

Aurora Sports Hall of Fame welcomes Class of 2024, Future Hall-of-Famers



The 11th Annual Aurora Sports Hall of Fame Induction Ceremony was celebrated on Thursday evening at the Aurora Town Square.

Emcee Rod Black welcomed 200 guests to the newly-renovated cultural facility and the 2024 inductees?Marcel Gery, Milton Hart, Sandy Townsend, and Grace Wong?were piped in with precision by SAC Pipe Corporal Clinton Lau.

The congenial sports broadcaster?who starred on CTV and TSN from 1990 to 2021 ? introduced the ?best-dressed Mayor in Canada? and mentioned to Tom Mrakas that ?the last time he saw a jacket like that was in a Justin Timberlake video.? Aurora's Mayor?an ardent advocate for community sports organizations? donned a maroon dinner jacket with black lapels and praised the inductees from the podium for their positive impact on the community: ?Your legacy of sports excellence will forever be enshrined for future generations to emulate.?

The Mayor's colorful apparel was part of an array of on-stage hues, especially when the new, distinctive red-orange ASHOF blazers?with lapels trimmed in lemon yellow ? were paraded on stage by past inductees in attendance, including NHL stars Mike Palmateer and Steve Vickers.

Black continued to warm up the audience in the cozy Aurora Town Square auditorium and worked the stage freely. He noted the connection between war and sports heroes, presenting the valor of ?The Kraut Line? ? comprised of Milt Schmidt, Woody Dumart, and Bobby Bauer who hailed from Kitchener, ON, formerly named Berlin until 1916. Schmidt, Dumart, and Bauer captured the 1941 Stanley Cup starring for the Boston Bruins. All three players were in their athletic prime when they joined the Royal Canadian Air Force and headed overseas to fight the Nazis. With a big video screen as backdrop, Black played the role of amiable academic as he took the audience through a history lesson that praised the sacrifices by both soldiers and athletes.

The emcee's praise of the value of the Canadian Armed Forces was poignant and timely four days before Remembrance Day. He noted that ?100,000 Canadians gave their lives in the Wars so we could enjoy and play sports.?

His remarks evoked a round of applause, then a standing ovation as Black described ?our war heroes who we'll celebrate and remember next week.?

Black's professorial reflectivity and compelling slides set the tone for the series of rich introductory videos which encapsulated the athletic careers of the four inductees. Each was imbued with vintage video and archival footage as well as meaningful testimonials

of teammates, coaches, friends, and family which set up each of the inductees' speeches effectively and efficiently.

Marcel Gery, Olympic bronze medalist at the Olympic Games in Barcelona in 1992, offered insights into his athletic life spent in the swimming pool?including ?5 a.m. swims in a cold pool? in Czechoslovakia when the butterfly specialist honed his skills behind the Iron Curtain.

Gery's tale about defecting to Canada after ?surrendering his passport to UN authorities in Belgrade, Yugoslavia? sounded remarkably like a spy novel and he praised ?our sponsor ? the North York Swimming Club?for helping my wife and I settle into life in Canada.?

Gery lost his composure briefly when thanking his wife, Micheala, ?for the sacrifice she made when we left Czechoslovakia to begin our new lives in Canada.?

The much-decorated swimmer expressed his frustration with the politics of the 1980s that cost him berths in three Olympics games?twice behind The Iron Curtain in 1980 and 1984 and in Canada in 1988. Gery's gratitude about his Olympic experience with Team Canada was evident and praised his Medley team members as well as the ?extraordinary community? of Aurora for ?welcoming my family and for the lives we have enjoyed here.?

The Olympic bobsledder and Canadian Masters sprint champion Milton Hart joked with the audience about the prospective speed of his speech and noted a bet placed with the Mayor that he ?would be under two minutes.?

The charming Hart acknowledged the lessons of sports that were reinforced by his tours of duty with the Jamaican and Canadian military. He noted ?that the scoreboard does not always tell the tale.? Hart also observed that ?the first half does not define you?but how you finish is the most important thing? and he added that ?in life and in sports, you need good teammates around you.?

Hart, who won four gold medals as York University's Most Valuable Track Athlete in 1996, flashed back to his ?bobsled tryouts where I went from 22-degrees in Jamaica to minus-32 degrees in Innsbruck, Austria a week later where we trained for the 1992 Olympics.?

The current YRDSB vice-principal thanked his family and acknowledged humorously that ?I lost the speed of speech bet.? He informed Mayor Mrakas that ?the cheque will be in the mail.? Hart closed his speech by connecting the failures and successes experienced in sports.

?We learn from our failures and our successes. I was proud of my failures since I learned so much from them.?

A charming interlude in the Induction Ceremony was the celebration of two Future Hall of Famers. Both were recognized for their stellar athletic accomplishments and awarded \$500 cheques by local community sponsors.

Connor Campbell, a 16 year old student-athlete from Dr. G. W. Williams Secondary School, was applauded for winning multiple gold medals in international competition. Deb Finnear of the Aurora Optimist Club and Mike Smith of Smith-Rogers Financial presented a \$500 bursary cheque to Campbell who noted that ?Karate has helped shape my life.?

Lindsey Strom of Royal LePage presented a \$500 bursary cheque to 10-year-old Angelina Chang who has accrued over fifty golf tournament victories, including two National Championships and a winning appearance at Augusta National. This amazing achievement was acknowledged by Black who asked the links phenom what it was like to golf at Augusta. The student from Whispering Pines Elementary School noted that ?there were so many cameras and crowds.? Black segued nicely by noting ?Just like tonight? and he shamelessly asked for golf lessons from the 3-handicapper.

Chang's father, who accompanied his daughter on stage, admitted to Black that ?Angelina beat me by 17 strokes last week? in what could have been described as the most charming interplay of the evening between Black and the inductees.

Sandy Townsend donned the red-orange blazer next and his centre stage appearance was acknowledged by the rowdy and spirited presence of the Aurora Barbarians RFC and the CDS Cyclone coaches and players with whom the legendary local sports figure has served for over twenty-five years.

The "Brotherhood of Rugby" made itself known to the audience and to their coach onstage who noted the "tremendous support of my family, including my daughter who flew in from Vancouver for this ceremony." Coach Townsend applauded "the importance of teamwork by his Country Day School coaching colleagues and players," but he reserved his greatest praise for his "dance partners with the Aurora Barbarians."

Townsend reflected on "25 years of teaching the game to teenagers" and expressed how much he loved "seeing the smiles and the dedication" of his student-athletes.

The legendary rugby coach stated "I've loved every minute of it" and offered an allusion to Field of Dreams when he discussed his role as an administrator and coach for the Barbs: "If you build it, they will come"and this certainly applied to the growth of the Barbarians which grew from 40 players to 500 players over a period of 25 years."

Townsend expressed his own satisfaction with this growth through a metaphor: "Leave the jersey in a better place?"I have left the rugby jersey in a slightly better place."

Grace Wong's accomplishments as an international Masters Table Tennis champion were acknowledged by Black who referred to the Aurora resident as "Amazing Grace" and "The Queen of Table Tennis."

Wong admitted that, "I've prepared this speech multiple times"far more time spent on it than my own training." Wong discussed the "countless highs and lows of my table tennis journey" and thanked the Aurora Sports Hall of Fame for "organizing such a spectacular and special event."

She called out Rod Black good-naturedly for his reference to "playing table tennis in the basement" and noted that the game is much more than a game played in basements. Wong"an advocate for table tennis who competed against local residents at the Seniors Centre last Friday " discussed the scope of her "first international tournament representing Canada which featured 4,800 players in Las Vegas."

The World Champion spoke fondly of her favorite sport and noted, "there's a special kind of power in the sport of table tennis."

Wong referred to her son and daughter-in-law, her mom and dad, as well as her sister and brother-in-law who flew in from the US as "the rock of support" and "my biggest cheerleaders." In a personal moment, she admitted that "It's not just about medals"it's about family and friends. They are the most important treasures in my life." She thanked the Town of Aurora "for welcoming me and the game of table tennis" and encouraged the audience that "It's never too late to chase your dreams."

Wong, who looked elegant in her newly-donned red-orange jacket that set off her black gown, sparkled on stage during this festive night.

Black closed the evening with some soothing words after a chaotic week in politics by reminding the audience that "Sports unite us in a divided world." The famous broadcaster and local resident reinforced the importance of our ABCs which stood for "Aurora Breeds Champions" and "Always be Canadian?"sentiments that resonated deeply in his audience assembled at Aurora Town Square.

By Jim Stewart