Fame](#), which will honour him in Montreal on Monday.

Corey will be inducted in the “builder” category at the ceremony, largely in recognition of his tenure as Canadiens president from 1982 to 1999.

Other sports figures being honoured include retired Los Angeles Kings forward Luc Robitaille and boxer Eric Lucas.

Canadiens games at the Bell Centre have sold out for years and an international trade publication recently ranked the building third among the world’s top-20 arenas with 15,001 to 30,000 seats. It was based on concert and event grosses over the past year.

The building created a kind of new enthusiasm, Corey said, because other people could now get tickets.

The Canadiens’ Stanley Cup victories — in 1986 and 1993 — and the Bell Centre are Corey’s two very important legacies, said Pierre Boivin, who succeeded him as team president.

“He was definitely one of the initial visionaries in seeing the need for these new modern buildings,” Boivin said.

The Bell Centre’s location is one of, if not the best in the league, said Boivin, now president and CEO of Claridge Inc., a privately owned equity firm. The arena sits on top of a métro station and is situated where the west-end commuter train comes in. It’s also connected to the underground city and is within walking distance to most business towers in the downtown core, Boivin said.

Corey is proud of the Stanley Cup victories and said credit must be given to all the hockey staff, including Serge Savard, who was general manager.

Corey also recalled the closing of the Forum as a magical evening and an event everyone talks to him about.

The Quebec Sports Hall of Fame also noted Corey’s role in creating the Canadiens’ alumni association.

“That was one of the things that means the most to me because I knew how much Maurice Richard wanted that — Jean Béliveau, Dickie Moore, all those people,” said Corey, who also had a small room built for the retired players at the Forum.

“I think it brought the (former) players closer together,” said Moore, a Canadiens’ Hall of Famer. “We’d meet after the games and during the games, and we’d always chat

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“It’s a wonderful feeling to be thought of after your career.”

Corey faced his share of criticism in the fall of 1995 when he fired GM Savard, head coach Jacques Demers and assistant GM André Boudrias, and named former Canadiens players Réjean Houle as GM and Mario Tremblay as coach, neither of whom had experience in their new respective roles.

The firings came only five games into the season. Two months later, Houle traded Patrick Roy to the Colorado Avalanche after the goalie told Corey he had played his last game with the Habs. Roy was angry that Tremblay waited until after he had surrendered nine goals before pulling him from a game against the Detroit Red Wings.

For decisions like those, Corey said he assumes full responsibility.

“I let people evaluate that,” he said. “It’s done.”

Now retired and about to turn 74, Corey still sits on the boards of a few companies. Family is what is most important for him, said Corey, who has two children and four grandchildren he often looks after.

A manager almost his entire life, Corey said he always tried to be fair and “close to my people — to be close to the floor, to know what was happening and make decisions.”

After Corey stepped down as Canadiens president, employees thanked him for his service in a newspaper ad. As he recounted the story, Corey put his palm to his forehead still looking surprised and touched by the gesture.

“I will never forget that,” he said.

“I only have good memories of the 17-1/2 years that I was there,” Corey said.

“We had very good moments, very difficult moments, but (it’s) part of the game.”

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