

Aurora Sports Hall of Fame's Class of 2023 honoured at gala



One of Aurora's most prominent evenings of the year is the Sports Hall of Fame Induction Dinner and last Thursday's gala was no exception.

The highlights of the night revolve around the traditional induction speeches that engage hundreds of guests who gather annually at the Royal Venetian Mansion on Industrial Parkway South.

This week is first of a two-part series on the keynote addresses delivered by inductees or family or friends of the inductees honored posthumously.

Here, we reflect on the remarks delivered by inductee Jim Thomson and the retrospective of Gary Machell and Bill McLean in praise of the posthumous induction of Frank "Pete" Machell at the Royal Venetian Mansion on Thursday, November 2.

Jim Thomson stepped up to the microphone last Thursday and offered insights on being inducted into the Aurora Sports Hall of Fame.

Thomson, a former NHL player with the Hartford Whalers, LA Kings, Ottawa Senators, Washington Capitals, the Mighty Ducks of Anaheim, and the New Jersey Devils, offered anecdotes about his professional hockey journey including scoring his "first NHL goal in Chicago Stadium against former Leaf goalie Eddie Belfour," but also focused on the importance of his family who he acknowledged as "the reason I am up here tonight."

Thomson shared a sentimental moment with an appreciative audience.

"I stand here tonight [to say] that I have five children [here from as far away as Texas]. For my wife, Rita, and I to have them all in one room is special. Someone asked me what's the highlight for me tonight and I say, "Children, it's having all five of you here tonight."

The former NHL enforcer also offered a poignant tale about his ability to overcome addiction and create a new life as an inspirational speaker, mentor, proprietor of his own business JT Prospects, and owner of the OJHL franchise Aurora Tigers.

He discussed being "recovered [from addiction] for seventeen years" and noted that helping people to kick addiction has been more

satisfying than scoring goals in the NHL.

He offered a humorous anecdote about being called up from the AHL for his first game in the NHL. As a tough hockey player, he thought he would be asked by his Coach the late Bryan Murray to provide sandpaper and some excitement. The conversation continued after practice with General Manager David Poile who disclosed that "You did such a good job with [AHL fifty-goal scorer] Ross Fitzpatrick that we're going to have you cover Mario Lemieux tonight!"

"The only thing Mario and I had in common is we were both drafted in the same year and he went #1 and I went #185. . . It went well."

The audience roared its approval of Thomson's good-natured self-deprecation about covering the top player in the NHL in 1987.

He acknowledged the special feeling that comes with being memorialized in the Town's Sports Hall of Fame. Thomson also told the athletes assembled that they have "to fight through adversity and you have to get through it" as he did. He spoke of being the only NHL player to be selected in three expansion drafts. However, he noted that "the NHL was not my calling and after being near-death, I realized after kicking addiction that I wanted to help people." He addressed the young athletes assembled at the Venetian and implored them to persevere.

"When you believe in something, follow it. Work hard."

He expressed his pride in his Aurora Tigers for being known around the league "for doing the most for their community." The OJHL squad stood up and received a warm ovation for their service.

Thomson closed his speech by acknowledging the influence of his mother and noted her sacred homespun wisdom: "Son, it costs you nothing to say 'Good morning', to say 'Hello', and say 'Thank you.'" And the former enforcer reminded everyone in closing to "Be kind."

Gary Machell, the family's historian and great-nephew to the national lacrosse legend Pete Machell, offered personal anecdotes about the Aurora-born dual sport athlete who played lacrosse in the summer and hockey in the winter.

Machell, who was born in 1948 and just missed meeting his great-uncle who passed away in 1946, delineated the lacrosse legend's accomplishments and provided his intergenerational link.

My connection to Pete "as a boy, at my games, some of my family would just show up and, if I had a somewhat bad game, all I would hear from them was, 'Pete wouldn't have missed that' or 'Frank would have done this.' I thought Frank and Pete were two different people. Later, my grandfather told me that Frank and Pete were the same person. I learned from him that Pete was 100 per cent committed [to the sports he played]."

Machell accepted with pride his great-uncle's enshrinement into the Aurora Sports Hall of Fame, but also reminded the congregants of Frank "Pete" Machell's military service.

"With Remembrance Day approaching, I would like to mention and acknowledge all Canadians who have passed and served in the armed forces."

The lacrosse player's great-nephew passed the microphone to Bill McLean who declared Machell's induction as a "Proud moment for lacrosse fans."

The St. Andrew's Lacrosse Coach acknowledged that Pete Machell's enduring legacy continues through McLean's Saints winning the CISAA field lacrosse championship in 2022, the excellent accomplishments of the Newmarket Lacrosse Redbirds recognized recently at the Sport Aurora Breakfast of Champions, and the news announcement that lacrosse was "named an official Olympic

sport in 2028.?

Coach McLean pointed out the significance of lacrosse's new international designation and Machell's induction for lacrosse players in the region.

?It provides our community programs and our local athletes [with] another motivator to aspire and represent our country on sport's biggest stage. A lot of what's been accomplished could not have been done without great men like Pete who played the game the right way and represented the game professionally [with the great Brampton Excelsiors of the 1920s and 1930s]. We thank Pete for setting the table for lacrosse as a Hall of Famer.?

As Socrates said, ?The unexamined life is not worth living.? The exemplary sporting lives of Jim Thomson and Frank ?Pete? Machell were, indeed, examined at the Aurora Sports Hall of Fame gala and the audience was better for it after hearing these tales of triumph and courage.

By Jim Stewart