

Graeme Roustan: Building a Future for Women's Hockey With the CWHL

By: Jesse Calomino

May 31, 2013 – 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 and while there are no shortage of players and fans of women's hockey, 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.

Roustan, the current Chairman and CEO of GTA Sports and Entertainment, has been in the news for the better part of nearly a year as his efforts to build an NHL-ready arena in the Toronto suburb of Markham and his attempts to bring an NHL team to the area continue to grab headlines. Yet long before his bid to bring more NHL action to Ontario, Roustan showed great support for women's hockey as he backed the CWHL in its early years.

In 2008 Roustan, as part of a group of investors, purchased the Bauer brand from Nike who had acquired it 13 years earlier. Roustan would serve as the Chairman of the Board 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.

Sami Jo Small, current goaltender with the Toronto Furies and 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. 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 General Manager and 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. 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 prospective, we are extremely fortunate to have the support of Graeme Roustan. 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 has continued to grow as the support Bauer provides to the CWHL develops further with each season.

However, Roustan did not act alone as Small recounts.

“Graeme not only provided sponsorship, but was also an advocate in helping to secure other sponsors as well. 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.”

With such high profile backing of the league, his efforts were instrumental in bringing in other sponsors and interested parties to the league, working to stabilize the North American home for women's hockey.

“Without the buy-in of sponsorship this league doesn't build to where it deserves to be,” continued Murphy. “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 Gala when Roustan and his company brought in over \$50,000 for the event. Murphy commented on the night which held extra significance as she won the CWHL award for Coach of the Year.

“I've been involved in women's ice hockey at all levels. I've been to Ted Meyers award banquets, NCAA Frozen Fours, 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 Awards Gala as she was presented with the Queen Elizabeth II Diamond Jubilee Medal. The Jubilee Medal serves to honour significant contributions and achievements by Canadians. Small was well deserving of the award following so much of her charitable work with various organizations including Right to Play.

She said, “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 sponsored by the GTA Centre. 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. It was a great event to attend, and made capturing the league’s MVP title memorable.”

The 2013 Gala 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 Markham mayor Frank Scarpitti, Ontario Women’s Hockey Association president Fran Rider, and Robert Witchel who is the National Director of Right to Play. Former Team Canada members Angela James, Becky Kellar, and Jennifer Botterill were in attendance and presented various awards while Cheryl Pounder acted as Master of Ceremonies.

The CWHL continues to grow every year and while the players and coaches often take the centre stage for being the 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 Rouston are the reason why fans get to see some of the greatest female hockey talent on the planet every year.