



News

Growing a league with Graeme Roustan

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by Jesse Calomino

Building and sustaining a competitive league is tough no matter the sport.

In our country, a land of hockey-first, we are privileged to see some of the game's most talented teams and strongest leagues in the world. However, this puts forth an uphill battle that any new league must face.

Since day one, the Canadian Women's Hockey League has had to fight to grow. While there are no shortage of players and fans of the female game, the true challenge lies in

finding individuals, like Graeme Roustan, who support the vision of building a league that is the premier home for the most competitive women's hockey on the planet.

"Women's hockey has really become a visible sports property in Canada and the U.S.A. in recent years," Roustan, chairman and CEO of GTA Sports and Entertainment, said in a recent interview with the CWHL. "The Vancouver Olympics provided everyone with a showcase of the product, and the competition was very exciting."

Roustan has been in the news for the better part of nearly a year, and his efforts to build an NHL-calibre arena in the Toronto suburb of Markham, Ont., continue to grab headlines. Yet long before his bid to bring a new arena to Markham, Roustan showed great support for women's hockey, backing the CWHL since the very start.

Roustan went on to add that, "The CWHL has assembled talent and leadership that are unmatched, and the quality of the product has grown exponentially every year.

"Woman's hockey is one of the fastest growing sports in the world, and I believe that supporting quality organizations like the CWHL is critical for the future of the game."

In 2008 Roustan, as part of a group of investors, purchased the Bauer brand from Nike, which had acquired it 13 years earlier. He served as board chairman for Bauer from 2008 until 2012.

With the new resources available to him, Roustan turned to the CWHL and ensured that every player in the league would be outfitted with new gear at no expense.

Toronto Furies goaltender Sami Jo Small, also a two-time Olympic gold medallist with Team Canada, remembers the impact having newer equipment meant.

"Graeme Roustan has been instrumental in the growth of the CWHL," she said. "While at the helm of Bauer Hockey, he provided the entire league with top-end equipment and ensured that the 'look' of the CWHL product on the ice was sharp and professional."

This sentiment was echoed by Boston Blades head coach Digit Murphy.

"If we didn't have people like Graeme stepping up to the plate to support women's sports, we'd still be in the dark ages," she said. "Without having support like that, we're not where we are."

Boston's superstar Hilary Knight expressed even further just what it meant to the players to have this kind of support.

"From a player's perspective, we are extremely fortunate to have the support of Graeme Roustan," she said. "His generosity and vision compliment the CWHL on many different levels."

Among the equipment provided to the players were helmets, pants, gloves, equipment bags and stick bags. The relationship the league has with Bauer continues to grow each and every season.

“Graeme not only provided sponsorship, but was also an advocate in helping to secure other sponsors as well,” Small said. “It has been thanks in large part to his belief in the power of women’s sport that we have taken leaps and bounds since our inception.”

“Without the buy-in of sponsorship, this league doesn’t build to where it deserves to be,” Murphy agreed. “The athletes really are deserving of the honour. It’s just an incredible partnership that we are incredibly grateful for.”

While so many people have begun to follow in his example, Roustan himself has always been at the centre of sponsorship for the CWHL. His proposed arena, the GTA Centre, became the presenting sponsor of the 2013 CWHL Awards Night, with Roustan and his company bringing in more than \$50,000 for the event.

That night held extra significance for Murphy was named the CWHL’s Coach of the Year.

“I’ve been involved in women’s ice hockey at all levels,” she said. “I’ve been to several gala celebrations and this is by far the best event that I have ever been a part of.”

There was something of a deeper meaning to the festivities though, as Murphy explained.

“I think what resonates with me about the whole night was the legitimacy of women’s professional sports. From start to finish there, was a theme of women’s leadership and a celebration of women’s leadership throughout the night, which I’m sure had the kind of flavour of what Graeme wants to do with all of this, and how he has his mark on that. It was just fabulous.”

Small was another individual who was honoured during the special night, receiving the Queen Elizabeth II Diamond Jubilee Medal. The Jubilee Medal serves to honour significant contributions and achievements by Canadians.

“In his new role with the GTA Centre, (Graeme) was able to put significant dollars behind the Clarkson Cup this season in Markham, and specifically the CWHL awards banquet,” Small said. “The Banquet was an incredible showcase of female hockey’s top players and was a marvelous evening complete with all the bells and whistles. The night catapulted the CWHL into the next realm of professional sports leagues, making a ticket to the CWHL banquet a coveted prize.”

Knight was another Boston Blade who was honoured at the gala. Finishing third in league scoring, she was awarded the Most Valuable Player trophy for the 2012-13 season.

“GTA Centre did a wonderful job for this year’s awards gala,” she said. “It was a great event to attend, and made capturing the league’s MVP title memorable.”

The 2013 Awards Night was one of the most widely attended events in CWHL history. Among the guests were former Toronto Maple Leafs and Anaheim Ducks general manager Brian Burke who was also a keynote speaker, as well as City of Markham mayor Frank Scarpitti, Ontario Women’s Hockey Association president Fran Rider, and Right to Play national director Robert Witchel.

Canada’s National Woman’s Team alumna Jennifer Botterill, Angela James and Becky Kellar were also in attendance as award presenters, while Cheryl Pounder acted as master of ceremonies.

The CWHL continues to grow every year, and while the players and coaches often take centre ice for being trailblazers, it’s the people behind the scenes who support the league that need to be recognized for their endeavours and belief in creating a women’s professional hockey league.

Though they are a rare breed, sponsors like Graeme Roustan are the reason why fans get to see some of the greatest female hockey talent on the planet every year.