

Aurora's finest lauded at Sports Hall of Fame induction



By Jake Courtepatte

Add four more names to the growing list of Aurora sporting icons.

Mike Palmateer, Bob Wall, Dan Thompson, and William Fleury were welcomed into the Aurora Sports Hall of Fame on Wednesday as this year's inductees, four athletes who reached the pinnacle of their sports.

St. Andrew's College was the host venue for the third year in a row, where close to 300 guests packed into Cole Hall to see the class don the traditional green sweater now worn by a total of 25 members.

"It's been amazing to see over the last five years how important this sports celebration is to this community," said ASHoF Board of Governors Chair Ron Weese.

This year marks the first year when all four inductees found themselves landing in the Hall's "Athletes" category: though on three different surfaces.

While Mr. Fleury and Mr. Thompson earned their legacy on the pitch and in the water respectively, Mr. Palmateer and Mr. Wall were on the ice.

James Duthie, TSN hockey analyst and the night's Master of Ceremonies for a third year, is never one to shy away from telling a good anecdote. He shared one he has of Mike Palmateer, as many in the Toronto area do, of he and his best friend playing hockey in his basement as a child.

Though Duthie was not a Maple Leafs fan, where Mr. Palmateer played during the pinnacle of his career, his friend would always "be" Mr. Palmateer when playing in net.

"That's the kind of guy he is, everyone wanted to be him."

Mr. Palmateer was a fan favourite during his days with the Leafs from 1976-80, then again from 1982-84, though his path there was somewhat tumultuous.

He shared a story of his first call up to the Maple Leaf's top farm team in Oklahoma City in 1974, where he was so excited to get on the ice for his first warm up he had forgotten his jock.

"Seriously," said Mr. Palmateer to a room full of laughs. "As I went back out, all my new teammates were coming off the ice, so I never got my warm up."

Mr. Palmateer went on to describe a disastrous first professional few periods, though he closed his speech out with a message for the young athletes in the crowd.

"I see there are some kids out there tonight, and I want to remind them to never lose sight of their dreams. When I was young like you, and lacking size, people said I couldn't make it in hockey. I also had some knee injuries that made my pro career a long shot. But I worked hard, and never lost confidence in myself."

One final anecdote shared by Mr. Palmateer brought his induction full circle. Upon his retirement, the Palmateer family was looking for a place to settle down, and found Aurora.

Their first family home was on Fleury Street, named for fellow inductee William Fleury.

Bob Wall, the first captain of the Los Angeles Kings in 1967, was happy to share a couple gems of his own. He told of how when he was drafted by the Detroit Red Wings, home of the legendary "Mr. Hockey" Gordie Howe, he came to know one of the greatest to ever lace his skates.

"It was Mr. Howe at first, then Gordie, then the last plateau to reach was Gord," said Mr. Wall.

It was Howe himself that assisted on Mr. Wall's first NHL goal.

"I was almost like "pinch me, wake me up, my dream is here."

Mr. Wall called himself fortunate to be able to coach his sons in hockey in Aurora, as well as his daughter's baseball team with the Diggers.

"Let's just say life has been good."

Guests were also treated to a live fantasy auction after dinner, where bidders competed for once-in-a-lifetime opportunities like trout fishing with Mr. Palmateer and a tour of the NHL's war room.

Always the grandest night of the year in Aurora sports, the event went off without a hitch save for some technical problems: though guests were instead introduced to the dulcet tones of Duthie's singing during those brief periods, so no complaints could be heard.

This year's inductees will see their photos and bios brandished on the walls of the Aurora Sports Hall of Fame for a full calendar year, where the public is also free to see their collections of equipment, medals, and other memorabilia.

Next week, The Auroran will focus on the induction of Mr. Fleury and Mr. Thompson.