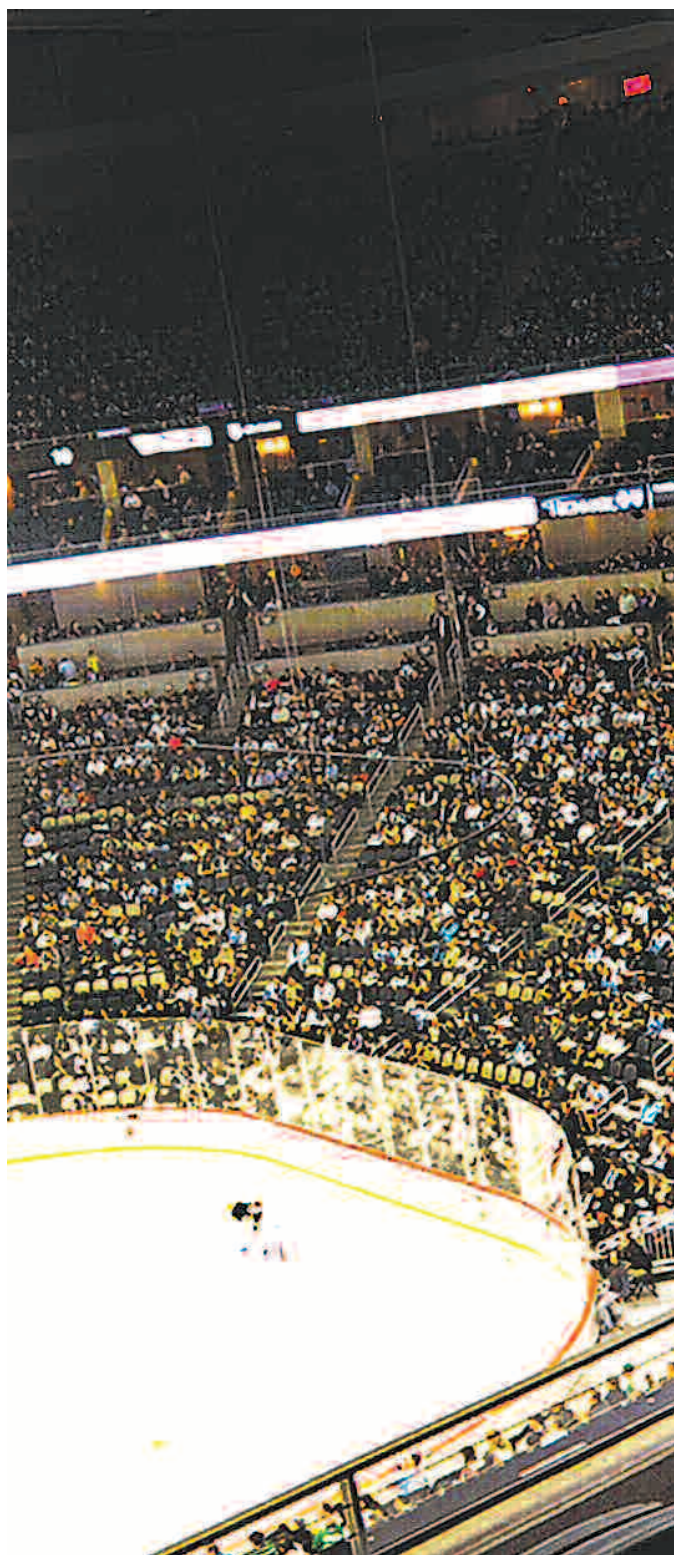
Pittsburgh Post-Gazette
A SOUVENIR SECTION

THE EVOLUTION OF MARIO LEMIEUX

30 YEARS IN PITTSBURGH

STORY BY
J. BRADY McCOLLOUGH

THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 27, 2014 • SECTION M



The friendly voice over the speaker says to come in, and the black iron gate rises and retreats. Inside, behind the ivy-covered brick walls that fortify the home, Mario Lemieux is waiting on the veranda.

Climbing the steps, there is so much to take in. Water springs from a sun-drenched fountain. His 11-year-old chocolate lab, Tara, ambles around. In just a few seconds, it is very clear that, in building this immaculate terrace that overlooks a sprawling backyard complete with a small pool and putting green, he has missed no detail.

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PITTSBURGH POST-GAZETTE

THE SECTION: Mario Lemieux begins his fourth decade in Pittsburgh this NHL season. Perhaps no athlete has meant more and given more to the city that he has come to call home. In a series of rare interviews spanning four months, Lemieux, his contemporaries and members of his inner circle spoke to that life that has been so public yet also private — a story today told in eight chapters.

Lemieux is prepared, having placed two small bottles of water on an end table that sits between a small sofa and a deck chair. The veranda's red brick facade provides shade on a serene morning. He does not have to do any of this. He does not like to talk about himself, so why is he? Maybe it's just time. He is not a nostalgic guy, though. Up in the attic, a box of mementos from his early days in Pittsburgh gathers dust. It was given to him by a family friend after his battle with Hodgkin's disease, and it contains some of the mail he received during those trying days. He has never opened it.

"I don't sit here and just think about what I did in the past," he says.

He is constantly evolving, has been since he rode in a black sedan with his father and agent through the Fort Pitt Tunnel and first laid eyes on the impressive skyline of a then-distressed city with a laughable hockey franchise.

With this fall marking his and Pittsburgh's 30th anniversary together, Lemieux knows there are questions, and he has agreed to answer them. He will be honest but understated, open yet wary of going too far, many of his responses ending short of revelation and often with a quick smile, as if to say, "Trust me, that's really all I've got." English is his go-to language now, the French left for talks with his wife Nathalie or close friend Pierre LaRouche in the owner's suite at Consol Energy Center.

This is as relaxed as any outsider will see him, in a white golf shirt, navy blue shorts and crocs, his left leg tucked under his right as he leans his neatly groomed visage into his left hand. At 6-foot-4, he is as strapping as he was as a young centerman, if not more; the massive hands he inherited from his father, a painter, no longer stick out, fitting his regal stature. The features of his made-for-caricature face are more pronounced with age, and the one-time famous mullet of hockey hair is now cropped short, showing a few hints of gray. Lemieux wears 49 as gracefully as he skated at 19, 29 and 39.

The years have flown by, he says, and the last two decades have been here, attempting to blend in among Pittsburgh's most affluent citizens in this leafy western suburb. This is a man who approved every nut and bolt of the first home he built, in Mt. Lebanon, made sure it was constructed to his specifications, and left it five years later because he wanted more privacy. He found it in Sewickley, but he still couldn't escape his own mind.

Golf with his buddies is a cherished release, but mostly, the brain never stops, to the point that, since starting his career in Pittsburgh, he has struggled to sleep more than a few hours at a time. What does Lemieux think about? He insists it isn't anything that deep; he has always been consumed by the ever-present tomorrow.

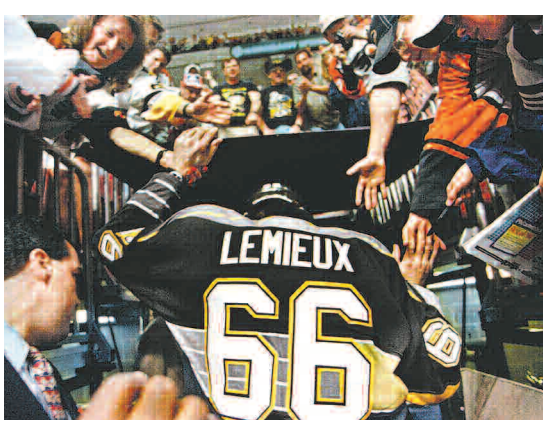
"I can't figure it out," he says. "When I played, at times I would pop an Ambien here or there. It's been more and more the last few years, too, just thinking about a lot of stuff."

Like what? The answer is a study in Lemieux.

"Just stuff that needs to be done," he says. "You know, a couple houses here and there, paying the bills, just normal stuff that people go through."

TOP RIGHT: Mario Lemieux can be found not on the ice these days, but above it in the owners' box at Consol Energy Center, where he watches the 2014-15 home opener.

BELOW: Lemieux wasn't born a Pittsburgher, but in 30 years he has become one.



Peter Diana/Post-Gazette

He laughs, a bit embarrassed. His restlessness doesn't quite add up, especially now, with his seemingly cushy existence (those houses he mentioned are this one; a $20 million mansion in Mont Tremblant, a high-end ski area in his native Quebec that was completed in the last few years; and an oceanfront condo in South Florida). Plus, he can drive each morning to that sparkling arena downtown and be reminded of a future as secure as one of his trademark breakaways. That building at the intersection of Fifth Avenue and Washington Street is a monument to his loyalty to Pittsburgh and a bond forged slowly and quietly over three decades. On this morning, he will give rare insight into how a French Canadian teenager with a 10th-grade education, a small grasp of the English language and no knowledge of this city became a pillar of the community and, along the way, a Pittsburgher.

Put into that context, his sleepless nights having begun here shouldn't come as a surprise.

"With Mario, there were very few years where I'd say everything went exactly as he planned," says Steve Reich, who helped his uncle, Tom Reich, as Lemieux's agent during his prime.

"He has always had an iron will."

A generation of young Pittsburgh hockey fans has grown up watching Sidney Crosby, only hearing about the legend of Mario Lemieux. They can lace up their skates and play the game they love at the 40 rinks that have popped up throughout the region (there were six or so when Lemieux arrived), but they might know little of the man who patiently watered the foundation and turned it into ice with his heroics.

Where to start? He led the Penguins to two Stanley Cups, playing many nights at half-strength or worse because of chronic back pain. He beat cancer and won the NHL scoring title in the same season. With no business background and the help of his tight circle of savvy Pittsburgh friends, he put together a group to buy the Penguins out of bankruptcy. Nearly a decade later, when city and state politicians weren't listening, he played hardball and got an arena deal done that would keep the team here for good and make his initial investment in the franchise pay off 10 times over. His gift for all of that? Crosby, and another Stanley Cup.

"He's had a doctorate degree in life," says Tom Mathews, who, along with his wife, Nancy, took Lemieux into their home during his first year in Pittsburgh. "He's comfortable with who he is."

Comfortable is a word that Lemieux uses often when discussing his personal life and his relationship with Pittsburgh. He has never been comfortable being fawned over by strangers, unless they are children (for them, he knows how to pose just right). He has never been comfortable speaking in public, but in becoming a VIP, he's had to step into the spotlight more frequently. The constant all along, what has made this unlikely power couple of Lemieux and Pittsburgh work, is that the city and its people have given him just enough space in which to grow. He has never wanted or needed an entourage, and that's OK here.

"I was very careful with choosing my friends," Lemieux says. "I don't have a lot of friends. The friends I have are very special.

"I like the people here. They're very nice. They respect my privacy. It's probably the main reason I decided to stay here all these years. I can have a normal life, like anybody else."

Lemieux's lifelong search for normalcy began the moment he became a teenage star in Montreal. Where could he be the best hockey player in the world — Lemieux, after all, means "the best" — but not have to be treated like it every day?

In the tiny two-bedroom house on Jogues Street in the working class Ville Emard neighborhood, Jean-Guy and Pierrette Lemieux raised Mario and his two older brothers, Richard and Alain, in a close-knit atmosphere. An occasion wasn't needed for Pierrette to invite over dozens of friends and family, spilling into the front and back yards. Molson bottle caps popped, music played and laughter bounced off the old brick. Pierrette liked to be the center of attention. Mario was more like his father, Jean-Guy, who barely said a word but enjoyed the good company.

They encouraged Mario's and his brothers' hockey obsession, but they did not raise him to want to be different from anybody else because of his talent. Of course, that didn't stop Pierrette from telling Mario's first agent, Bob Perno, who signed him as a client when he was 14 years old, how she felt about her youngest.

"You know, Mario is special," Perno remembers her saying while they sat at the kitchen table early on. "There's something about him. Good things happen to Mario, all the time. He's very special."

Pierrette somehow knew that life wasn't going to stay simple for her boy. At 12, Mario was so dominant that top NHL executives were hearing his name. Perno heard about Mario from Scotty Bowman, then the coach of the Montreal Canadiens. To sign Mario, Perno promised the family that his first contract in the NHL would be for a total of at least $1 million — an unheard of amount for a draft pick in those days.

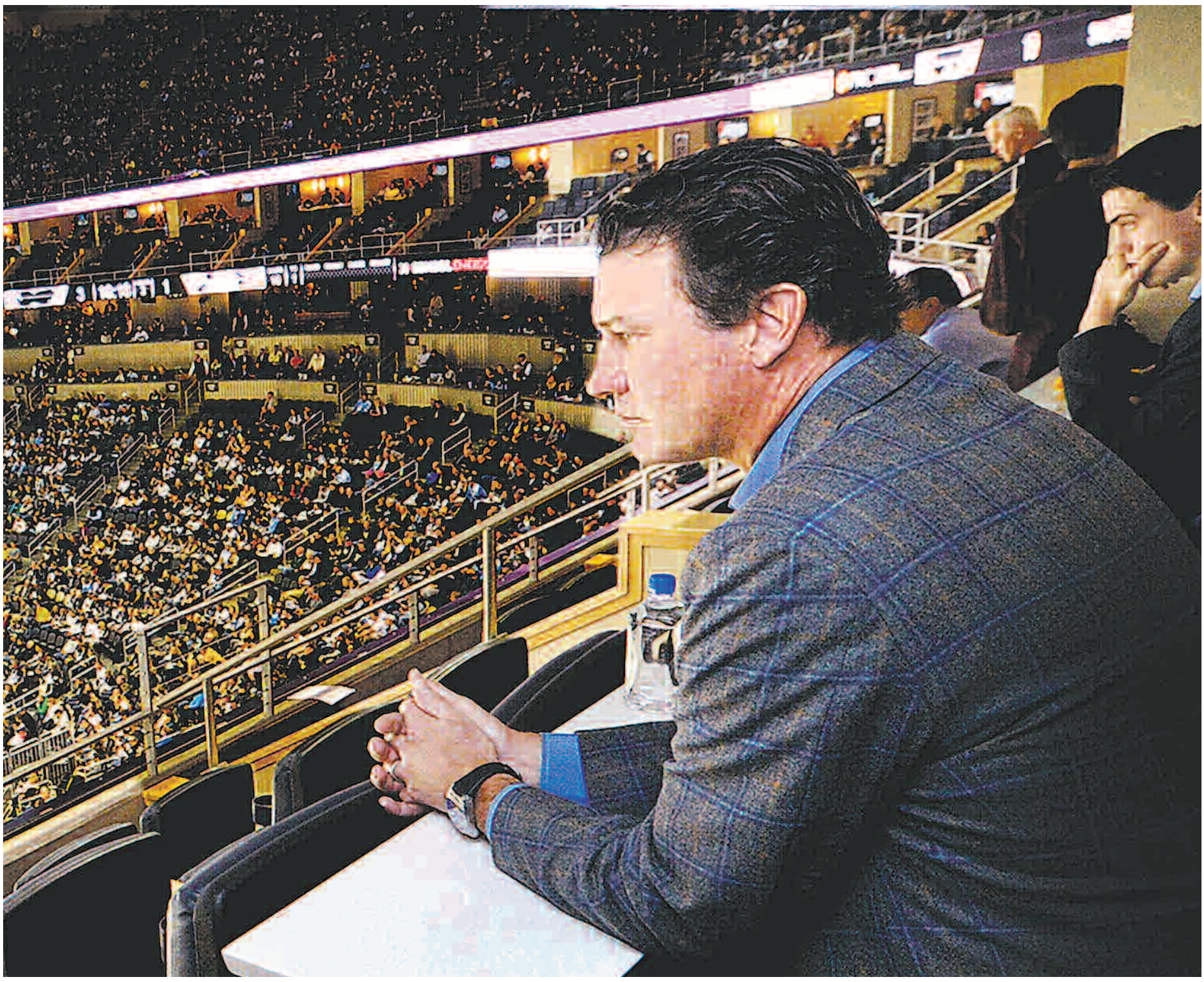
"His parents looked at me like I had five heads," Perno says.

At that age, Mario did not say much, but he wasn't bashful about what he had in store for hockey. He had always worn the number '27' because that's what Alain wore, but when deciding what number he should wear after he was drafted by the Laval Voisins of the Quebec Major Junior Hockey League, he first suggested Wayne Gretzky's '99' to Perno. Fixing Mario's target straight at hockey's "Great One" was too bold, Perno knew, so he suggested a more subtle route: How about '66,' turning Gretzky's number upside down?

"I want you to become as good if not better than Wayne," Perno remembers saying. "I think you've got the potential to do that. Every time you look at that sweater, you will know who you have to measure yourself with."

The expectations for Mario spread across Canada. At 17, he was named to the World Juniors team that would travel to Russia in 1983 for the annual tournament. Canadian coach Dave King picked Mario because his offensive game was more than ready, but he was unsure if he could count on Mario's defense. As the tournament progressed, King elected to play Mario sparingly, only on the power play, if at all. Early one morning, Perno was woken by a phone call. It was Mario from halfway across the world, frustrated by the lack of ice time and asking Perno to book him an early flight home. Perno told him to stick it out, but, the next year, Mario decided that he would play for Laval during the Christmas holiday instead of for Team Canada.

"[Mario Lemieux's] had a doctorate degree in life. He's comfortable with who he is." — Tom Mathews



Peter Diana/Post-Gazette

Mario: Thirty Years In A Life

When the major junior league said it was a breach of contract for Mario to ignore his country's call, he took the league to court and won an injunction.

"Boy, when Mario got something in his head, he sure stuck by his guns," Perno says. "He was a stubborn dude, even at a young age."

Says King, "That's what makes some players so great, their belief in themselves."

The Mario mystique was real. He knew that when he glanced up into the press box at the small Laval arena and saw Wayne Gretzky and his fellow Edmonton Oilers star Paul Coffey looking down on him. Mario's pursuit of Guy LaFleur's major junior records was generating quite the buzz, and Gretzky, who was in town to play the Canadiens, thought he had better check out the kid, at Perno's urging (Gretzky also was a client of Perno's boss, Gus Badali). After the game, Gretzky and Coffey went to introduce themselves.

"A quiet kid with a curious smile," Coffey says.

During the ride back to Montreal, Coffey asked Gretzky if Lemieux could do it at the next level.

"You're sitting there talking to the 'Great One,' you might as well hear it from him," Coffey says. "Wayne had a twinkle in his eye, and he said, '*Oh, yeah.*'"

As Lemieux's draft day approached, he was the unquestioned best prospect, a player who could change a team from day one. Lord knows, the Pittsburgh Penguins, who were barreling toward the No. 1 pick in the 1984 draft with their ineptitude, were in need of a makeover — a new era to close nearly two decades of irrelevance.

It's ironic that the Penguins were brought to Pittsburgh in 1967 because politicians like young state senator Jack McGregor thought another pro sports franchise would help the city create a renaissance through tragic economic times. The Penguins would only bring a dark cloud of their own. Their first young star, Michel Briere, died in April 1971 from a car accident after spending 11 months in a coma. After blowing a 3-0 playoff series lead to the New York Islanders in 1975, the franchise filed for bankruptcy. After the 1982-83 season, Penguins general manager Baz Bastien attended a team banquet, had too many drinks and drove home. He also died in a car accident.

Eddie Johnston was the team's head coach at the time, and he would take over for Bastien as GM. The Penguins had so few viable players at training camp heading into the 1983-84 season that basically everybody was guaranteed a spot. The team had a history of trading first-round picks to manufacture playoff runs, but this time, Johnston was firm: The team was keeping its top pick. Johnston, also a French Canadian, had heard about Mario Lemieux and taken a few trips to see him play. But could they sign him?

Paul Steigerwald, then the Penguins' marketing director, sure hoped so. Selling the Penguins in a football- and baseball-obsessed city was pretty thankless. One straightforward promo he used was "We have a hockey team"; Pittsburghers needed to be reminded. This Lemieux guy, well, he was hope on skates. Steigerwald was planning a party for season-ticket holders at the Igloo the night of the draft.

Behind the scenes, though, negotiations with Lemieux were not going anywhere. When he heard that the Penguins were hosting a draft party, essentially trying to make money off his name before he had signed, he was offended.

On the morning of the draft, Perno called Lemieux's home to make plans. Fittingly, the draft was at the Montreal Forum, which would be packed with fans wanting to see their native son begin his race to greatness. But Lemieux had decided he was not going to attend because he did not want to wear the Penguins sweater if he hadn't been signed. Instead, Lemieux was going to play golf, his new passion.

Perno couldn't let Mario win this one. He asked Gretzky to call Mario.

"Wayne told him that he owed it to the fans in Montreal, being a Quebecer, to show up," Perno says.

Mario would appear and give a salute to his city, which was already pushing the limits of the attention he was willing to receive when in public. His excellence had stripped him of his comfort there, and, at that moment, he truly would have rather been playing golf. The Penguins called his name, and Lemieux did not come to their table to put on the jersey. The Forum stirred with disbelief. Perno says it was Mario's decision, even though the agent was saddled with the blame.

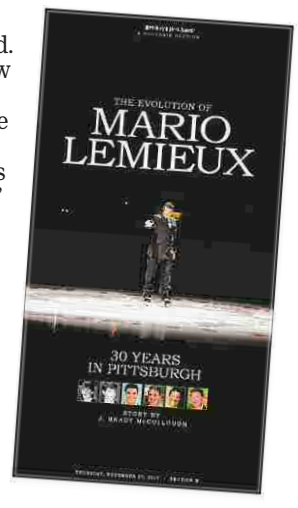
"What drives Mario is his pride," Perno says. "He's got the pride of 10 men.

"I was criticized heavily by a lot of people for coddling him. I was not coddling him. I was backing him."

Within days, Perno and Johnston agreed on that $1 million, paid over three years. Perno, Jean-Guy and Mario flew to Pittsburgh, where Steigerwald giddily greeted them at the airport. Steigerwald couldn't decide whether the kid was more like a puppy, with those oversized hands, or a prince.

Perno had been telling Mario that he would like Pittsburgh. It was bigger than Ville Emard, but it had a small-town feel. The people there, they worked hard for what they got. As the black sedan drove east and emerged through the Fort Pitt Tunnel, Lemieux's mind began to open to this foreign land.

"It seems like yesterday," he says.



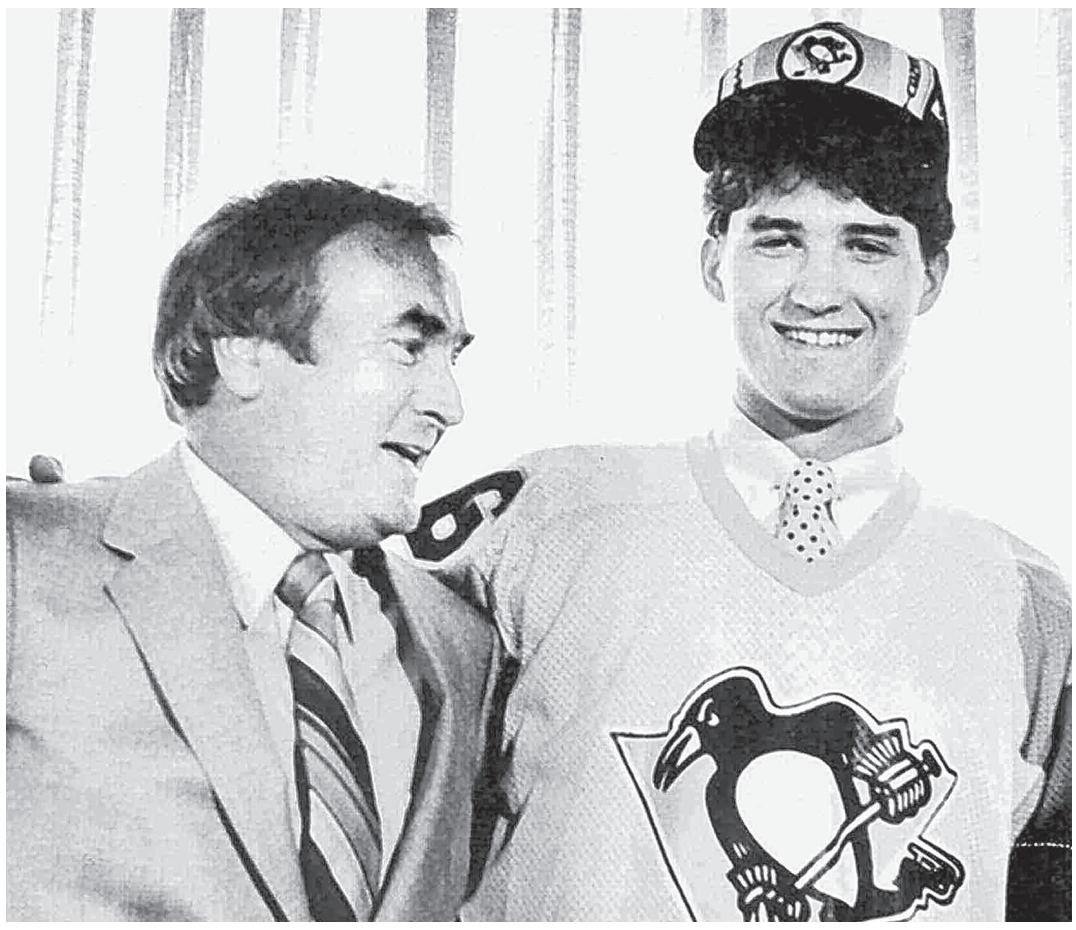
THE COVER: As captured by Post-Gazette photographer Peter Diana, Mario Lemieux brings the old and new together the night the Penguins christened Consol Energy Center — Oct. 7, 2010. He pours melted ice from Mellon Arena onto center ice at their new home.

The Mario mystique was real. He knew that when he glanced up into the press box at the small Laval arena and saw Wayne Gretzky and … Paul Coffey looking down on him.

Post-Gazette archives

ABOVE: Fans who had seen far too much bad hockey by the Penguins in the early 1980s let their voices, if not their identities, be heard during a game in the 1983-84 season — the season before Mario Lemieux arrived.

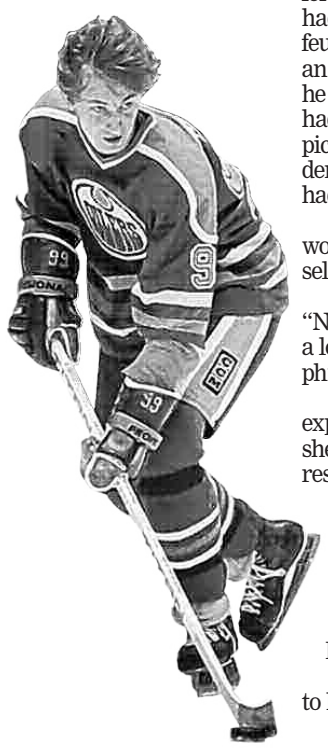
RIGHT: Lemieux dons the Penguins sweater for the first time after signing his first contract with coach and general manager Eddie Johnston June 19, 1984.



Post-Gazette archives

ON THE WEB
For an online presentation of this story with video highlights of Mario Lemieux's career and more photos, go to **post-gazette.com.**

BELOW: Mario Lemieux considered wearing No. 99 with his junior league club — the same as "The Great One," Wayne Gretzky — but that would have been too bold, advised agent Bob Perno.



Chapter 2

Life In A New City

Tom Mathews could not figure out what his new friend, Eddie Johnston, was up to. They had met at a party, and Mathews was a hockey guy, his three boys having played the sport. But Johnston was the Penguins' general manager. He wasn't lacking for hockey guys in his life. Yet, Johnston kept calling Mathews, who just went with it.

Johnston knew exactly what he was doing, of course. He had just brought a crown jewel to Pittsburgh. The franchise had been a joke, but it didn't have to be anymore. Mario Lemieux was precious, and he could not be tarnished. His early years with the Penguins would set the tone for everything that was to come for the 19-year-old rookie. The team was years away from competing, and the kid seemed to relish that challenge. But his life away from Civic Arena would be equally crucial to his development.

Lemieux would be making his first friends and connections in a new country while facing tough lifestyle decisions for a teenager with a ton of cash. Johnston was not about to have Lemieux, who hardly spoke English, living in some downtown apartment where anybody could get to him. The first thing he needed was a good family to nurture him, give him a real sense of home.

Mathews and his wife, Nancy, were Johnston's choice. Tom was a prominent businessman in Bridgeville, working in construction, and their house in Mt. Lebanon was more than suitable for Lemieux, who had practically been raised in a box in Ville Emard. Johnston would drop hints to Tom. *You wouldn't believe this guy up there in Montreal.* … But he wouldn't go further, leaving Tom to wonder. One day early in the season, Johnston invited Tom to practice and finally made his move.

"I was thinking, here's this superstar, probably spoiled, probably treated like royalty, might have an attitude problem," Tom says. "I don't want to deal with it. I said, 'Eddie, it's got to work for both of us.' "

After practice, Lemieux and Johnston visited the Mathews' big white house in exclusive Virginia Manor. Lemieux would have some privacy, with a third floor bedroom that had been used by the Mathews' oldest son. It even had a water bed.

Nancy did not meet Mario until later, after a game. She thought he looked rather lonely.

"Let's take him home now," she told Tom.

Nancy's youngest son had just left the house, and she could already tell that an empty nest was not going to be her thing. In short, Tom's reservations weren't going to matter. The Mathews had Mario, Johnston and his wife, Diane, over for Sunday brunch to cement the deal.

"Why don't you go get your clothes?" Nancy offered.

"I already have them with me," Mario said.

Mario was sold on the Mathews. He did not want to live by himself, and he knew that he needed help getting acclimated to life in his new city.

"As talented as Mario was," Diane Johnston says, "he still had to learn how to shake someone's hand and look them in the eye."

Everything came so naturally to Lemieux on the ice. Here was a kid who turned 19 just days before his NHL debut in Boston, stripping the puck from Bruins star defenseman Ray Bourque and charging in for a goal on his first shift as a pro. Paul Steigerwald had been relentlessly promoting Lemieux, chauffeuring him around town from spot to spot. He did an ad for Mario's bar on the South Side, even though he wasn't old enough to imbibe. In one ad, Lemieux had to wear a Crocodile Dundee hat and pose for a picture. It wasn't his idea of fun, but he tolerated the demands on his time. His dramatic start in Boston had made the Penguins look smart.

At home with Tom and Nancy, Mario eagerly worked on his English. He found himself extremely self-conscious when he had to do interviews.

"Because I would make a lot of mistakes," he says. "Nancy was a good English teacher. I used to watch a lot of TV. If she was there, if I didn't understand a phrase or word, she would try to explain it."

Above all, they were fine as long as Mario could explain to Nancy what he wanted to eat. One time, she was trying to gauge if he liked lamb, and Mario responded, "Is that fish?" Once they had reached an understanding, she'd cook it up for him.

After a month, Mario's two worlds met when his parents visited Pittsburgh. They did not speak English, and the Mathews did not speak French. Mario did his best to handle the role of translator with the help of agent Bob Perno.

"Mario was very shy, really very quiet, stayed to himself a lot," Nancy says. "But after his parents came, we all sat around and talked with one another, and I think after that point, he felt more safe. If he had a question, he would come and ask me."

There was nowhere Nancy wouldn't take Mario: To the dermatologist for a bout with acne. To the mall for Christmas shopping, where Mario picked out clothes and a piece of jewelry for his Montreal girlfriend, Nathalie. When Mario bought a machine that imitated sounds of the ocean to help him sleep, it was Nancy to whom he went with questions. She eventually became the team mother, her nest suddenly full of hungry hockey players for whom she'd cook about 20 large chickens.

Most of the time, having Mario around wasn't much different for the Mathews than it had been with their three sons. But, one day, a truck pulled up in front of their house carrying a white Ferrari. Neighbors assumed that Tom Mathews was going through a mid-life crisis, but nope, that was just their Mario, stepping out a bit.

"He was too tall," Tom Mathews says, "so we had to take it to a custom place to give him more leg room."

Riding in style, Lemieux would win the Calder Trophy as rookie of the year. After, he would spend the summer in Montreal, the trip affirming that it was no longer a place he could live.

"Hockey is everything in Montreal," Lemieux says. "It's tough for players to go anywhere without being recognized."

Nathalie would join Mario in Pittsburgh for his second season, and Nancy found them an apartment just blocks away. For years, the Mathews kept close tabs on the young couple. Eventually, with Mario taking his place among the game's best, Tom knew that Mario would be due for a significant bump in pay. It just so happened that big-time baseball agent Tom Reich lived on a parallel street and shared a backyard with the Mathews. Lemieux met Reich at Tom's urging, and Reich, who was known as a fierce negotiator, worked his way into Mario's graces with his boisterous personality.

But what about Bob Perno? He and the Lemieuxs had been like family since Mario was 14. It was a tough decision for Lemieux, but he felt he needed more than Perno could offer him from Montreal. Reich (pronounced *rich*) would work with the Penguins on Mario's next contract.

"It's a decision that hurt me to no end for many years," Perno says. "It's not the monetary side. It's the personal side. I understood he had moved to Pittsburgh, so I guess he had another life."

Lemieux may have increased his firepower with Reich, but it ended up being the player himself who took the lead in negotiations with the Penguins. He had proven that he was worth much more than what he was making under the contract Perno drew up, and it was time to cash in. The DeBartolos, who owned the team then, weren't going to give in easily. They hadn't built a shopping mall empire out of Youngstown, Ohio, grit and taken the NFL's 49ers to a Super Bowl victory by being pushed around.

One day in fall 1988, Lemieux and Reich drove to Steubenville, Ohio, where the DeBartolos operated their business, intent on forcing their hand. Lemieux demanded that they draw up a new contract right then and there and threatened to leave the team and return to Montreal if they didn't.

Lemieux knew they would have no choice. Attendance was up, and the Penguins were starting to make a dent in the market. By that point, he was the franchise.

"It wasn't a class organization until he got there," says Tony Liberati, who worked for the DeBartolos and was in the room when Lemieux made his ultimatum.

The DeBartolos extended Lemieux's contract that day, agreeing to a deal that would put him over the $2 million per year threshold, joining only Wayne Gretzky. For a guy who was still learning the language, Lemieux certainly knew how to get his point across. He wanted to be in Pittsburgh, and now he had the security to know it was going to happen. He enjoyed life in Mt. Lebanon and would often be seen around the neighborhood.

"He really anchored in," Reich says. "He quickly became ingrained in the fabric of the city. He went to his favorite places to eat, and he was very familiar with people. He was a magnet. People loved Mario. He was royalty without acting like royalty."

Lemieux would need a more princely residence. He and Nathalie loved to entertain and were generous hosts. With Mathews' help, Lemieux planned to build a house in Mt. Lebanon. In the process, he needed an attorney, and that's when he met Chuck Greenberg, a young lawyer who would become a key part of his inner circle a decade later when Lemieux would make his transition to businessman.

"Initially, it was a challenge not to be in awe of the fact that he was Mario Lemieux," Greenberg says. "But he was so humble and grounded and funny that he put you at ease right away."

That was young Lemieux: Charming, but if you happened to get in his way, he had no problem skating right through you.

He liked being around people who would shoot straight and weren't overly impressed with him (Greenberg must have hid it well).

Lemieux was out golfing one day when he met Tom Grealish, who worked in insurance. Grealish knew nothing about hockey, but he made Lemieux laugh a few times during the round, and so Lemieux invited him over for dinner that night. Grealish returned the favor a few weeks later, and a friendship began.

Grealish was in his mid-20s, had recently lost both his parents and was trying to run the family business. He was under a lot of stress, and so, clearly, was Lemieux.

"Mario and I were talking," Grealish says, "and he's saying, 'Tell me a little bit about your life.' I said, 'I feel like I never have anyone I can talk to,' and he goes, 'I feel the same way a lot.' "

As Lemieux added to his group, Tom Mathews was always there, watching. He liked the way Tom Reich had handled Mario because "Tom would have killed for Mario." With Greenberg and Grealish, and anyone else who earned Lemieux's trust, Mathews was looking for a commonality.

"Going through this era when he became highly successful, visible, there wasn't anyone that he was associated with that we know of that would do anything to harm him," Mathews said. "We were always looking out for that."

"As talented as Mario was, he still had to learn how to shake someone's hand and look them in the eye." — Diane Johnston

Chapter 3

The Rise of 66

Mario Lemieux spent his first three years in the NHL in the shadow of a legend.

Wayne Gretzky's numbers said it all after the 1987 season: Eight straight Hart Memorial trophies as the NHL's most valuable player. Seven straight Art Ross trophies as the league's leading point scorer. Winner of three of the last four Stanley Cups.

Lemieux had emerged as the second-most popular player in the game and a legitimate Hart candidate. His ascension was on schedule by any reasonable measure. Still, Lemieux had not forgotten why he chose to wear the '66' as a nod to Gretzky's '99'.

"I had the mindset of becoming the best in the world," Lemieux says. "Looking at Gretzky, the way he was racking up points, I had a long way to go."

The chase was officially on, but playing in Pittsburgh had been frustrating. There weren't many meaningful games, and when Lemieux did have a big stage, like when Gretzky's Edmonton Oilers came to town, he didn't have the talent around him that could help him shine.

So when Lemieux arrived at training camp for the 1987 Canada Cup late that summer, he relished the chance that was in front of him. He would be skating against the best players in the world, surrounded by the firepower of Team Canada, including the "Great One." All over the globe, the sport's rabid fans would be watching the dynamic between Gretzky and Lemieux. Would one defer to the other? Would their egos get in the way? Canada coach Mike Keenan couldn't resist pairing them up to find out.

"Mario was always a study," says Paul Coffey, another Canada Cup teammate. "Mario watched every move Gretz made. There were no insecurities, and Wayne wanted to teach him."

Four years after passing on a chance to play for his country in World Juniors, Lemieux dazzled on his home soil, scoring seven goals in the first six games and helping the Canadians advance to the three-game championship series against the Soviet Union, which would bring its incomparable allure to the event. Back in Pittsburgh, Penguins diehards gathered around their televisions to see if Lemieux could show the world what they already knew: Mario was unstoppable.

The Russians took Game 1, 6-5, holding Lemieux without a goal. But in Game 2, he began to live up to his name. He scored the last three Canada goals in a 6-5 victory — all on assists from Gretzky — including the winner in the second overtime. It would go down as one of the greatest hockey games played.

"When they played on a line together, it was magic," says Rick Tocchet, a Canada Cup teammate. "There's one puck there, and two superstars. If they both want the puck, it might not work."

Game 3 followed the same script. The teams were tied 5-5 with less than 2 minutes left. After a face-off, Lemieux poked the puck ahead and then flipped it up to Gretzky on his left. Lemieux trailed, and there was no doubt that Gretzky was going to give it back to the kid at just the right time. Lemieux was free and received the pass in the slot, skated in with a clear shot and beat the Soviet goaltender high glove side. Lemieux grabbed Gretzky, and their teammates crowded them. All over Canada, pandemonium.

You don't give Lemieux that kind of room! the play-by-play man bellowed.

For the tournament, Lemieux scored 11 goals — the closest competitor had seven — and Gretzky took MVP honors with 21 points. Lemieux then headed for Penguins training camp, where he arrived a different person.

"That was the turnaround in my career," Lemieux says. "It was six weeks of playing with the best in the world, learning what it took to be a champion. I looked up to Gretzky. He was the hardest worker in practice, even though he was the most talented. His work ethic was incredible."

Lemieux's teammates immediately took notice. In past years, he had shown up to camp and dominated simply because he was Mario Lemieux. Phil Bourque recalled one time asking him where he'd been all summer, because Bourque hadn't seen him. "This is the first day I put my skates on," Lemieux had said.

"It was night and day to me," Bourque says. "He was a man. It was a body language thing. When he looked at you, and you looked at him, you knew … he's going to another level right now, and you better get on board."

Coffey had seen enough of Lemieux in the Canada Cup to know that Pittsburgh was now a destination. Coffey's contract negotiations with Gretzky's Oilers were at a standstill, so when the Penguins became an option, "I couldn't get there fast enough," says Coffey, a Hall of Fame defenseman.

As one of the few who played with Gretzky and Lemieux during their primes, Coffey would field the question for the rest of his days: Who was better?

"The answer always is you cannot accumulate the points Wayne did and not be the greatest player who ever played," Coffey says. "That being said, the most talented player that ever played the game was Mario. You can't be 6-foot-4, have a reach from here to the Allegheny River, with hands that soft …

"I have a simple way to describe it. When I played with Wayne, and I threw him a long pass, I'd hustle after him, and he would deke and draw four or five guys and throw it to you or someone else. When I played with Mario, I'd hit him with that long pass, then I'd bust my butt up there to get a front-row seat, to watch him do his thing and go score. It was incredible."

Lemieux's game was elegant, effortless. From the time he started playing as a boy, he had a heightened awareness on the ice, seeing things before they happened. As a pro, he had begun to harness it, and it would play out in odd ways. Like, during a game, he always knew if his friends were in their seats at Civic Arena, and one time he smacked the glass with his stick to make a beer spill on Tom Grealish. Then there are the ways that mattered — like banking a puck off Tocchet's stick for a goal that would go in the books as a Lemieux assist.

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"It's always been with me as far as far as I can remember," Lemieux says. "I think that's what made me better than some other guys. Just being one step ahead all the time … not only having the talent but putting it all together with your mind."

Nobody could control the flow of a game like Lemieux, and his teammates felt lucky just to be a part of it.

"When the coach puts the lineup on the board and you see your name up there beside Lemieux, you can't imagine … just talking about it right now gives me goose bumps," says Bob Errey, a longtime Lemieux winger. "All of a sudden, your heart rate goes up."

He had the same effect on opponents.

"You couldn't handicap him," legendary coach Scotty Bowman says.

"An exercise in futility," says longtime Rangers goaltender John Vanbiesbrouck, who gave up more Lemieux goals (30) than anyone. "You just keep trying stuff and seeing if it works."

Lemieux would follow the Canada Cup with his breakout season in 1987-88, unseating Gretzky for the first time as the Hart and Ross winner with 168 points (70 goals). The next year, he would tally 199 points to bring home another Ross.

Still, for many Pittsburghers, he remained an afterthought in a Steelers- and Pirates-dominated sports scene. He was the best athlete in the city at a time when people needed something, anything, to believe in, but some simply wouldn't give hockey a chance. To break through in this town, after the four Super Bowls and two World Series titles in the 1970s, you had to win the big one. The same standard applied in the hockey world: A player couldn't be considered one of the best until he won a Stanley Cup.

What nobody outside the Penguins knew, because he was so quiet, was that Lemieux had his own personal mountain to climb each day before he could even take the ice.

Since his major junior days, Lemieux had been playing with back pain, and it had worsened with wear. It was Dr. Charles Burke's job as the Penguins team physician to monitor the situation, but there was only so much he could do. Lemieux had congenital spinal stenosis — he was born with a narrow spinal canal — which had been intensified by spondylolysis, a defect of the vertebrae.

At his peak, as he pursued Gretzky's record 51-game point streak at the end of the 1989-90 season, Lemieux was burdened with pain that most mortals couldn't fathom. He could not bend over to tie his own skates, so the Penguins built him a stool where he could rest them while a team employee laced him up. His teammates knew what he was going through to be out there with them; heck, they could smell the stench of his back ointment on the bench.

"What people don't understand," Dr. Burke says, "is that the majority of nights he played, he played at 25 percent, 50 percent. He played so little of his career at full or 100 percent. I remember one game against the New York Rangers during the streak, we picked him up and stood him up and literally gave him a push to get him going."

The streak stopped at 46, and Lemieux knew he couldn't continue playing in this shape. That offseason, he had back surgery.

The Penguins had made some key moves to compete for a Cup, and they had hired the experienced Bob Johnson as coach. Lemieux sensed that his time had finally arrived, but he had to work on that back first. Only, after the surgery, Lemieux was in more intense pain. An MRI revealed a post-surgery infection. Lemieux would spend the first half of the 1990-91 season bedridden in his Mt. Lebanon home. The longer he wasn't around the Civic Arena, the more media and fans panicked.

"People thought his career was over," Dr. Burke says. "We didn't want him to be crippled as an adult."

Lemieux returned to the ice Jan. 26, 1991. The Penguins had managed to go 26-21-3 without him, and with their leader, they pushed on to the division title. In the playoffs, Lemieux's game rose with the stakes, just like in the Canada Cup. He was in so much pain that he had to sit out Game 3 of the Stanley Cup final against the Minnesota North Stars, but he still scored 44 points in the postseason, second in NHL history.

Along the way, Lemieux found his voice as a captain, too. "We're not going back for Game 7," he told the team before Game 6 in Minnesota.

"He never lets anybody down," Errey says.

The Penguins jumped on the North Stars from the start and won 8-0, clinching the franchise's first Stanley Cup. Lemieux led all scorers with 12 points in five games and was awarded the Conn Smythe Trophy as playoff MVP. As the team plane flew toward Pittsburgh, thousands of people had gathered at the airport in the middle of the night to welcome them home. It had taken seven years, but Lemieux finally had everyone's attention.

He was now walking in rarefied air. So it was no coincidence that he would cross paths with Michael Jordan that summer. His Airness, who had just won his first NBA Finals, and Lemieux met in Lake Tahoe at a celebrity golf tournament and clicked through their shared passions of golf, French wine and cigars. It didn't hurt that Lemieux was also one of the few people on the planet who happened to be going through the exact thing Jordan was — mostly, intense relief.

"It was very similar," Jordan says. "It was a dogfight. We were scoring champions who couldn't win a championship. We had great conversations about it. It was that type of relationship, that type of brotherhood."

Michael Jordan had few peers, but he saw Lemieux as one of them.

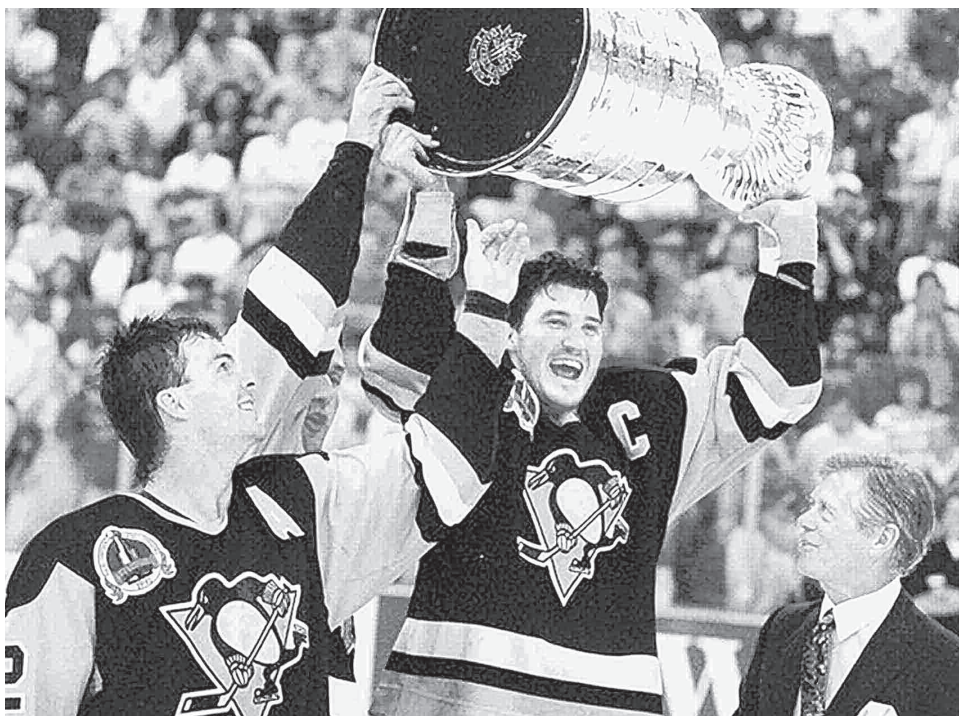
TOP: Mario Lemieux scores goal No. 1 against the Boston Bruins and goalie Pete Peeters Oct. 11, 1984.

MIDDLE RIGHT: Parents Jean Guy, right, and Pierrette take in Mario's home debut Oct. 17, 1984, at the Civic Arena. With them are then-girlfriend Nathalie Asselin and agent Bob Perno.

MIDDLE LEFT: Lemieux with part of his Pittsburgh family: Nancy Mathews, left, and son Michael.

BOTTOM: Lemieux on the eve of his NHL debut in 1984.

" … You cannot accumulate the points [Wayne Gretzky did] and not be the greatest player who ever played. That being said, the most talented player that ever played the game was Mario." — Paul Coffey



Darrell Sapp/Post-Gazette

ABOVE: Mario Lemieux hoists the first of two Stanley Cups he helped bring to the Penguins — May 25, 1991, in Minneapolis. At left is teammate Bob Errey.

ABOVE: Howard Baldwin, Penguins owner from 1991-99, made the contract happen that guaranteed Lemieux would always be paid more than Wayne Gretzky while also putting Lemieux and the team on a path that would force him to pursue ownership before the 1990s were out.

"Even though Mario was a bigger guy on skates," Jordan says, "it just seemed like he was moving so gracefully, like he had a rhythm about everything he did. I had a strong aggression about the way I played. It looked like his game came easier than mine."

The gradual polishing of Lemieux was becoming apparent off the ice, too. Howard Baldwin, the Penguins' new owner, was part of the Los Angeles social scene as a Hollywood producer and sensed his newly acquired talent in Pittsburgh — had he wanted to live life in the spotlight — would have fit right in.

"It's just the aura he gives off," Baldwin says. "We've worked with pretty much anybody and everybody out there, and there are a few that have the aura of a superstar. When they walk into a room, you know they're there. It's almost like a spiritual thing. It's an intangible gift that not many people have, and he has it."

Baldwin was in awe of Lemieux. After the second Stanley Cup in 1992, when Lemieux and agent Tom Reich approached Baldwin about a major contract extension that would make him the highest-paid player in the NHL and keep him in Pittsburgh until the end of the decade, Baldwin didn't balk, agreeing to a seven-year deal worth $42 million plus bonuses.

And to show how just how far Lemieux had come, Reich had included some specialized language in the contract: Lemieux would always be paid at least $1 million more per season than Wayne Gretzky.

Chapter 4

Crises Create Deeper Bond

The prophecy laid out by Pierrette Lemieux in the small kitchen on Jogues Street had rung true. *Mario is special. There is just something about him. Good things happen to him, all the time.* Yes, and that did not seem likely to change.

The 1992-93 Penguins were rolling toward the top seed in the conference, with Lemieux on pace to challenge Gretzky's single-season scoring record of 216 points. He was playing the best hockey of his career, with goals in 12 consecutive games. In his personal life, he was taking steps that would make Pierrette a very happy mother. He and his longtime girlfriend, the devoted and fiery blonde Nathalie Asselin, had moved to a beautiful home in Sewickley. They were engaged to be married that summer, and Nathalie was pregnant with their first child.

That just made it all the more jarring in early January when Dr. Burke received a phone call from a specialist who had shocking news: Mario Lemieux, the greatest hockey player in the world, had cancer. It had happened so fast — Mario showing him the lump on his neck, the doctor's decision to have it removed and tested, just as precaution, so that Mario could have no worries at all going forward. Odd, but they had already decided to sit Mario for three or four weeks because his back was acting up again. Now, Dr. Burke had to invite Mario to his office and deliver the crushing blow.

Dr. Burke stressed to Mario that they had caught it early, Stage 1. That Hodgkin's lymphoma, a cancer of the lymph nodes, had a survivor rate of 90 percent. Those assurances helped, but here was a 27-year-old man contemplating his mortality for the first time.

Lemieux drove back to Sewickley with the news eating away at him. Nathalie waited at home, planning Lauren's birth and a fancy Montreal wedding at historic Notre Dame Basilica. Lemieux pulled over to the side of the road and cried, a scene he softly described at an emotional news conference days later. Whether he wanted to or not, he had let people in, and, all over the city, those who knew him and those who didn't joined in praying for his quick recovery.

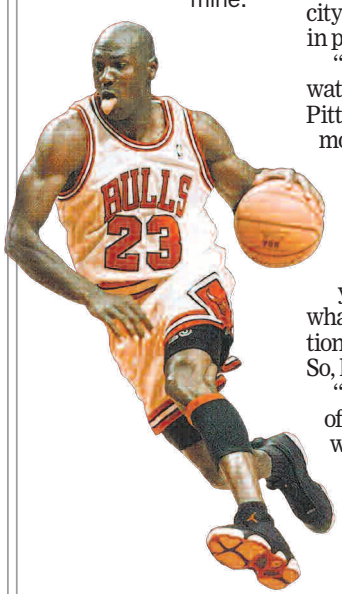
"People sent him family medals, bottles of holy water, Rosary beads," says Nancy Mathews, Mario's Pittsburgh mother. "He touched a lot of people, even more than he realized."

At home, Nathalie showed impressive strength. "Don't cry for him, don't show any weakness. He's going to be OK," she told Nancy when the Mathews first visited.

Lemieux had spent so many nights over the years awake, thinking about what lay ahead and what he was going to do about it. With weeks of radiation therapy staring him down, that wasn't easy to do. So, he just thought about hockey.

"I had a big lead on Pat Lafontaine," Lemieux says of the points race. "I would stay up at night and watch ESPN and find out how many points he got, day after day. He got a lead, and that was my goal, to come back after the last treatment and step on the ice and start chasing him. That was important for me. That was a challenge."

BELOW: Michael Jordan had few peers in the 1990s, but he considered Mario Lemieux one of them. Said Jordan: "It looked like his game came easier than mine."



On the morning of March 2, 1993, Lemieux had his last radiation treatment. He had missed 23 games, and Lafontaine now led him by 12 points with 20 games to go. The Penguins were playing that night at Philadelphia against the hated Flyers, and Lemieux wasn't going to miss it. He hopped a charter flight and arrived at the Spectrum, surprising everyone, even NHL commissioner Gary Bettman, who didn't have time to get to Philadelphia from New York to witness it.

When Lemieux took the ice, the Philadelphia fans who had lustily booed him for years were now on their feet, cheering him. Having not skated for nearly two months, his body tired from blasts of radiation, Lemieux scored a goal and an assist in a 5-4 loss. That felt remarkable, but he was just getting started.

The Penguins ran off an NHL-record 17 consecutive wins, as Lemieux set his sights on Lafontaine. Playing some of the most inspired hockey anyone had ever seen — never mind the circumstances — he scored 30 goals and had 26 assists after his return to pass Lafontaine and win by 12 points.

It was one of the most unfathomable seasons an athlete has had in any sport, and for a guy who valued his privacy, all it did was pull his fans and admirers closer.

"He was a superhero of flesh and blood," close friend Chuck Greenberg says. "He hurt, and he got sick, like real people do, and he did things that only superheroes can do. I think it made him that much more accessible, that much more relatable to people."

Lemieux had given Pittsburghers the joy of two Stanley Cups, but he felt a responsibility to do more. Now, he had a worthy cause. Penguins president Jack Kelley approached Lemieux about starting a foundation. As a cancer survivor who was thriving under a spotlight, he could stand for something bigger. Lemieux put best friend Tom Grealish in charge of it, and they would begin raising money with small golf outings that paired Mario up with donors for nine holes at a time. They had no idea where it was headed, but with the Lemieux name behind the project, the possibilities were endless.

A decade into his Pittsburgh tenure, Lemieux viewed the city as home. For proof, all one would need to see was his latest contract, orchestrated by Tom Reich, who got owner Howard Baldwin to agree to provisions that nobody in hockey had ever seen. Like this one: If Lemieux wanted to return to Montreal or to play in a bigger market like New York or Los Angeles, all he had to do was give the team six months' notice and they were required to find him a landing spot.

Reich might have asked for it — he hoped to give his client the power to steer the franchise — but Lemieux had no interest in testing the waters.

"It was a non-starter," says Steve Reich, who helped his uncle, Tom Reich, as one of Mario's agents. "As his agent, it would have been fun to see what he could have gotten on the open market. But at the end of the day, he wouldn't be who he is either. He always had the sense that his legacy was as a Penguin, and from the very beginning, he had a sense of the things he was going to be able to do as a Pittsburgher well beyond his playing days."

Lemieux had taken the lockout-ridden 1994-95 season off from hockey to rest his back and fully recover from his bout with cancer. As the 1995-96 season came around, he was refreshed, even with two little Lemieuxs, Lauren and Stephanie, running around in Sewickley. Soon, he and Nathalie would find out that she was pregnant with their third child.

The excitement would be short-lived, though. Doctors informed them that this was going to be a complicated pregnancy for Nathalie. To have a chance at a successful birth, she would have to remain bedridden throughout. It was hard to imagine, but somehow Mario and Nathalie still hadn't been through enough. This time, it would be him sitting by her bedside, paying her back for all the times she had woken up in the middle of the night to give him his medication.

"It was weighing heavily on Mario's mind, how this was going to unfold," Steve Reich says. "He said 100 times, he's been through a lot, but he always had control over it. With the helplessness of not being able to do anything about it, he was more of a passenger as opposed to the conductor."

Lemieux used hockey as an escape, continuing his mastery. Back in Sewickley, Nathalie's spirit was undaunted. When visitors suggested Nathalie should sit up instead of laying in bed, she wouldn't budge. This baby — it was a boy — was going to make it.

In late March 1996, three months before her due date, Nathalie went into labor. Her pregnancy was suddenly even more complicated. Mario was out with Grealish after a game when he got the call and high-tailed it to the hospital, where Nathalie gave birth to their son Austin.

"It was scary to see this little baby," Lemieux says, "weighing two pounds and seven ounces, holding him in the palm of your hand."

Still, finally, Lemieux could breathe easier. Nathalie was going to be OK, and, with the care of some of Pittsburgh's best neonatal doctors and nurses, there was no shortage of hope for Austin.

Two nights after Austin's birth, Wayne Gretzky's St. Louis Blues came to town. Throughout Lemieux's career, he had shown that no moment was too big. There was the first career goal on his first shift, the Canada Cup game-winners, the goal and assist on that magical night in Philadelphia, and now this.

Publicly dedicating the game to his tiny fighter of a son, Lemieux scored five goals and added two assists. Once again, his private struggles had fueled an amazing public display on the ice.

For months after the birth, Mario and Nathalie practically lived at the hospital, watching Austin slowly grow into a healthier baby.

In the process, they would see an opportunity for their new foundation. The Lemieuxs had noticed that there was nowhere for Lauren and Stephanie to play as they waited for their brother to get well. The foundation had been raising money for cancer research, but why not help in another area of health care where there was clearly a need? "Austin's Playroom" would become Nathalie's pet project, brightening dark days for families throughout the region.

"Certainly," Lemieux says, "all the adversity I went through created a great bond between our family and the people here in Pittsburgh."

A distinct quality had emerged from Mario Lemieux during the mid-1990s, one that wouldn't become clear until years later: When he encountered personal strife, he did not do the easy thing and let go of those memories. Instead, he funneled them into causes that would benefit everyone.

Chapter 5

A Fortune At Stake

Retirement was supposed to be golf outings with the guys, relaxing strolls down Sewickley's Beaver Avenue with the dogs, fun-filled evenings at home with the wife and children. Mario Lemieux left the game behind at 31 to save his ailing back while he still could and enjoy the sweet fruits of his labor.

After all he had been through, nobody could begrudge him that. And certainly nobody could have imagined that, in the fall of 1998, just a year after his grandiose exit — the Hockey Hall of Fame waived its three-year waiting period to enshrine him as soon as possible, and the Penguins promptly raised his retired jersey to the rafters — he'd be sitting in the private back room at Morton's Steakhouse in Downtown, contemplating questions about his financial future.

The Penguins owed Lemieux $32.5 million, even as he did not play out the length of his contract. But Roger Marino, who had joined Howard Baldwin's ownership group and kept it afloat, had decided that paying Lemieux was not part of his plans. Lemieux had already sued Marino, but now that Marino had taken the team into bankruptcy, the situation was even more serious. Depending on how it went in the courts, Lemieux, an unsecured creditor, could get next to nothing.

Tom Reich and his nephew Steve, Chuck Greenberg and bankruptcy attorney Doug Campbell joined Lemieux in the room that night. The group was eerily quiet, without the laughter and verbal one-upmanship that usually livened up their steak dinners. There was also no panic. Lemieux believed in himself and his friends. It wasn't that he had been purposefully assembling a team all these years in Pittsburgh, but whether it was his motive or not, he had one of the most fierce negotiators in the business in Tom Reich and a savvy young entrepreneur in Greenberg ready to fight for him at a moment's notice. This was that moment.

Lemieux was Tom Reich's favorite client, and he prided himself on making sure he had gotten Mario every dollar he was worth. Reich was ready to move back to Pittsburgh from Los Angeles to steer Lemieux out of this mess. Reich could not have forecast that the monstrous contract he constructed for Lemieux could have ended up putting the player in jeopardy.

The thing was, Mario's contract allowed for millions in deferred compensation, especially over the last three years. The Penguins had also deferred many of the performance bonuses Lemieux had earned, including the "Gretzky bump" that stated Lemieux had to be paid more than the "Great One." Lemieux was OK with the deferrals because he wanted to free up money in the short term for the franchise to surround him with talents like Jaromir Jagr. He deeply wanted to win another Cup or two.

When Lemieux decided that 1996-97 would be his last season, his contract was still guaranteed. Reich had gotten doctors' notes for Baldwin that said the long-term health of Lemieux's back was in jeopardy. If it had been a leg injury, for instance, Baldwin could have had grounds to not pay Lemieux for the remaining years. Because it was the back, and Reich had included stipulations about this exact scenario in the contract, there was nothing Baldwin could do about it. Mario was a rich man who was about to get richer.

"I thought everything was secured," Lemieux says.

So how does a franchise that recently won two Stanley Cups go bankrupt? Baldwin had bought the team from the DeBartolos without investing much capital, striking a deal with arena management company SMG that allowed it to take on the running of the events and pocket the profit as long as the Penguins could remain at the Civic Arena. At that time, though, player contracts (like Lemieux's) were about to skyrocket, and arena revenues, with the inclusion of luxury boxes and corporate suites, were about to explode. Baldwin's stake was in the side of the operation with growing expenses, not the one with increasing revenues. His business model was flawed from the start, and he didn't have the resources to reverse the tide.

It seemed like Marino's buying a $50 million stake was going to keep the franchise viable. But Marino had bristled at paying a retired superstar millions of dollars and used bankruptcy as a weapon against the creditors. SMG and Fox, which owned the Penguins' TV rights, were joining in a bid to buy the team.

That night at Morton's, it was time to discuss the options. Lemieux just listened, which was his way. Tom Reich started talking, which was his way. To Reich, it was clear: In order for his client to get his money and the Penguins to remain in Pittsburgh with proper ownership, Lemieux would have to put together a group to buy the team out of bankruptcy. It was wild, insane even. But Lemieux considered it.

They proposed the scenario to Campbell, who had the legal know-how.

"I said, 'OK, do you have any money?' No. 'Do you have any investors lined up?' No," Campbell says. "OK, so you're telling me a $30 million unsecured creditor who has no investors lined up is going to go head to head against two publicly-traded corporations, one of which has the master lease for the Civic Arena and the other the TV rights, and we don't even have a telephone or an office, and we're going to outmaneuver them legally and financially and get control of the franchise?"

"When they walk into the room, you know they're there. It's almost like a spiritual thing. It's an intangible gift that not many people have, and he has it." — Howard Baldwin

Well, yes.

"I just thought, that's something that's never been done before," Campbell said, "especially in the context of a sports franchise, to have an unsecured creditor try to take control of a case where he had so little leverage. The only thing we had going for us is the goodwill that comes with Mario Lemieux's name. Otherwise, it was a little bit like if someone said to you, 'I'd like to build a bridge across the Grand Canyon, but I don't really have any financing lined up, and you have to get it done within the next 12 months.' "

Through osmosis, Lemieux had picked up some business acumen from friends like Tom Grealish, Greenberg and Reich, but he knew he was out of his element here. Still, he understood the weight that his name carried in Pittsburgh. Surely, if potential investors understood that the Penguins could be headed for some other city like Portland, Ore., or staying in town under ownership that only cared about the bottom line, they'd pony up. Then again, $50 million was a lot to raise anywhere, much less in a city trying to recover from severe economic trauma.

Team Lemieux traveled to New York to make its case for ownership to Gary Bettman, and, if the NHL commissioner came off skeptical of the fresh-faced Lemieux running a franchise, please forgive him.

"I asked them a series of very difficult questions," Bettman says, "and I pressed them very hard, because I wanted Mario to understand what he was getting into, that it wasn't going to be easy. I was testing his commitment, pushing to see if they were going to be able to have the fortitude to get this done."

Bettman did not give the level of support they felt Lemieux deserved. Simply put, he was going to need to see more, and they received similar reactions from city politicians. Some were doubting Lemieux's intentions, assuming he was only out to recover his money.

So, Team Lemieux went to work. Each morning, Lemieux would arrive at Greenberg's office downtown at Pepper Hamilton law firm and try to understand the day's challenges. Reich would send daily faxes breaking down the proper course of action, and there was always room for debate. Greenberg and Reich, with huge personalities, often butted heads, but Grealish was there to protect Lemieux from the drama. With Lemieux, reasoned discussion was the way to win an argument. He would never raise his voice.

"If you disagree, you're not banished from the kingdom," Grealish says. "In fact you probably get elevated. But you don't pick a fight just to pick a fight."

They referred to their new life as "Groundhog Day," and Lemieux was in for all the tedium.

"He inspired us every day," Greenberg says.

Sometimes, it was hard not to worry: What if they didn't win? Grealish would fume just thinking of his friend signing autographs for hours at the Monroeville Mall. That was an exaggeration, of course, but it just felt wrong that Lemieux could be shortchanged. Throughout his career, he had turned down hundreds of chances to do advertisements and appearances because he was not comfortable in front of cameras and simply would have rather been playing golf. Now it seemed like he should have better capitalized on the height of his fame.

"He was very self-conscious about being viewed as a self-promoter," Steve Reich says.

Lemieux was the one with a fortune on the line, yet it was his friends who were losing their cool. Oddly, they were leaning on him.

"We were trying to find solutions, so I didn't dwell too much on what could happen," Lemieux says.

From the start, their plan called for Lemieux to receive some cash up front. That did not seem out of line, but maybe it was contributing to his perception problem.

Early one Sunday morning, Greenberg got a call from Lemieux.

"I've been up all night thinking," Greenberg recalls Lemieux saying. "If I went through everything I did in my career only for the Penguins to leave town a couple years later, what have I really accomplished? We have to make sure they stay in Pittsburgh."

Lemieux had decided that he was no longer going to receive any money after acquiring the team. He would turn much of what was owed him into equity and also contribute the $5 million he made from his suit with Marino. Greenberg was taken aback. He asked that Lemieux take a minute and think about his family. He would be risking never getting the money or even losing more if the Penguins weren't successful.

"This is the way it has to be," Greenberg recalls Lemieux saying. "For anyone to think that I'm just doing this to line my pockets is wrong. The only way we can stop that talk is by doing this."

When Team Lemieux told the bankruptcy judges about this change in strategy, they became the favored option. Lemieux's name, combined with his money, was undeniably enticing.

They still needed to reel in a big fish to invest with Lemieux. Once they had that, they could easily fill in the rest. Tony Liberati, who was a minority part of Team Lemieux's ownership group, reached out to Ron Burkle, a Southern California venture capitalist who made hundreds of millions of dollars in the grocery business. Liberati and Burkle had a prior relationship from when Burkle bought Ralph's grocery company from the DeBartolos.

Liberati asked Burkle, who was scheduled to fly from London to the U.S., to make a stop at the airport in Palm Beach, Fla. He agreed, and Lemieux and his team met him there. For about 20 minutes, Lemieux and Burkle spoke to each other alone, as Lemieux sold the billionaire on himself, the Penguins and Pittsburgh as a worthy investment.

"Just that it was a great franchise, that I was going to be involved on a day-to-day basis," Lemieux says. "He wanted to help me out. He had done some research on my career and wanted to be involved."

Lemieux had his guy. Burkle would go in as an equal partner with Lemieux. When they delivered the news to Bettman in New York, the commissioner's eyes got big. Lemieux had now legitimized himself.

"The big thing about him," Tom Reich says, "is he never showed weakness even when we were very weak."

With the judge's backing, Team Lemieux brokered a deal with SMG that would transfer the arena lease back to the team after a few years. Fox had already joined Lemieux's side. By spring 1999, the pieces had come together, and after a tense summer of final negotiations, the court approved Lemieux's purchase of the team on Sept. 3.

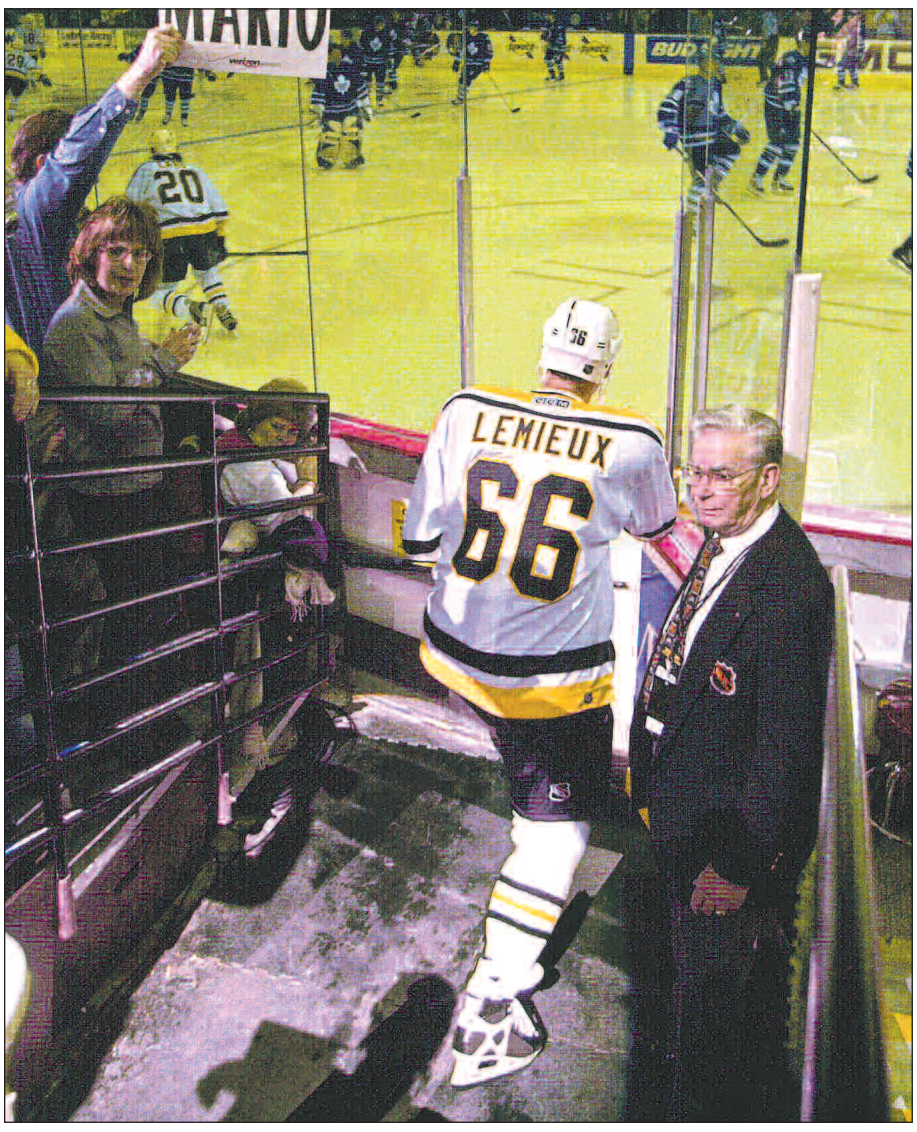
For Campbell, it would remain the most improbable victory of his career. It would not have been possible without Lemieux.

"He took a huge risk and was still very much at risk at the moment he acquired the team," Campbell says. "That's his money still there, and if it doesn't work, he's out."

Says Pittsburgh mayor Bill Peduto, a longtime Penguins fan who was just starting his political career at the time, "He helped to make sure we didn't lose a critical asset at a time when this city was struggling. There were those that made sure we worked to save the Pittsburgh Symphony and Pittsburgh Opera, that we didn't let our Downtown diminish, that we built a cultural district, and there's also one guy who everyone can point to and say with all honesty is the person that didn't let hockey leave Pittsburgh, and that is Mario Lemieux."

But there was no Stanley Cup-style celebration at Lemieux manor. There was too much to be done. On Lemieux's orders, the 29 creditors were to all be paid 100 cents on the dollar — a rare feat in bankruptcy cases — and it wouldn't be long before the new owners would have to start the colossal endeavor of getting a new arena built. Civic Arena was ready to fall on top of them, and the franchise wouldn't be safe until it had a new home.

"I remember right after the bankruptcy I went into the Penguin office to walk around and meet people," Lemieux says. "That was certainly a big change. I didn't feel as comfortable as I did on the ice, but I knew that it was going to be a new chapter in my life."



Gene J. Puskar/Associated Press

Chapter 6

The Double Life of 66

In the early days of his playing career, Mario Lemieux was a man on an island. The game's unforgiving rules allowed opponents to use their sticks to yank, flip and pull at him, disrupting his flow at any cost. Referees? They were basically zebra-themed decoration. Lemieux, with his size and reach, could play through the abuse, but other stars across the league had intimidators on their bench who would deter such behavior with just a pointed glance, and Lemieux did not.

Then Jay Caufield arrived. A football player at the University of North Dakota who eventually joined the school's storied hockey program, he was a linebacker on skates. The guy looked too much like G.I. Joe for anyone's comfort, so Lemieux could operate with more freedom. Caufield relished his role, and he would do anything for No. 66. Mostly, though, all Lemieux had asked of him in retirement was to frequently join him for 18 at The Club at Nevillewood.

When Caufield picked up his phone in fall 2000 and heard Lemieux's voice on the other end, he figured it was just his friend setting up another tee time. Turned out, it was anything but.

"Hey," Caufield recalls Lemieux saying, "what are you doing the next couple weeks?"

Lemieux wanted Caufield to start working him out, and Caufield did not push for more information. With Lemieux, it was always better not to pry.

The next day, in the early morning darkness, Lemieux and Caufield met at the Island Sports Center in Moon, on the campus of Robert Morris University. Their workouts were to remain secret, and Caufield had stressed that with ice rink operator Dale Rossetti, who had cleared out a small locker room for them.

Lemieux had not skated with any real purpose in more than three years, but the good news was that he had been able to rest his back. At 35, he wasn't exactly a clean slate, but there was reason for optimism.

Once they hit the ice, Lemieux did not have to say that he was thinking of making a comeback. Caufield could see it in his frustration at all the things he was unable to do. Lemieux had talked to his friend Michael Jordan about the challenges that he would face in coming back after an extended layoff, as Jordan had done, but experiencing them for himself was another thing entirely.

"The toughest part that we found in our comebacks," Lemieux says, "was your body adjusting to the training that it needs to be a world-class athlete."

Lemieux left the game on top, with a sixth scoring title, and he was not going to return unless he was sure he could reach that level again. The first workouts were fraught with the kind of self-doubt that "Le Magnifique" had never known.

One day, less than a week in, Lemieux was clearly struggling. He took a break and sat on the bench, and Caufield tried to lighten the mood with a story: His first practice with North Dakota after coming over from football, the other guys were skating circles around him, and he questioned whether he had made a huge mistake. Caufield thought it was funny that he was sharing that seemingly insignificant tale with the man he believed to be the greatest hockey player who ever lived, but somehow it connected.

"I don't know if I can do this," Lemieux confided.

His teammates had always joked that Lemieux's idea of training was not ordering ketchup with his French fries. He was having to earn it now, without any guarantees that it would be worth it.

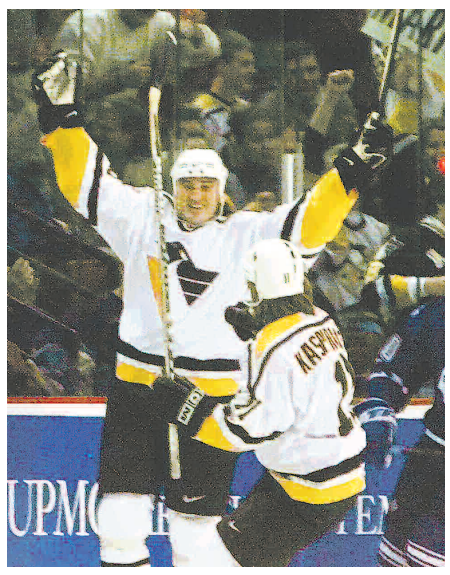
"That was his hump day," Caufield says. "He got a second wind, a third wind, from there. He went stronger, stronger, stronger. He wanted to do everything. If I said 'Go run into the wall 10 times,' he'd run into the wall 10 times."

For a few weeks, it remained their secret. Lemieux hadn't even told his wife, Nathalie, or close friends Tom Grealish and Chuck Greenberg. He had to know he could do it first.

On a Thursday night in early November, as George W. Bush sweated out a contested victory in Florida over Al Gore, Lemieux asked Grealish and Greenberg to join him for a post-dinner drink at Grealish's apartment on Mount Washington.

With the sparkling Pittsburgh skyline a fitting backdrop, Lemieux delivered the news.

"I want to tell you something," Grealish recalls Lemieux saying. "I'm thinking of coming back to play."



Keith Srakocic/Associated Press

"I'm like, 'Oh, that's great, I mean you should, get back in shape,' " Grealish says. "I'm thinking he's going to play in an alumni game."

No, Lemieux said. He was talking about playing for the Pittsburgh Penguins.

"I just screamed, 'NOOOO! NOOOO! You said you weren't going to do this!' " Grealish says.

Lemieux told Grealish that he had been training with Caufield, and that he'd turned a corner.

"This is going to work," Grealish recalls him saying.

Well, that was that. As Lemieux had proven over and over, once he decided something, there was no stopping him. For Grealish and Greenberg, the excitement quickly sunk in. They knew how big it would be, and since they couldn't discuss it with anyone else, they'd call each other to gab like giddy teenagers.

Soon, Lemieux would pick a date — Dec. 27, 2000, against the Toronto Maple Leafs at the newly named Mellon Arena — and announce his comeback to the world. He would remain the team's owner, and certainly his return would put more people in the seats, helping the bottom line.

"But that's not who Mario is," Greenberg says. "That would have been a mercenary decision."

Lemieux looked at players like Jaromir Jagr and Alexei Kovalev, and he thought there was a window for another Stanley Cup run. He also wanted his children, especially 4-year-old Austin, to be able to see him play and remember what it was like. Plus, "I missed the game," he says.

Tickets for the Lemieux return flew off the shelves. Fans never did retire their '66' sweaters, but now they wore them with extra vigor. Longtime announcer John Barbaro, the man in the booth with the melodious voice, dusted off his famous Lemieux cadence. And when the night arrived, the old building hummed and buzzed like never before.

Seeing Mario Lemieux skate onto the ice again was the best of both worlds — a trip down memory lane and a thrill you'd never forget. The anticipation was palpable; everybody knew his first goal just had to be coming. In the second period, with the Penguins leading 2-0, Jagr brought the puck into the zone, spun around and fired a pass cross-ice to the trailing Lemieux, who one-timed it past the goaltender and sent the crowd into delirium.

Whether you were in the arena or at home or your local pub, the moment was a blur — ESPN play-by-play man Gary Thorne yelling "*MARIO! IS! BACK!*", Lemieux raising his hands as he skated with a big smile along the boards, Barbaro practically singing "*Mario LEMIEUUUUUUUUX!*" for the first time in nearly four years.

Caufield looked on and knew he had the best view of it all.

"I knew what it entailed," he says. "Only certain players … only certain people … you got to have that intestinal fortitude."

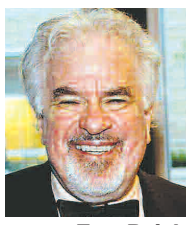
TOP: Few sporting events in Pittsburgh sports history were met with as much buzz as the night of Dec. 27, 2000, when Mario Lemieux stepped back on home ice for the first time in more than 3½ years.

ABOVE: In keeping with his mother's proclamation that good things happen to him all the time, Lemieux added to the storybook feel of that night by assisting on the first goal of the game and later scoring one of his own.

"… There's also one guy who everyone can point to and say with all honesty is the person that didn't let hockey leave Pittsburgh and that is Mario Lemieux." — Bill Peduto

TEAM LEMIEUX

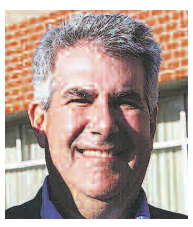
Key players in Mario Lemieux's career in Pittsburgh, particularly in his efforts to buy the team and then those that got Consol Energy Center built:



Tom Reich
Agent

Chuck Greenberg
Lawyer

Tom Grealish
Advisor



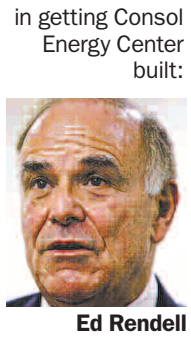
Steve Reich
Agent

Doug Campbell
Lawyer

Ron Burkle
Investor

THE POLS

Politicians Team Lemieux dealt with in getting Consol Energy Center built:



Ed Rendell
Governor
2003-11

Luke Ravenstahl
Mayor
2006-14

Dan Onorato
County executive
2004-12

Caufield had brought Lemieux back just as he'd planned. In 43 regular season games, he scored 76 points (35 goals and 41 assists), finishing second in the MVP voting. The Penguins advanced to the Eastern Conference final, losing in five games to New Jersey.

It had been a magical season for Lemieux, the Penguins and Pittsburgh. But through it all, Lemieux was still having to switch hats. A brutal reality had set in that the franchise had to consider trading Jagr — who won the scoring title that year and had played all 11 seasons of his career in Pittsburgh — to save money. Jagr was owed $20.7 million the next two seasons, and he had been asking for a trade for months. So Lemieux and the cash-strapped Penguins gave Jagr his wish, dealing him to the Capitals for three players who would never impact the Penguins.

Two seasons later, in February 2003, the Penguins would trade Kovalev to the Rangers for $4 million cash and more throwaway players.

These were not the kind of moves a competitor like Lemieux would have ever wanted to make, but, living in a post-bankruptcy world with an NHL lockout looming, he had to do what was best for the franchise's long-term stability.

"We had no choice at the time," Lemieux says. "We were fighting for a new arena, and the team was not very good. At times, we had 7, 8,000 in the building. It was pretty depressing. There were times when I didn't think we were going to make it."

The magic of Lemieux's return had worn off, and making matters worse, he was now battling issues with his hip as well as his back. In the three seasons after his comeback year, Lemieux missed more games than he played.

"There's no doubt he had a lot on his plate," says Eddie Olczyk, a former Penguins player who was hired as coach in June 2003. "Look, I'll just say this: One minute, he's worried about the power play and how we're going to generate a little bit more there, then a period of time after that, he's in the middle of a PowerPoint presentation and talking about finances and stuff like that. He was trying to do everything."

It was Olczyk's job to coach a bad Penguins team in the present while marketing what Lemieux still hoped was a promising future. After trading assets like Jagr and Kovalev, they were going to build through the draft. In 2003, the Penguins selected Canadian goaltender Marc-Andre Fleury with the first overall pick, and, as Tom and Nancy Mathews did for him, Lemieux invited Fleury into his home for the first year of his career.

In 2004, the Penguins drafted Russian Evgeni Malkin, a dynamic scorer, with the second overall pick. At least they got something out of their sorry 23-47-8-4 record heading into the sport's longest winter.

While the lockout of 2004-05 was disastrous for hockey, it would end up being a blessing for the Penguins. To stay afloat, small-market teams especially needed a salary cap. The players, after 10 months of bitter negotiations, agreed to one July 21, 2005.

A day later, the NHL hurringly held a draft lottery. It was the Sidney Crosby Sweepstakes. Even more so than Lemieux, who had to play in the shadow of Wayne Gretzky, Crosby, a Cole Harbour, Nova Scotia, native, had been anointed by Canadians as the next coming of the "Great One." Some team and some city were about to get very lucky.

The Penguins, because of their recent on-ice woes, were one of four teams with the best chance (6.25 percent) to get Crosby. Sure enough, the last two pingpong balls remaining were the Penguins and Ducks (who started at 4.17 percent). After having Lemieux drop into their laps two decades ago, it was hard for anybody outside of Pittsburgh to root for the Penguins. But Mario Lemieux knew just how much his franchise needed anything positive to happen.

The Ducks were the second-to-last ball taken. Crosby was headed to Pittsburgh.

"Mario called me and said, 'We got him! We got Sidney!' " Grealish says. "I don't remember ever hearing him that excited."

Chuck Greenberg immediately had an idea. He called Lemieux and volunteered to take in Crosby. Lemieux didn't say no, but he had to talk to Crosby's agent, Pat Brisson, first.

"I've got good news and bad news," Greenberg recalls Lemieux saying. "The good news is Pat thinks it's a terrific idea. The bad news is he'll live with me, not you."

The hockey gods had bestowed a once-in-a-lifetime gift upon the Penguins — well, maybe it was more like twice-in-a-lifetime — and Lemieux, like Eddie Johnston before him, wasn't going to leave anything to chance.

With Fleury, Malkin and Crosby, the Penguins suddenly had the best young nucleus of talent in the league. That alone wasn't going to get an arena built, but any assets could be used as bargaining chips with city and state politicians who were all too skeptical of the franchise's long-term benefit to Pittsburgh.

The 2005-06 season had the potential to be a hockey fan's dream. Here was the 40-year-old Lemieux handing off the baton to the 18-year-old Crosby each night for the world to see. Lemieux enjoyed the opportunity to mentor his new housemate, but he could not deny that the business demands were taking their toll.

"There was a lot of stress that he was wearing," Olczyk says.

That summer, Lemieux had noticed that he had an irregular heartbeat. He took some tests, and doctors said he was OK to play. But in late November on a Florida road trip, Lemieux experienced it again. He called Olczyk to help him in his Tampa hotel room.

"He was scared," Olczyk says. "We were all scared."

A few weeks later, after a practice in Pittsburgh, Lemieux's heart rate increased once more. He went to the hospital, where he was hooked up to a monitor and diagnosed with atrial fibrillation, a condition that causes one's pulse to flutter unpredictably.

Stubbornly, he played a week later on Dec. 16 against Buffalo at Mellon Arena, and the condition flared up again. That night, his resolve shaken, Lemieux called Grealish and asked him to come to Sewickley to talk.

"I think I'm done," Grealish recalls him saying. "I can't get past this thing. I am getting older. I used to be able to control the pace of the game. I could slow everyone down. I just can't do it anymore."

Lemieux had never wanted to be one of those guys who hung on too long, and he knew that's where he was headed. He suggested having a news conference, but Grealish urged him not to be rash. This was too big of a decision. Lemieux gave it another month before announcing on Jan. 24, 2006, that he had played his last game.

"This is it, and it hurts," Lemieux said then.

He retired as the game's seventh-leading career scorer with 1,723 points, and yet hockey observers couldn't help but wonder how much more he could have done without his four maladies: the back, the Hodgkin's, the hip and the heart.

Lemieux's comeback might have been stirring, but what had it really accomplished? The larger circumstances on the day of his second retirement were the same as five years earlier on the day of his triumphant return: Much of his fortune was unsecured, tied up in a business that was in desperate need of a lifeline, and nobody that mattered seemed to be listening.

Chapter 7

A Test of Loyalty

It was hard for the politicians to see, but truly, Mario Lemieux did not owe Pittsburgh a thing. The Penguins had become his livelihood, and the financial fate for generations of his family was now dependent on the franchise's success.

Much was on the line, and there was little room for romance. Lemieux had loved Pittsburgh, sacrificed for Pittsburgh, believed in Pittsburgh enough to play his whole career here and raise his four children here. He knew this arena business wasn't personal, but hadn't he earned more faithful cooperation from his city's elected officials?

An angry Mario Lemieux was not good for anyone. Those closest to him knew that.

"Mario's a very loyal man," says Nancy Mathews, his Pittsburgh mother. "Don't screw him. You just don't do that with him. He very quietly turns his back, and that's the end of it."

There were a few factors working against Lemieux. First, the city was broke, having been designated as financially distressed and put under state supervision in December 2003 as part of Act 47. Plus, city and county taxpayers had been asked to pony up for the building of Heinz Field and PNC Park, and officials were hesitant to do so again this soon. Voters would have revolted, but the fact remained: A big city with two professional teams instead of three, simply put, becomes less of a big city. Ask people who live in Cincinnati or Baltimore how much fun the winter is.

There was one way that the Penguins could stay in Pittsburgh: In December 2006, Pennsylvania was going to be awarding slot machine licenses for the first time, and a Pittsburgh casino was on the table. Isle of Capri Casinos Inc. was one of three gaming companies competing for the license, and it and the Penguins had agreed that Isle of Capri would contribute $290 million to the building of a new arena if it won the license, taking on the entire cost of construction.

But if one of the other two bidders won, an alternative Plan B crafted by Gov. Ed Rendell would be in play. It required that the Penguins contribute $8 million up front and $4 million a year for the 30-year lease, which was like walking off a cliff from the Isle of Capri plan.

Lemieux did not want to go down in history as the guy who moved the Penguins out of Pittsburgh. He would have rather sold the team than end up going down that road, and so he and co-owner Ron Burkle began talks with Canadian billionaire Jim Balsillie, who was the co-CEO of Research In Motion, which makes BlackBerry wireless devices. Balsillie had always wanted to own a franchise, and he indicated to Lemieux that he hoped to keep the Penguins in Pittsburgh. In early October 2006, Lemieux and Burkle signed away the Penguins to Balsillie for $175 million — a respectable haul but not nearly what they would have been worth with a new arena.

Two months later, though, Balsillie withdrew from the sale after he and the NHL reached a stalemate over terms in a last-minute agreement. Reports said that Balsillie balked at a stipulation that made him promise to keep the club in Pittsburgh. It had been theorized that he would rather have the franchise in Hamilton, Ontario, within an hour of his home, and his reaction seemed to confirm that theory.

Balsillie's move "shocked and offended" Lemieux, who was now left to hope that Isle of Capri would win the bid.

Days later, the Pennsylvania Gaming Control Board pulled the rug out from beneath the Penguins and their fans by awarding the Pittsburgh license to the smaller PITG Gaming LLC, owned by Detroit-based Don Barden. If the Balsillie sale had gone through, this would not have been Lemieux's problem anymore. But now, he had no choice but to white-knuckle through a Plan B that worked for the Penguins and the state, city and county, or move the team.

"I don't think anybody appreciated how close this team was to being gone," Tom Grealish says. "And this is not a guy that is prone to making threats and pounding the table and calling news conferences. He's just going to say, 'OK, you don't want to do this? We'll do something else.'

"This is dangerous. This is really close to being a disaster for Pittsburgh. And he's just getting pushed, and pushed, and pushed, and somebody is going to push one too many buttons, and then it will be over."

As the calendar turned to 2007, Lemieux, Burkle and Chuck Greenberg, operating as counsel, were going head-to-head with Rendell, Pittsburgh Mayor Luke Ravenstahl and Allegheny County Chief Executive Dan Onorato. Lemieux felt more at ease in this setting than he did during the bankruptcy chaos of 1999, but he still leaned on Burkle and Greenberg.

The one thing each side had going for them was that Burkle and Rendell had a previous relationship, with Burkle having been one of the Democratic party's biggest donors and Rendell having served as general chairman of the Democratic National Committee during the 2000 election. Burkle did most of the talking, but Rendell respected Lemieux's presence.

"Mario Lemieux as a businessman and a negotiator is the same as he was as a hockey player," Rendell says. "He was charming and a great guy, but when it came down to brass tacks he was tough as nails and would give you an elbow in the back.

"Mario was very much pro-Pittsburgh. He was trying to find a way to make it work. He was tough to deal with and he squeezed every ounce of energy that we had."

The Penguins soon realized that, to get the best deal from Pittsburgh, they would have to do a little flirting — or, elbowing, if you will. In early January, Lemieux and Burkle visited Kansas City, which was building a state-of-the-art downtown arena. The Anschutz Entertainment Group, which operated the Sprint Center, told the Penguins they could play there rent-free with a half-stake in management of the arena.

"The deal Kansas City had on the table was too good not to take," says David Morehouse, the Penguins' president who then was advising Lemieux and Burkle during the arena negotiations. "That was the frustration point … there's this city that really wants us."

But, even as Kansas Citians joyfully prepared to welcome Sidney Crosby, the Penguins could not get the politicians back home to take them seriously. So, in early March, they went back to Kansas City for an impromptu meeting with many of the city's corporate leaders, who promised they would sell out all of the club suites. Lemieux already was impressed with the Sprint Center, telling the Kansas City folks that it had the best sight lines outside of the Bell Centre in Montreal, and the devotion of the city's businesses only made him think more about uprooting the team to America's heartland.

"It would have been easy for us to pack up and move to Kansas City," Lemieux says. "Everything was taken care of. But at the end of the day, I wanted to give Pittsburgh one last shot to make a deal with us before we decide to make the move."

The Penguins finally had created enough leverage to move Rendell. The governor agreed to not make the Penguins pay anything up front, and they would only have to contribute $2.2 million annually. On March 13, 2007, the sides announced that the Penguins would remain in Pittsburgh for the next 30 years with a new arena in Uptown. The franchise — and Lemieux's legacy as its savior — would live on.

That night, the Penguins were playing the Sabres at Mellon Arena, and the team's vice president of communications, Tom McMillan, asked Lemieux to go onto the ice and trumpet the victory. Lemieux said no. He was not one for victory laps. But McMillan called Grealish and asked him to plead with his friend.

"I'm not going out on the ice tonight," Grealish recalls Lemieux saying.

"You *are* going out on the ice tonight," Grealish told him. "You've got to go out and say something. This isn't about *you*. It's about *them*."

Lemieux suddenly understood. The fans, who had cheered him for more than two decades, needed to hear from him in that moment. Before the game, he went onto the ice and took the microphone.

"Your Pittsburgh Penguins," he said, "will remain right here in Pittsburgh where they belong!"

Those words, from this man in front of these people, signified a completed journey. What had the past 23 years been other than Mario Lemieux slowly finding his voice and then realizing what he could do with it, if used at just the right time? It had been that way as a captain, as the face of a foundation, as the owner who surprised everyone by stepping forward. Through it all, he was an observer first, a decision-maker second, and he had somehow managed to get what he needed for himself and his family while at the same time doing what was right for Pittsburgh.

Now, the fun could start. This was supposed to be fun, remember? Hockey had always been the easy part, and from the owner's box, Lemieux could see it coming together. Crosby was a dynamo, Marc-Andre Fleury was developing in net, and they had gotten Evgeni Malkin over to Pittsburgh from Russia through some Cold War tactics.

That spring, the Penguins were on their way back to the playoffs, and how about this? Crosby was still living with Lemieux, who would joke with friends about his million-dollar baby sitter. Nathalie and Mario had made their manor feel like a home, a comfortable place for Crosby to ease into his transition from boy to man. Funny, but Lemieux and Crosby didn't talk much about hockey, at least in a serious way. Lemieux just let him be, giving his star player the space he would have wanted himself, and Crosby could just watch the legend in his midst.

"Him being pretty even-keeled, that's something that I think over the course of a season or a career worked really well for him," Crosby says. "There were a lot of things that happened on and off the ice, and I think all those things just allowed him to have experience and be able to handle things well. Those things stuck out a lot to me."

As an owner, Lemieux was now solely focused on the business and helping to create the right hockey culture. He stayed in the background publicly, but he would visit the locker room after each game to show his support for the guys, and when the Penguins would bring in a new player, he would always personally greet him. Somewhere along the way, he had figured out what a handshake and a smile meant to others.

"He is aware of it, but almost in a shy way," Morehouse says.

When the Penguins fired coach Michel Therrien during the 2008-09 season and promoted Dan Bylsma from their American Hockey League club in Wilkes-Barre/Scranton, it was Lemieux who met Bylsma at Mellon Arena on his first day in Pittsburgh.

"It was very cordial, respectful," Bylsma says. "We talked about the team a little bit, and that was probably the longest conversation we had in my five and a half years in Pittsburgh. He was just a presence, an encouraging and steady force more than being there to offer an opinion."

That team had lost to the Red Wings in the Stanley Cup final in six games the previous year and was expected to return. So for the Penguins to be trailing two games to none in the conference semifinals against the Capitals was harrowing, especially for Bylsma, who was coaching in the biggest series of his life. He would never forget what Lemieux said to him in the locker room after Game 2.

"It's a long two months, Coach," Lemieux told him.

The message was subtle yet clear enough — Mario Lemieux still believed that the Penguins were going to be playing for a while.

"He was charming and a great guy, but when it came down to brass tacks he was tough as nails and would give you an elbow in the back." — Ed Rendell

They won that series 4-3 and then swept the Hurricanes in the conference final. They would meet the Red Wings again in the Stanley Cup final, and after six games, they were knotted, 3-3. The home team had won each game, and the decider was back in Detroit at famed Joe Louis Arena.

The night before the game, Tom McMillan was at a restaurant in Detroit with Morehouse, general manager Ray Shero, Bylsma, his assistant coaches and director of team services Frank Buonomo. McMillan glanced at his phone to see an email from Lemieux, who was still in Pittsburgh, at 7:34 p.m.

"Do you think I should have a message posted for the guys in the dressing room before the game tomorrow?" Lemieux asked.

McMillan was a bit shocked. Lemieux never did that kind of stuff. McMillan discussed it with his dinner group, and everyone thought it would be great for the players to hear from Lemieux. Before McMillan could respond, Lemieux had typed out his message and sent it along:

"This is a chance of a lifetime to realize your childhood dream to win a Stanley Cup. Play without fear and you will be successful!! See you at center ice," he wrote.

McMillan asked Lemieux if he would be OK with Buonomo sending it as a text message to the players as well.

"Go for it," Lemieux responded. "We are going to win tomorrow … "

He and McMillan continued their exchange for a bit more. Mario was like a kid again.

"I'm not a novelist," Lemieux wrote, "but I speak from the heart and I think that might give the boys a little boost before they step on the ice… Hope so anyway!!"

And then …

"Text the boys before they get up tomorrow. Like it!!"

When the players woke up, Lemieux's words were waiting for them.

"The players just dubbed them the 'Braveheart texts,' " Bylsma says.

Mario Lemieux was no William Wallace, but he was growing a pretty fierce playoff beard, and he had picked a perfect spot to make himself heard. The Penguins knew that Lemieux's expectation was that they would meet him at center ice to receive the Stanley Cup, and so that's exactly what they did, after Fleury stoned Nicklas Lidstrom's final shot attempt with one of the greatest saves in playoff history to preserve their 2-1 victory.

Seventeen long years had passed, and now Lemieux was hoisting the Cup once more.

"It was very satisfying," Lemieux says. "It's certainly not the same as when you're a player and you win the Cup for the first time. It was a great process. Obviously getting the lottery changed the whole franchise, to be able to get Sid and build around him, knowing that year after year we were going to have a pretty good chance to be successful."

They were champions again, and after one final season at Mellon Arena, they would have a new home at Consol Energy Center, where they'd make fresh memories.

Oct. 7, 2010, was opening night. Before the drop of the puck, Lemieux skated to center ice with a surprise. Concealed in his suit jacket was a water bottle containing melted ice from Mellon Arena. A spotlight shined on him as he revealed the bottle, hoisted it into the air and poured the water onto the ice, christening this new building that for a decade had only been a dream he clung to during sleepless nights. Thousands screamed as he kissed the empty bottle, and this time, no words were needed.

Chapter 8

It's For Them

The vision is always there. No matter what the present holds, Mario Lemieux can look into the distance and see something grander ahead. From a tony Montreal basement where his father would deliver snow for a makeshift playing surface, Lemieux could see NHL superstardom. From anywhere on the ice, he could see a highlight developing before it happened. From the Penguins' consistent standing at the bottom of the league, he could see Lord Stanley's Cup and imagine it in Pittsburgh. From inside the brittle bones of old Mellon Arena, he could see the light across the street at Consol Energy Center.

The vision applies everywhere, and, once he's fixed on something, he will never do anything halfway. As a golfer, he has worked his way to a 2 handicap. How about his love of wine? Early in his career, he became friends with veteran goaltender Gilles Meloche, who joined the Penguins in 1985. Meloche was a wine connoisseur, and with Lemieux just coming of age to drink, he passed his passion for the grape down to the kid. In his first apartment in Mt. Lebanon, Lemieux kept about 10 cases of wine next to his sofa. At his first home, he built a small cellar, which held about 200 bottles. He was intoxicated, not so much by the heady buzz, but by the expansive world that could open through the pursuit of a good bottle. He began to dabble in wine futures, investing in vintage Bordeauxs while still in the barrel, purchasing them at least a year ahead of their official release.

When he and Nathalie moved to their Sewickley home in 1993, they picked the place with an eye on staying there for a while, and for Lemieux, that meant giving proper respect to the vine. The contractors would take about a year to complete his plan, but when finished, Pittsburgh's prince would have a wine cellar befitting a Parisian king.

On an early September morning, after a second hourlong discussion of his 30 years in Pittsburgh, Lemieux graciously offers up a quick tour of the house. It starts in his first-floor office, where he makes note of his messy desk — yet, everything is stacked in orderly fashion — and points to the shelves displaying all of his hockey hardware, the six Ross Trophies, the three Hart Trophies, the two Conn Smythe Trophies and much more. Lemieux might not like talking about the past, but he values it.

"Where's my gold medal?" he says, looking for the 2002 Olympic prize he brought home from Salt Lake City and finding it in another corner.

The trophies are impressive, but what of this wine cellar? Surely, it will serve as the key into the padlocked mind of Lemieux. He agrees to open it, and walks across the house, by the ornate, antique fixtures at each turn, and down a staircase to a side room that appears to have no real purpose. But Lemieux pushes against the wooden wall, and a door suddenly appears, opening to a hidden passageway.

Inside, it is chilly, damp, dark. If one didn't know the cavelike surroundings were leading to a wine cellar, it wouldn't be out of line to wonder if Mario Lemieux were actually Batman.

The next flight of stairs leads into the main room of the cellar, where old bottles and boxes cover the walls. With the contents of the two other rooms off to the right, Lemieux has collected about 2,500 bottles from all over the globe. Down here, he couldn't be further from his parents' home in Ville Emard, where Molson was the drink of choice.

"If we had wine, it was in a box," Lemieux recalls with a chuckle.

Sheets of paper sit on a table in the middle of the room. They make up Lemieux's wine registry, what has made it here and what is on the way. He says he is not as into it as he used to be, but friends say he will spend hours at a time in this dank dungeon, chronicling his acquisitions with the exquisite handwriting of a perfectionist.

No, Lemieux is definitely not Batman, although he has swooped in to save the day several times — and, given his personality, he would probably prefer to be the masked kind of hero. A more apt comparison would be Bruce Wayne, only minus the dark undertones; Like Wayne, Lemieux quietly owns one of the biggest businesses in town, keeps a low public profile and takes pride in hosting great parties.

He is the son of Pierrette, generously filling glasses. He is the son of Jean-Guy, happy to thrive off the energy and conversation of others. He is a deeply private man, but he is not a loner.

"He really likes to have a lot of people around," best friend Tom Grealish says. "I don't know how many days in his life he's been alone in any house that he's lived in. My guess is you could count them up on one hand."

When he's in the right mood, Lemieux will show his mother's flare. He will play the piano. He will sing. He will do impressions. He can imitate anything from singer Englebert Humperdinck to basketball announcer Marv Albert — *Jordan from the key … YES!*

"Everything about Mario is very classy," Jordan says. "It's totally natural. If you first see him, you think he's so quiet, but he's not. He's very observant. Even when I first met him, he seemed much more mature for his age than you would expect. He was always that way."

Always? Well, yes. Tom Mathews took Lemieux into his home when he was just a 19-year-old trying to learn a new language and handle the rigors of his rookie season, and Mathews could tell there was something inside of the kid that just hadn't been tapped yet.

"He's always carried himself with some sort of dignity," Mathews says, "First of all, he's big. He's 6-4, a good-looking guy. Mario's a presence, and I think that, over time, he has grown into that so nicely. He's grown, to me, in stature, how he carries himself."

But not many people get to witness Lemieux's polish. Around Sewickley, he is polite, but will often be seen eating alone at the Sewickley Hotel or Sewickley Cafe, where people are good about letting him be. At 18-year-old Austin's hockey games, it's been rare that he's had to tell a persistent stranger that he is there to watch his son play.

Usually, if he's going to step out of his comfort zone, it will be in the name of his Mario Lemieux Foundation, which has raised and donated millions for cancer research, the latest gift a $2.5 million sum to establish a lymphoma center for children and young adults in his name. And there are now 31 "Austin's Playrooms" across the Pittsburgh area, with more on the way.

The foundation, more than his handprints all over the city's hockey scene, will be how his name endures and touches the most people. Lemieux admits that the foundation has far exceeded even his original vision.

"A little bit surprised," he says. "I think the least we can do as celebrities or athletes is try to help other people who are less fortunate."

That comment, taken without context, could read like a staid cliche straight out of the philanthropist's handbook, but that is just how Lemieux talks. He proves that his words are more than platitudes by giving his time in ways that few get to see.

Over the years, he has kept in contact with children who have Hodgkin's lymphoma or other cancers. He figures that in their minds, if they know Mario Lemieux went through it, it can't be that bad.

"Kids from Canada, the U.S., everywhere in the world, I'm glad to do it," he says. "I keep their number in my phone, and I text them."

Grealish has noticed that Lemieux puts more effort each year into making his annual fantasy hockey camp fundraiser a first-class event. The last thing Lemieux would want to subject himself to is a bunch of middle-aged men fawning over him, and it would be easy for him to make a few cursory appearances, tell some stories about the good ol' days and let his staff handle the brunt of it. But Lemieux has put his personal touch on it, having a contract signing ceremony for each participant and being present for most of the three to four days.

"That's far more Mario than putting on a black tie," says Dr. Andy Urbach, the chief pediatric resident at the Children's Hospital of Pittsburgh of UPMC and a member of the foundation's board of directors. "He likes being one of the guys, where he can relate to people and make the time special for himself and for everyone else."

At his annual golf fundraiser — which in Lemieux fashion has gone private after years of having celebrities descend upon Pittsburgh for a public show — he will make some comments at a post-round dinner in a room full of the foundation's biggest donors. This year, Grealish and friend Chuck Greenberg were blown away when Lemieux unleashed a 10- to 12-minute speech about all the important things the foundation was doing.

"Mario had a page of notes that he never looked at," Greenberg says. "To go from someone who preferred to be in the background to someone who can speak from the heart about something that's intensely personal, without ever seeming like a huckster, is a wonderful reflection of his evolution and growth as a person. He does it every year, and it gets stronger and more meaningful every year. It's time-lapse photography."

When deciding whether to come out from behind the curtain, Lemieux first considers how his actions will be perceived. He will gladly do it for his foundation because the goal is clearly to help others. But if there's a chance people will think he is hunting the spotlight, he will shy away.

That's why his answer to the Penguins wanting to build a statue of him outside the arena was an immediate "no." Of course, the Penguins called on Grealish to once again remind him: *It's not for you. It's for them.*

"It's OK to be a big deal," Grealish says. "You don't need to be a big shot, but you are a big deal."

That statue, unveiled as "Le Magnifique" in March 2012, is a 4,700-pound rendering of Lemieux breaking through two defenders in a game from 1988.

Lemieux's parents, wife and four children attended the ceremony on that sunny spring-like day, as past, present and future united. Pierrette and Jean-Guy Lemieux still live in the small house on Jogues Street in Montreal, and, while their four grandchildren have an appreciation for their French-Canadian heritage, they're proud to have been molded in Pittsburgh.

Lauren Lemieux is in school at Babson College in Wellesley, Mass., but she interned this summer in Pittsburgh. Stephanie did her first year at Boston College but then transferred home to Carnegie Mellon. Austin and Alexa have one more year of high school at Central Catholic and Oakland Catholic, respectively, before Mario and Nathalie will have an empty nest.

All generations of the Lemieux family will now be able to congregate at Mont Tremblant, the mansion Lemieux recently built in Quebec. But he does not want there to be any confusion.

"This is my home, our home," Lemieux says of Pittsburgh, "and we're going to be here for a long time."

Says Grealish: "He's a Pittsburgher at heart. Pittsburghers don't like change a whole lot. We like predictability. We like going to the same golf course, the same restaurant. He's a Pittsburgher in that he wants *the same*. He wants to be around the same people, go to the same places. He doesn't want to be a jet-setter and go to parties and meet new people. He is content."

At 30 years and going strong, it's safe to say: the Lemieux-Pittsburgh partnership stands alone.

"It is unique," says former Rangers goaltender John Vanbiesbrouck. "A lot of guys leave, go home, come back and wave every once in a while. There's very few that have built a relationship with a fan base and a city like Pittsburgh and Mario. You look through all sports, I mean, who has that relationship?"

Credit Pittsburgh, too.

"This wouldn't happen in New York," Morehouse says.

Lemieux understood at a young age that he wouldn't be able to create the life he wanted in a big city like New York or a hockey-obsessed one like Montreal. Pittsburgh, thankfully, had just the right chemistry.

Back in Sewickley at Lemieux Manor, the tour is ending, and as Lemieux walks up the stairs from the wine cellar and emerges into the kitchen, there is Nathalie, his partner all these years. She briskly addresses him in French and is apparently about to make him a sandwich.

Before leaving the Lemieuxs to their lunch, a question lingers: Why now? Why did he agree to this particular interview? Well, it was 30 years, so, he figured, "Do this one and take 10 years off."

"There are some people that need attention even after their career is over," Lemieux says. "I'm totally the opposite. I just want to do my own thing. I don't need to be celebrated every time there's an anniversary or something like that."

Now fully explained, Lemieux strides out to the front gate, where he receives a thank you for his time.

"My pleasure," Lemieux says.

The door closes, and Lemieux turns away, returning to his wife, to the dogs, to the normalcy he craves. It might be a decade before he opens up again in this way. But if the last 30 years are any indication, he will give a little bit more of himself each day, and, almost without realizing it, he won't need an official occasion to let people see the real Mario Lemieux.

Bill Wade/Post-Gazette

ABOVE: Mario Lemieux arrived in Pittsburgh to find a struggling franchise and little hockey tradition. Thirty years later, he has helped bring it three Stanley Cups and has a statue in his honor outside an arena he helped create.

ABOVE: Mario and Nathalie Lemieux's four children, from top: Alexa, Stephanie, Austin and Lauren. All were born in Pittsburgh.

BELOW: Mario and Nathalie at a Mario Lemieux Foundation fundraiser in 2013. The foundation has raised tens of millions of dollars for cancer research in its 20-plus years.

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