

The Kid

*Originally published in The Montreal Gazette
April 1st, 2016*

<http://montrealgazette.com/sports/baseball/falling-in-love-with-the-expos-and-gary-carter>

My love affair with the Montreal Canadiens began when I was 3. I wasn't allowed to stay up until the end of the game, of course – especially given that “La Soirée du hockey” had an 8 p.m. start back then – but those Saturday nights spent in our suburban family basement with a 17-inch black-and-white television and a cozy Franklin stove felt like paradise. There was nowhere we'd rather be, except maybe at the Forum.

According to family lore, that's also when my dad realized I would do really well in English school, because I had no problem pronouncing “Ma-HOV-lich”, unlike my mother Huguette and all our French-Canadian relatives who referred to Pete and Frank as “MAO-vlich”.

My mother had been watching Les Glorieux since her youth, when she and all her siblings would crowd around the newly acquired TV to witness the exploits of the Rocket, Boom Boom, Béliveau and company.

But when the Expos came to town, and especially when they became legitimate contenders during the late-1970s, we all stood up and took notice. The Habs were so good, you could basically take them for granted, so there was something exciting about discovering a whole new sport and having a new team to root for.

When that big, bad meanie Rick Monday broke our hearts with that fateful homerun off Steve Rogers on Oct. 19, 1981, we were completely devastated. Now what?

Two long years had already gone by since the last Stanley Cup parade, but we knew it was just a blip on the radar, just a matter of time before the Habs got back on track.

We knew how to watch hockey, but watching baseball was a whole new, um, ballgame. My mother didn't like going to the Olympic Stadium to see Nos Amours. Too distracting, she said, with Youppi! walking around, the giant screen, the peanut vendors. She couldn't concentrate on the game. And yet, she didn't do particularly well watching on the small screen either.

There are two kinds of sports fans: the ones that can't bear to look away, and the ones that can't bear to watch.

During the Expos' playoff run of 1981, when the rest of us were glued to the TV, my mother couldn't sit still. She would leave the room regularly, busying herself with anything else. “J'ai les mains moites!” (“My palms are sweaty!”), she would cry out on

her way to the kitchen or the laundry room. The seventh-inning stretch was her every-inning stretch.

Could the Expos' Cinderella story repeat itself, with a happier ending? Well, we wanted to be there for the beginning, so we headed to Florida for our family spring break in 1982.

Training camp at West Palm Beach was a great opportunity to see the players up close. You could tell Warren Cromartie was the class clown. Andre Dawson was majestic. Tim Lincecum was faster than a speeding bullet. Wow! It was fun to get some baseballs autographed and then try to make out the signatures afterward. Also, it was almost eerie that young Terry Francona was a dead-ringer for my father. Those Italian genes, eh?

Crack! Gary Carter's bat split open and he casually tossed it aside, grabbing a new one to continue his batting practice.

My mother is not bold by nature. She is quite shy in public spaces, and hates drawing attention to herself. But in that moment, she summoned up her courage and all the English she could muster. Thanks to after-school Three's Company reruns we exposed her to, she had come a long way from the good, old days when she sang her favourite Platters songs phonetically. And if Gary could speak French for us in those 7Up ads, she could speak English for him.

From the other side of the fence, like a spontaneous cry from the heart betraying all those pent-up emotions left over from Blue Monday, she called out: "Gary, give me your bat!"

Carter turned toward us and laughed. He interrupted his practice swings, picked up the broken bat and came over. "You're the first!" he noted. His big, strong hands easily separated the shattered piece of wood, lest it be a hazard, before he carefully passed the bat over the fence to my mother and she hadn't even said "please"!

After practice, Gary signed autographs and posed for anyone who asked for photos. There were no TV cameras around. He wasn't putting on a show. He simply enjoyed and appreciated the attention, in the best possible way. He lingered with us as he leafed through my scrapbook and autographed the broken bat. He could not have been more gracious, more open, more genuine.

To this day, that bat remains one of our most prized family possessions.

These days, when I see Youppi! at a Canadiens game, I feel compelled to recite in my head the starting lineup of the 1981 Montreal Expos.

And when I get to No. 8, my heart breaks all over again.

RIP Gary Carter (April 8, 1954 – February 16, 2012)