

Chamber's Celebrity Sports Dinner featuring Bourque, Clark, and Reid a big hit



NHL legends Ray Bourque and Wendel Clark brought the house down as they recounted colorful events from their professional careers on Thursday night at the Royal Venetian Mansion at the Aurora Chamber of Commerce's Celebrity Sports Dinner.

Emcee Ken Reid prodded and grilled the NHL legends with great questions during the post-dinner Hot Stove Session—the highlight of the evening for the 185 guests. Reid transitioned seamlessly from Sportsnet TV anchor to engaging host whose wit, stage presence, and comic timing moved the evening along at a leisurely and enjoyable pace.

All the fun and great dining experienced and supported by the patrons went to a great cause—two annual \$5,000 Manufacturing and Skilled Trades Scholarships sponsored by the Aurora Chamber of Commerce.

The inaugural scholarships were awarded in the spring to Maximilian Kolbe CHS students Daniel Rolinsky, who is studying mechatronics engineering at the University of Waterloo, and Alexander Moll, who has commenced his electrician apprenticeship training this Fall. Both of the St. Max grads were celebrated at the Celebrity Sports Dinner and their choice to enter the skilled trades was championed by two guest speakers: Joe Bentolia, President of the Aurora Minor Hockey Association and Co-Owner of AJ Printing; and Marco Di Girolamo, Aurora Sports Hall of Fame Inductee, Former Captain of the Canadian Men's Rugby 7's, and Vice President of DeVille Electric.

Sandra Ferri, President of the Aurora Chamber of Commerce, and Mayor Tom Mrakas delivered engaging and concise opening remarks to those assembled prior to the Venetian's delicious three-course meal. But the attraction of the night was the nostalgic trip down memory lane with Hall of Famer Ray Bourque—the all-time top-scoring NHL defenceman, and bonding with the gritty Leafs legend Wendel Clark who was selected by Toronto as the #1 pick in the 1985 draft.

Bourque and Clark were brilliant on-stage—a pair of performers that regaled the audience as comfortably as the customized Muskoka chairs in which they sat. The charming raconteurs delivered vivid memories of their lives primarily as members of the Boston Bruins and Toronto Maple Leafs, respectively.

In addition to his 22-years with the Bruins, Bourque noted the highlight of years in the NHL was winning a Stanley Cup with the Colorado Avalanche during the final game of his illustrious career.

Both Bourque and Clark spoke glowingly about winning gold medals for Team Canada in the 1980s at the Canada Cup and World Juniors, respectively.

Clark's tales about Harold Ballard elicited a high degree of hilarity, especially some slapstick dressing room moments involving the cantankerous owner—who was victimized by a practical joke intended for teammates.

?We had loaded talcum powder in all the hairdryers and loaded the towels with Vaseline. Unfortunately, Harold used the hairdryers after showering in our dressing room and interrupted a team meeting in a terrible mess. He laughed it off, however, because Harold just wanted to be one of the boys most of the time.?

He also referred to Ballard as a man ahead of his time ?who was all about stirring it up and who installed luxury boxes to replace his cheapest seats, but he also took whizzes on the tires of the Leafs planes during layovers and had to be rescued from dressing room hot tubs.?

Clark told tales of his inaugural pro training camp in 1985 where his first three fights in the NHL ?were against his own teammates.?

Bourque offered similar insights into his early days with the Big Bad Bruins: ?I just listened and watched and learned from great players like Cheevers, Park, Ratelle, Cashman, and O'Reilly? and he spoke about ?the magic of playing games in the Original Six arenas where you felt it right away when you stepped on the ice?the Olympia, Chicago Stadium, Madison Square Garden, the Forum, the Gardens?hockey really mattered in those buildings.?

Clark echoed Bourque's remarks about the mystique of the Original Six buildings.

?High energy players like me thrived in the old buildings when it's the main thing in town. Every night was a big night at those rinks.?

Clark also contrasted the reality of his weak Leafs teams of the mid-80s to Bourque's powerhouse Bruins teams.

?Instead of a natural rah-rah speech by our coach, he'd say to us, ?Let's keep it close out there tonight' ?not exactly inspirational words from the top,? the Leafs legend deadpanned.

After the laughter and applause subsided, Bourque looked at Clark and told him: ?You were made for Boston. Imagine you playing for Boston.?' Another round of applause swept the Venetian as Bourque wended his way into the hearts of the Leafs fans assembled.

Bourque not only noted the toughness of Clark, but offered high words of praise for his mentor Terry O'Reilly: ?He was the hardest-working guy and the toughest guy I ever played with. He was nuts, but also smart and intellectual. He as a great coach, too.?

In addition to O'Reilly, Bourque lavished praise on Bruins great Rick Middleton: ?He should be in the Hall of Fame. Rick was an amazing player and guy. He helped me with my leadership with the Bruins when they asked me to be captain of the team at 25. He shared the captaincy with me and it was a blessing to play with Rick in Boston.?

When asked to contrast today's training camps with the camps he experienced in the 80s, Clark remembered ?McDonald's wrappers all across Al Iafate's car. Now, the Leafs have two full-time chefs and those eating decisions are taken out of their hands.?

While Bourque, Clark, and emcee Reid entertained the guests, renowned GTA artist Danny Granger was busy off-stage painting two brilliant, black and white multi-imaged portraits of the NHL stars. Both paintings were presented to Bourque and Clark and auctioned to support the Chamber's scholarship fund as were all the terrific items of sports memorabilia that graced the back tables of the Royal Venetian Mansion.

An enjoyable evening was had by all participants at the first annual Aurora Chamber of Commerce Celebrity Sports Dinner in partnership with Jackson Events.

By Jim Stewart