

13 TOO MANY MEN

Lafleur and the Canadiens Beat Boston ... Again
May 10, 1979

For years the NHL's territorial rights and the drawing power of the team's success guaranteed the Montreal Canadiens access to any of the top French prospects in Quebec they wanted. Even when the NHL began to phase out its sponsorship program for junior teams with the institution of the Amateur Draft in 1963, the Canadiens were granted the option of selecting up to two players of French-Canadian heritage before any other team could make its first selection. The Canadiens only invoked this privilege once, grabbing Réjean Houle and Marc Tardif in 1969. They undoubtedly would have done so again in 1970, but a change in rules denied them the opportunity to pick Gilbert Perreault, who went to the Buffalo Sabres instead.

New rules had prohibited Buffalo from doing so, but NHL President Clarence Campbell was unhappy with the way Original Six clubs were dealing away players to the league's newer teams in return for top draft picks. The Canadiens, however, weren't dissuaded. With both Marcel Dionne and Guy Lafleur available in the 1971 Draft, Montreal was determined to secure as high a pick as possible that year. Even before the 1970 Draft, Canadiens general manager Sam Pollock engineered a swap with the Oakland Seals that gave the Canadiens their top pick in 1971.

In the book *Remembering Guy Lafleur*, long-time sportswriter Frank Orr relates a story about Sam Pollock. It goes like this: "As a young man, Pollock is working in the menswear store owned by his father. One day a grieving widow enters the premises, seeking a dark suit in which to bury her dearly departed husband. Pollock sells her one — with two pairs of pants."

As Orr points out, "That joke tells you all you need to know about Pollock's flair for getting the best of any deal." And so, when it looked as if the Los Angeles Kings might actually fall behind the Seals for last overall in the 1970-71 season, Pollock sent them Ralph Backstrom, whose play helped lift the Kings well past the Seals and guaranteed the Canadiens first pick in 1971.

In truth, the two deals that landed the top pick involved as much luck as genius on Pollock's part. For one thing, the Seals were coming off two straight playoff appearances and were expected to be better than they were in 1970-71. Second, Pollock had only dealt Backstrom because the veteran player had requested a trade to a warmer climate ... and the Kings were the only team to make him an offer.

Still, having acquired the top pick, the Canadiens were split on whether to take Marcel Dionne, who had won two straight scoring titles in the tougher Ontario Hockey Association, or Lafleur, who had scored 103 and then 130 goals in his last two seasons with the Quebec Remparts of the Quebec Junior Hockey League. Dionne had plenty of supporters in the Canadiens' front office, but ex-coach-turned-scout Claude Ruel championed Lafleur as the heir apparent to the recently retired Jean Béliveau. In the end, Ruel's enthusiasm carried the day, and Pollock selected the Quebec league star with the Seals' pick.

Guy Lafleur had received his first hockey stick and pair of skates as a five-year-old at Christmas in 1956. "From the time I was seven," author Kevin Shea quotes him in a spotlight for the Hockey Hall of Fame website, "I used to sleep in all my equipment. That way, I was ready to play in the morning." When the new phenom was 10, the local arena manager in Thurso, Quebec, worked out a deal with him. The more duties he was willing to take on around the rink, the more ice time he could have. Throughout his junior and NHL careers, Lafleur continued to be a rink rat, arriving at games hours early to mingle with the maintenance crew and soak in the sights and sounds as he readied himself for games.

It was at the age of 10 that the legend of Guy Lafleur began to spread beyond his hometown of Thurso on the Ottawa River 30 miles west of the Canadian capital. Although he was still playing atom hockey, Lafleur was recruited by a team in nearby Rockland, Ontario, and joined it for the prestigious Quebec International Pee wee Tournament. With a booming slapshot that was remarkable for a boy so young, Lafleur scored 30 of his team's 48 goals and was named the competition's most outstanding player.

Lafleur returned to Quebec City with his Thurso pee wee squad the next two years and continued to dominate the event. Not surprisingly, he caught the eye of tournament director Paul Dumont, who was also a scout for the junior Quebec Aces. Dumont promised to bring Lafleur back to the Quebec capital as soon as he was old enough to play junior hockey. True to his word, Dumont contacted Guy's father, Réjean, shortly before Lafleur's 15th birthday on September 20, 1966. The two men agreed that the young prodigy would play Junior B hockey that year in Quebec City before moving up to the Aces (who would later be sold and renamed the Remparts) for the 1967-68 season. Lafleur proved so successful in Junior B that he actually wound up playing eight games

for the Aces in 1966-67, though he nearly didn't make the promised jump the following year.

Because of his slapshot, Lafleur had developed the habit of simply crossing the blue line and unleashing a powerful blast. In fact, his Thurso teams all but designed their offence around this tactic. To succeed in junior hockey, he was going to have to show more skill as a skater. "I am certain that Guy had natural skating talent," Paul Dumont told journalist Claude Larochelle for *Guy Lafleur: Hockey's #1*, his 1978 book. "Perhaps even exceptional talent ... but he had not yet developed this possibility. He had to knock himself out unmercifully in his early junior years in order to display that power of acceleration and that unharnessed speed which are considerable weapons for him today."

His skating improved, Lafleur, like his hero Jean Béliveau before him, took Quebec City by storm before moving on to Montreal with great fanfare. He scored 29 goals as a rookie with the Canadiens in 1971-72, yet was seen as something of a disappointment that year. True, he had one more goal than Marcel Dionne had scored with the Detroit Red Wings, but Dionne's 49 assists gave him 77 points to Lafleur's 64. Even worse, Montreal Junior Canadiens grad Richard Martin had followed former teammate Gil Perreault to Buffalo and set a new rookie scoring record with 44 goals that year.

The Canadiens won the Stanley Cup in Lafleur's second season, but his personal production dipped slightly, and he was a non-factor in the playoffs. In his third season of 1973-74, Lafleur scored just 21 goals and was unhappy with the harsh treatment he felt he was receiving from coach Scotty Bowman. Yet Lafleur was on the verge of breaking out, and the Canadiens were putting together a special team around him.

"You could see it coming," Bowman told Dick Irvin for his book *The Habs: An Oral History of the Montreal Canadiens 1940 to 1980*. "Fellows like Guy Lafleur, Larry Robinson, Steve Shutt and Bob Gainey had all arrived. And, of course, Ken Dryden was well established by that time. They had a good draft in 1974 when they picked Doug Risebrough and Mario Tremblay, who were young players who had a good impact on the team. We knew by the mid-seventies that we had a lot of good, hungry young players who hadn't reached their peak. The question at that time was how good they might be."

Heading into his fourth season in 1974-75, Lafleur decided to play without a helmet. The added element of danger brought out the best in him, and soon the sight of *Le Démon Blond* (as the French media dubbed him) streaking up the ice with his hair blowing in the breeze he created lifted the Forum faithful out of their seats. Lafleur had finally made the leap to elite player status with his first of six straight 50-goal seasons.

The Canadiens battled Philadelphia and Buffalo for top spot in the NHL standings in 1974-75 but lost out to Buffalo in the semifinals of the playoffs. The



Flyers then beat the Sabres to win the Stanley Cup for the second year in a row. A year later Lafleur scored 56 goals and added 69 assists to win the Art Ross Trophy for the first time with a league-leading 125 points. The Canadiens also led the league with a record-setting 58 wins in 1975-76 and 127 points. This time they advanced all the way to the Stanley Cup Finals where they battled the Flyers. The Broad Street Bullies, as the Flyers were known, had actually led the NHL in scoring that season, but they had ruled the NHL with goon hockey for three seasons. The Canadiens put an end to their championship reign of terror with a four-game sweep.

The 1976-77 season was even more spectacular. Lafleur led the league again, with a career-high 136 points, and added the Hart Trophy as league MVP to his personal collection. The Canadiens broke their own league record by posting 60 wins. With only eight losses and 12 ties, their 132 points were another new high. Three of the team's eight losses that year had come at the Boston Garden, but when the Canadiens met the Bruins for the Stanley Cup, the result was another four-game sweep. The next year Lafleur scored a personal-best 60 goals and had 132 points to win his third straight scoring title and second straight MVP award. The Canadiens posted a record of 59-10-11 for 129 points, and though they lost two games in the Boston Garden during the Finals that season, they won their third straight Stanley Cup title.

Canadiens defenceman Larry Robinson pushes Boston's Wayne Cashman behind Ken Dryden's net during their semifinal series in 1979. Although the two teams had met in the Stanley Cup Finals in 1977 and 1978, this series was by far the most memorable.

Courtesy Hockey Hall of Fame

In 1978–79 the Canadiens had a record of 52–17–11, but their 115 points that season placed them only second overall behind the New York Islanders, who had 116. Lafleur had 52 goals and 129 points but finished third in both categories, which were led by Islanders stars Mike Bossy and Bryan Trottier. In their first playoff matchup that spring, the Canadiens took four straight from the Toronto Maple Leafs for their sixth series sweep in four years. Next up was a semifinal encounter with the Bruins, and though the Stanley Cup wouldn't actually be at stake as it had been in the past two years, this series would be one for the ages.

Coach Don Cherry had famously described his Bruins team of the late 1970s as “a lunch-bucket team of workers.” Earlier stars like Bobby Orr, Phil Esposito, and John Bucyk were all gone, and though players like Jean Ratelle, Brad Park, and Rick Middleton had plenty of talent, it was grinders like Wayne Cashman and Terry O'Reilly who made the team so tough to play against. Cherry predicted good things for his Lunch Bucket Brigade against the Canadiens this time — “if we can just control that damn Lafleur.”

The Bruins had a 2–1 lead through two periods in game one, but Lafleur scored the tying goal from behind the net early in the third. He also had two assists in what turned out to be a 4–2 victory. Lafleur had another goal in game two as Montreal rallied from a 2–0 deficit for a 5–2 victory. “I'm not going to say anything about the officiating,” said Terry O'Reilly in an interview with *Hockey Digest* the following year, “but it's amazing how seldom the Canadiens get a cheap penalty called on them in the Forum. Their power-play goals killed us.”

Returning home to the Boston Garden for game three, Don Cherry decided to make a goalie change. He inserted Gilles Gilbert for Gerry Cheevers, and the team responded with a hard-fought 2–1 victory. Then they won game four 4–3 in overtime to tie the series. Game five was another lopsided win for the Canadiens at the Forum, with Lafleur scoring two goals 25 seconds apart in the first period en route to a 5–1 final, but the Bruins responded with a 5–2 win of their own in game six at the Garden. With the New York Rangers wrapping up a surprise upset of the Islanders in their semifinal series that same night, it seemed to everyone that game seven between the Canadiens and Bruins would be this season's true battle for the Stanley Cup. It would take place at the Montreal Forum on a Thursday night, May 10, 1979.

It had been four years and two days since the Montreal Canadiens had last faced elimination in a playoff series, back in 1975. Unfortunately for the Bruins, it had been almost as long since they had last won a game in Montreal, losing 14 straight since October 1976. “A thing like that had to come to an end,” said Terry O'Reilly, “and there couldn't be a better time. I don't think we've ever been *more steamed up* for a game than we were for that one.”

Although the Canadiens outshot them in the first two periods, "the Bruins had dominated them in those first 40 minutes," wrote Tim Burke in Montreal's *Gazette*, "checking them mercilessly and running roughshod over the Canadiens in their own end. On the occasions that the Canadiens did break through the excellent umbrella Boston established at their own blue line, Gilles Gilbert ... pulled off some of the most sensational saves I have ever seen." Bruins captain Wayne Cashman, whose back was so bad he had to take injections to kill the pain before the game, scored twice in the second period to put Boston up 3-1.

Inside their dressing room, the Canadiens remained confident. "We forgot that it was 3-1," said captain Serge Savard to E.M. Swift of *Sports Illustrated*, "and decided to work hard for the next goal. Then, when we got that, we knew that one lucky shot would tie it. As an athlete, you never think you will lose." Larry Robinson put it more bluntly. "If we didn't go out and work our butts off," he told reporters, "it was going to be an early summer.... If you don't give your all here, you're on holiday. You just can't say die until the last second."

Still, Canadiens fans feared the worst. They grumbled at Ken Dryden for not playing as well as Gilbert and complained that Lafleur was giving away the puck as if he were someone who didn't want to be hit. "But as the great ones so often do," Burke wrote, "Lafleur returned like a hurricane in the third period and with that inexorable speed, he slowly but surely wore the Bruins out."

At 6:10 of the third period, Lafleur burst past the Bruins' defence and set up Mark Napier for a goal to make it 3-2. Two minutes later Lafleur set up Guy Lapointe, and the score was tied. (Lapointe's goal came after a questionable hooking call against Boston's Dick Redmond, which prompted Don Cherry to bow sarcastically to the fans. The clip is still shown today in the introduction to "Coach's Corner" on *Hockey Night in Canada*.)

Lafleur and the Canadiens continued to press, but Gilles Gilbert kept coming up big. Then, with 4:43 remaining, Lapointe was taken down heavily by Rick Middleton and Mike Milbury. He suffered torn ligaments in his knee and had to be removed from the ice on a stretcher. The time taken seemed to give the Bruins the rest they desperately needed, and 44 seconds later Middleton scored to put Boston back on top.

"All we had to do," O'Reilly said later, "was hang on for less than four minutes and we'd beat the Canadiens. They were pressing, but if we played it smart we'd come out all right, then go on to the Finals."

And then it happened.

At 17:26 of the third period the Bruins were called for too many men on the ice. Then, and forever after, Don Cherry has taken the blame ... though it has been said that Don Marcotte was the extra man, jumping on the ice to

TWENTY GREATEST HOCKEY GOALS

shadow Lafleur as he had been instructed to do throughout the series. The television footage is unclear on this.

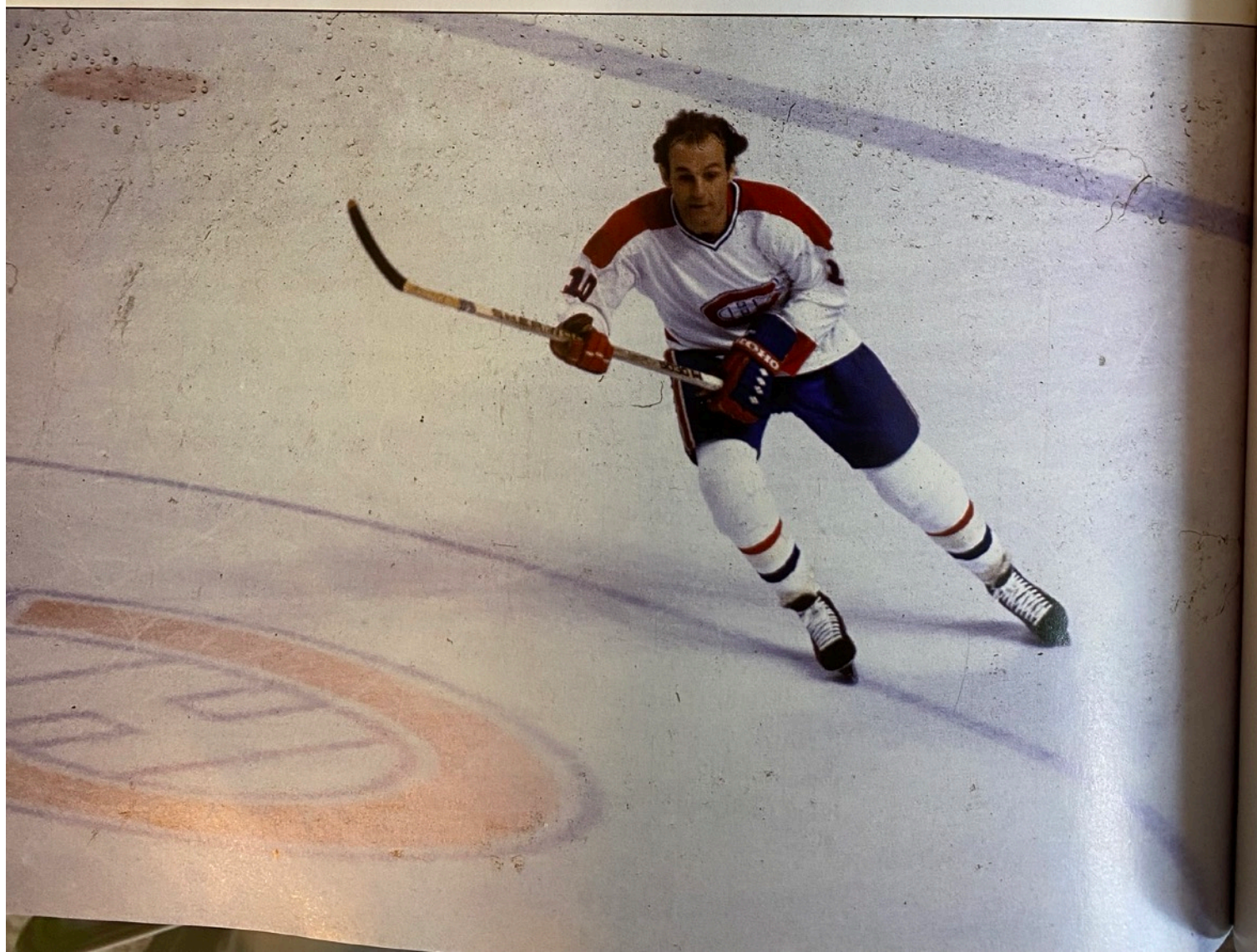
The Bruins managed to kill off the first minute of the penalty and fired the puck deep into the Canadiens' zone with 55 seconds left in the man advantage. There was 1:27 to go in regulation time when Lafleur took the puck from Ken Dryden and skated behind Montreal's net. Marcotte was right on him when he emerged, and so Lafleur spun tightly to give himself a little more room before heading up the ice. As broadcaster Danny Gallivan described it, Lafleur came out "rather gingerly on the right-hand side."

After moving across the Canadiens' blue line, Lafleur fired a long pass for Jacques Lemaire, who took it on his backhand against the boards at the Boston blue line. Lemaire took a few strides into the Bruins zone, then dropped the puck back for Lafleur, who was steaming up the ice. As he had done since he was a boy in Thurso, Lafleur let go with a powerful slapshot. The blast, hard and low along the ice, beat Gilbert to his right, just inside the far goalpost. There was only 1:14 to go, and the score was tied 4-4.

Lafleur just missed on a long slapshot a few seconds later, and play raced from end to end in the final minute, but there was no more scoring. Time on

There was no greater sight for Montreal Forum fans in the mid-1970s than Guy Lafleur in full flight.

Courtesy Hockey Hall of Fame



TOO MANY MEN

ice wasn't an official statistic in that era, but it has been estimated that Lafleur was on the ice for 40 of 60 minutes in regulation time, including almost all of the third period. He played another six of nine minutes in overtime and was responsible for three or four good scoring opportunities — though Terry O'Reilly probably had the best chance to end it with a close call for Boston early in the extra session. It would be grinders Mario Tremblay and Yvon Lambert who combined for the winning goal at 9:33 of overtime, but "when I think back on that game," Don Cherry has said, "I never think of losing to the Canadiens. I can only think of losing to Guy Lafleur."

