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TRIBUTE JEAN BÉLIVEAU: A MENSCH TO THE END

 By [David Lazarus](#) - December 4, 2014 > 5528 > 0

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MONTREAL — Even though I have glanced at only the occasional pro hockey game since the first National Hockey League expansion in 1967, I would have been among the first to help lower the flag to half-staff when Jean Béliveau died Dec. 2.

Béliveau's retirement from the Montreal Canadiens in 1971, in fact, was one of the reasons I gave up watching pro hockey, which has since seemed to succumb completely to cynicism. It's all about money and how much owners and athletes make, and about players who don't try hard enough or care enough.

Maybe it was always about money for the owners, but decades ago, it wasn't always like that for the guys shooting the pucks or stopping them.

Béliveau, Le Gros Bill, number 4, winner of 10 Stanley Cups and millions of hearts, cared.

He loved hockey to the core of his being, but he was always wise enough to know what really mattered in life, even when he was starting out as a young, strapping, charismatic team leader.

For Béliveau, hockey was never as important as family, friends and fans, which of course made him the greatest ambassador the game has ever had and simply wise as a human being.

He always made sure his signed autographs were legible and neat. He never declined to sign one, or pose for pictures with a fan, whether they were aged nine or 90.

His life was devoted to family, children and hockey, in that exact descending order.

So we should avoid the words that seem so inevitably attached to this handsome and hulking figure, like "class," "gentleman," and "legend." They're all true, but they've been overused to the point of meaninglessness.

How about this one: mensch?

For three decades, Béliveau in many ways was one of Israel's and the Jewish community's most ardent ambassadors, supporters, and admirers.

That began in 1984, when at the prompting of community leader Gordon Brown, Béliveau was approached by then-Maccabi Canada president Gary Ulrich, a Montreal businessman in the shmatte business, to serve as Canada's honorary chef de mission at the 1985 Maccabiah Games, the first non-Jew to do so.

Béliveau jumped at the chance, recalled Ulrich, a very, very close friend whose sense of loss is deep.

"He said yes even before consulting with [his wife] Elise," Ulrich remembered. "Jean told me that he always missed the chance to compete for the [1972] Canada Cup. He felt this would be his chance to represent Canada once again."

My own voice trembled when as a (much) younger CJN sports columnist, I called up Béliveau to write the story about him going to the Games. He was cordial and polite to a fault, as I would come to learn he always was. Always. That was Béliveau. He often described leading the Canadian team into Ramat Gan stadium that year for the opening ceremonies as one of the highlights of his life, and I know this was true, since I heard him say so myself.

That trip also led to his close and abiding friendship with Maccabi Canada and the Jewish community that only grew more steadfast over time.

In 1996, Maccabi Canada gave Béliveau a lavish tribute dinner to help raise funds for the 1997 Maccabiah, when Béliveau went to Israel again as honorary chef de mission. Unfortunately, that was the same year as the tragic bridge collapse, which cast a pall on the Games.

In later years, despite increasing health issues, Béliveau still (almost) never said no. In 2008, he visited a Jewish centre for autistic children to help dedicate an ambulance, as usual signing countless autographs. The same year, he became the first non-Jewish inductee into the Montreal YM-YWHA's Jewish Sports Hall of Fame, witnessed personally by other hockey gods such as Bobby Hull, Gordie Howe and Yvon Cournoyer.

In 2011, Maccabi Canada stalwarts rallied around him again while he recuperated from serious illness, and a year later, Béliveau showed up personally at corporate headquarters to sign a painting of Béliveau's hockey sweater owned by Aldo Bensadoun, owner of the Aldo's Shoes chain.

Even in 2013, Béliveau, by then not really able to appear publicly anymore, recorded a video tribute to another Maccabi Canada friend, Roy Salomon, for a Jewish community sports celebrity breakfast.

That was Béliveau. A mensch to the end.

Ulrich recounted that while he visited him at his Longueuil home regularly in the months up to his death, Béliveau, although bedridden, still managed to smile and briefly clasp a hand or exchange some words.

And while not unexpected, Beliveau's death still came to soon.

"I was supposed to go to his house today," Ulrich said Dec. 3. "I feel like I've lost a member of my own family. My heart is broken." n

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