

The boss behind the Canadiens' bench

Jean Perron, fresh off coaching the Montreal Canadiens to a Stanley Cup, was one of the guest speakers at York's Elite Hockey Coaching Symposium held in June. After an on ice demonstration at Chesswood Arena he spoke to Excalibur's Lorne Manly on topics running the gamut from drugs and violence in the NHL to the differences between coaching college players and the pros.

EXCAL: Last summer (1985) you were appointed the new head coach of the Montreal Canadiens, replacing Jacques Lemaire who surprised a lot of people by resigning after a very successful season. What was your reaction to this unexpected move?

PERRON: I was surprised to be named after one year as assistant coach. I thought two years would be better for my career as a head coach in the National Hockey League (NHL). But Serge Savard (the General Manager of the Canadiens) and Jacques Lemaire told me I was ready for the job and so when you get the confidence and support of your boss, it helps. I took the job with peace of mind and I decided I would do my best to help the club go a long way.

EXCAL: When the Canadiens got off to a poor start last season there was a lot of criticism directed against the team and you. As a coach, how did you handle this criticism?

PERRON: I think I handled the pressure very well. I don't get excited—I'm a calm individual. When you get the support of your boss—he says it's not going very well but better times are coming—it helps get you through those tough periods in your life. I work hard, and when you work hard you get rewarded...At the Montreal Forum we have good communication between the management and the coaching staff. So

one side and the other guy is left alone and there's battles for the net during practice and so forth. That's why it's so tough.

EXCAL: How did you reach the conclusion to go with just Soetart and Roy?

PERRON: Penney got hurt in St. Louis late in the season and he couldn't play anymore. He had arthroscopic surgery and was finished for the year.

EXCAL: Did you realistically expect the Canadiens to win the Stanley Cup last year?

PERRON: Who did? We wanted to go further than last year—one more round. It just happened we played better and a big club got knocked out of the playoffs (the Edmonton Oilers). That opened the door for the rest of the teams to win the Stanley Cup.

We didn't have any injuries. We were fortunate but at the same time our system fell in place. It was not even in my dreams to win the Stanley Cup but you grab it when it comes. Who knows, it may be 10 more years before we win the Cup again.

EXCAL: Do you foresee any problems with player's egos this year because they won the Cup?

PERRON: I don't see too much of a problem—players are down to earth people. They have had more tough times than good times in their lives and they're realistic enough to know that without hard work you can't achieve your objectives, your goals.

(What's going to happen is that) I'll be very tough early in the season to make sure the guys come back to earth. We're going to have our share of ups and downs this year but that's part of any hockey club. It's my role to make sure the players are not too confident.

EXCAL: Last year you had up to eight rookies in the lineup. Are these rookies going to progress starting another Canadiens dynasty, or will they run into the sophomore jinx?

PERRON: I don't think the young players can afford to go into hole. Who can brag right now that they had a great year with us. We had two youngsters who had an outstanding finish, Claude Lemieux and Patrick Roy, but Lemieux was down in the minors and Roy's average

Thomas Steen; he doesn't have the flow some of the Swedes have. So when you're an up and down player (like Dahlin is) and you rely on your shot to make things happen you have to adjust in the NHL because the defensemen are pretty good; they close in on you very quickly and you have to skate more and be strong physically. I think he was tired.

EXCAL: What is your opinion of the NHL playoff format where it seems that a team can coast through the regular season as long as they make the playoffs. And that's not too difficult when 16 of 21 teams make it. A team like the Philadelphia Flyers played full out during the season but were knocked out early in the playoffs; they seemed to be penalized for trying too hard.

PERRON: No matter what the other teams say about the playoffs or the regular season, I feel that you have to finish as high as you can in the regular season because of the home ice advantage. Who knows—if we had finished behind Hartford in the standings, we would have had to play the seventh game in Hartford. It would have been a lot tougher—so I prefer to play the last game on my own ice.

And as far as the playoffs are concerned I feel that a team like Buffalo should have been part of it. Some of the clubs didn't belong in the playoffs. So the format of the top team playing the 16th team (and second versus 15th) is a pretty good one. I hope that the owners and the general managers go back to this format.

EXCAL: Do you really think that there will be a change given the considerations of division rivalry and money?

PERRON: I think so. I think that the league wants to show people that hockey is as serious a professional sport as any other league. We have to get the best clubs into the playoffs.

EXCAL: Drugs in the NHL have become a very pressing issue lately, especially after the Sports Illustrated article on the Edmonton Oilers. Is it a serious problem or has it been blown out of proportion?

PERRON: Drugs don't belong in the NHL or in pro sports. The stand the National Basketball Association took by just suspending players for life or for one year was a great idea. Because all the youngsters look to the pro athletes I think we have to set an example and we have to pay the price if we decide to go and party.

EXCAL: Is there too much violence in the NHL?

PERRON: The interpretation of violence is different from one team to another. But as far as the Montreal Canadiens are concerned, we want to ban fighting—it's as simple as that. The referee should be tougher on those high sticks, because we lost three good players to eye injuries in the last two years (Pierre Mondou, Jean Hamel, and Tom Kurvers) and it's got to stop.

EXCAL: Are you for replays in the NHL?

PERRON: Yes, I am. I don't think that a series should be decided by a mistake from a human being. It happens but when you have all the materials to help out people like they do in business (it's a shame not to use them). In business they use computers, they use everything they can to improve. Why don't we use it in sports—it's just natural.

EXCAL: The games you play against the Quebec Nordiques seem to be very emotional with each team genuinely disliking, or even hating, each other. How intense is the rivalry between the Canadiens and the Nordiques?

PERRON: It's a little bit different than the Edmonton Oiler/Calgary Flame rivalry (in Alberta) because of the tradition that doesn't exist over there. In Montreal there is a long and exceptional tradition, as far as hockey is concerned, and Quebec is trying to challenge Montreal in every aspect of the game. They want the beer market (Molsons owns the Canadiens and Carling O'Keefe owns the Nordiques).

But we have to face the reality that sometimes it goes too far. It shows on the ice (where) the players are getting a little bit too emotional. In Quebec, hockey is more important than reli-

gion, it's as simple as that. It goes back a long time. People are living according to the results of the games that we play against each other. It's very, very important in the social life of Quebec.

EXCAL: You coached at the University of Moncton for 10 years moving up to the pros. What have you found to be the biggest difference between Canadian university hockey and the NHL?

PERRON: In the NHL there is a lot of pressure to win and we don't have that pressure in college. I know in Moncton we had a very successful programme and people had high expectations but it's nothing compared to what we have to do in the NHL as a coach. The relationship between the players and the coach is not the same. In college, school is the first priority and hockey is second and you have to put that in the right perspective even if you want to win. But, in hockey, everything is centered around winning at all costs and you put a lot of pressure on the players to perform because you know you are the first responsible if the team doesn't deliver.

EXCAL: Have you found it difficult to motivate NHL players as opposed to college players?

PERRON: In the NHL every night is a new situation and you have to adjust to it, find new ways to make sure the players are going to produce. For example, I think it's related to objectives you set for your players at the beginning of the year but you have to reassess your objectives now and then. That's something I'm trying to do as much as I can. Instead of having a meeting with the whole team, I'll have small meetings . . . to make sure the players understand their roles.

EXCAL: What adaptations have you had to make to your coaching style since you came to Montreal?

PERRON: I thought I was tough in Moncton—I had to be tougher! This is the big adjustment in the pros. A coach can lose but it's no big deal if you're tough. But if you lose and you're soft, it's unacceptable in the pros.

EXCAL: What does it mean to be tough?

PERRON: There's an expression in French—un main fer dans un gant velou (an iron hand in a soft glove). It takes a lot of judgement on my part to use toughness when it's needed and softness when things need to be a little more relaxed.

EXCAL: The Canadiens have a number of college grads on the team in Chris Chelios, Tom Kurvers and Steve Rooney for example. Do you think more and more NHL teams will follow this trend, as Calgary and Winnipeg have done, by having a lot more university and college players on their team? Also, why are university players getting such a better reputation these days?

PERRON: I think NHL teams are going to take the players where they can find them to better the club. I don't think the roots of the players have something to do with it. It's just that if the player is good somewhere in the colleges, they'll take him. But if he's good in the juniors, they'll take him from the juniors. But right now the junior teams know they have to improve the schooling of players because in life you have to get some schooling.

EXCAL: Is there anything different in the coaching techniques used in college that are different than in the juniors?

PERRON: My philosophy about that is very simple: an early maturing player, one who has all skills, should play junior. He needs the games, he needs the playing time. A late maturing player (however) will benefit by going to college because he's going to have more time to work on his skills and his section of the game.

EXCAL: In your opinion, how much difference does a coach really make to a team's fortune?

PERRON: The coach is not as important as the players—there's no question about it. But the coach is 25 percent of the team. As a coach or a manager you have to be surrounded by good people . . . He has to be the leader, he has to be well-informed, and competent, he's got to do a lot of things. So I would say 25 percent is what a coach represents to the club.



JEAN PERRON: The Montreal Canadiens coach took his team all the way to Stanley Cup in his rookie season. The Canadiens and Perron are determined to prove last year wasn't a fluke.

when there is a problem we all gather and talk about it, express ideas. I'm a better coach when I'm well surrounded.

EXCAL: You received a lot of complaints over carrying three goalies (Steve Penney, Patrick Roy and Doug Soetart) last year. How did this affect the team?

PERRON: It's tough because they all want to play and there's no way you can put three goalies in net on a rotation basis. So, lack of playing time affects the morale of the goalies and it reflects on the players, on the defensemen especially, and there's a lot of complaining . . . you know, three's a crowd. Two guys get on

during the season wasn't very good. I'm sure those guys want to prove they can play on a regular basis and that they can be as good as they were in the playoffs.

EXCAL: What do you think happened to forward Kjell Dahlin who had a great first half but tailed off drastically in the second?

PERRON: My own opinion is it was the number of games. In the Swedish First Division they have 40 games while in the NHL there are 80 plus 10 exhibition games plus the playoffs. I guess it was hard for him mentally and physically. His style is not like that of (teammate) Mats Naslund or (Winnipeg Jet)