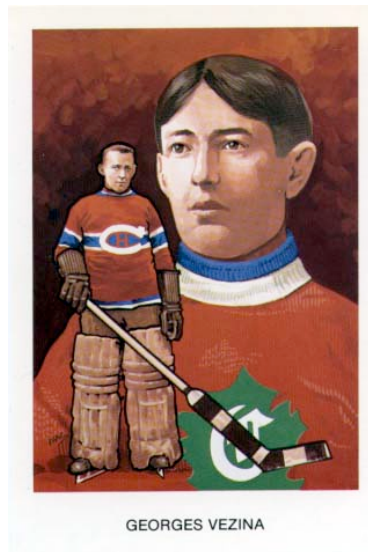


Empty Net



By Amy Tejirian

As he studied his face in the mirror of the locker room bathroom, he thought to himself, “I hope no one can notice. I need to do this. I have persevered through more pain. They are counting on me.” His chest felt like a freight train had collided with it at 100 miles per hour. His thin, pale face did not show any signs of his hurting, his fatigue or the chills that ran through his 5’6”, 185 pounds frame. He had earned the nickname, “Le Concombre de Chicoutimi” (The Chicoutimi Cucumber). Because of this thin stature and his composed character, he was as cool as a cucumber. He pulled on his famous blue, white and red toque and started to make his way to the ice.

“Go Habs¹ Go! Go Habs Go!” The incessant chant grew louder and with more fervor as Georges Vézina approached the rink. The hometown crowd had been anxiously waiting all summer and fall for this day, the 1925-26 Montréal Canadiens season opener. When they spotted their beloved goalkeeper step onto the ice, the crowd exploded.

Georges calmly skated towards the net. Sweat rolled down his forehead and cheeks. He wiped it away with his sleeve. Some chest pain and a fever weren’t going to stop him from enjoying his favorite activity. Georges had been the Canadiens goalie for the past 15 years and never missed a single game. Even when the Stanley Cup finals were canceled in 1919 due to the Spanish flu epidemic, Georges was prepared to

¹ Habs is a nick name for the Montréal Canadiens, which is a shortened term for their nickname “Les Habitants”.

stop any puck that flew his way. And Habs fans loved this passion and dedication.

They recognized that he was the greatest goalie hockey had ever seen. They celebrated the first shutout game that he had accomplished, the very first shutout in the NHL. How could Georges let them down today just because he wasn't feeling 100 percent? The rambunctious crowd made Georges forget about his ailments. He stood stoically in front of the net. Georges was ready – "Bring it on!"

The puck dropped. The Canadiens won the face-off against their opponents, the Pittsburgh Pirates. The Habs players skated away from Georges as they tried to score a goal, but to no avail. The puck rebounded off the goal post, and a Pirates player stole the puck. This large man in yellow and black broke away from the rest of the pack, puck in hand. He raced across the rink, past center ice and into the Habs zone. Quickly, only inches from the goal, he drew back his stick slightly and tried to shoot in the round, vulcanized rubber disc into the net. Instinctively, Georges deflected the puck, slightly moving his arm that clutched his stick. The spectators burst into a deafening cheer, "Go Habs Go! Go Habs Go!"

This non-stop action continued throughout the whole first period. Every time a Pirate tried to shoot a goal, Georges did not disappoint his fans. They praised his skill and agility with continuous yells of support. After twenty minutes of play, the score was nil all. Georges was proud. Once again he had not allowed a single puck to cross him. He smiled with satisfaction.

All of sudden, the fatigue set in, but even worse this time. It felt like daggers were piercing Georges' chest. A chill went up his spine. He wiped the excess sweat from his face with his sleeve as he skated off the ice. Georges looked down at his moist sleeve and noticed a crimson stain. He glared at this arm and wiped his face again. The red mark grew larger. "Mon Dieu!" He was bleeding. But where was it coming from? He wasn't hit during the first period. He felt a trickle from his mouth and tasted iron. Georges realized he was bleeding from his mouth.

Georges' pale face was even whiter than usual. His teammates and coach stared at him with concern when he walked into the dressing room with his bloody sleeve. Coach Léo Dandurand rushed over to where he sat down to rest. "Georges, you don't look so good," he said gravely. "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine, I'm fine," Georges replied coolly.

Then Léo uttered words that Georges had never heard before in his fifteen years with the Canadiens, "Maybe you should take it easy and sit out the second period."

Georges used all of his strength to jump up and exclaimed, "Quoi? Are you kidding? I'm perfectly all right. I don't need to rest. Didn't you see how well I played in the first period? If I was sick, don't you think I would have let in a few goals? This is ridiculous. I've played with many more injuries than this. I've never missed a game before, and I don't intend on missing this one. Coach, you know that a little blood can't

stop me.” He paused briefly and continued, “Besides, the team and the fans are counting on me. I can’t let them down.”

“Well, if you insist. Are you sure you’re okay?” asked Léo after Georges’ passionate soliloquy.

“Trust me. I’m fine.”

The intermission passed by quickly. Georges felt a little better after sitting down those twenty minutes.

Second period began with the Habs winning the first face-off again. Georges stood in position at the goalie crease focusing on the action. He tried to concentrate on the game in front of him but could not ignore the pain within him anymore. Within the first few minutes of the period, his vision started to get blurry. He blinked a couple of times, but it did not help. Georges was feeling light-headed, and the arena around him started to spin. The next thing he could remember was everything going dark.

The game stopped abruptly. Teammates skated towards Georges’ limp body lying on the ice. Everyone in the crowd rose to their feet with worried expressions. For the first time throughout the whole game, Mt. Royal Arena was silent.

“Georges! Georges!” Léo yelled as he made his way to the net. “Are you okay?” No response. “Georges! Can you hear me?” But it was futile; his star goalkeeper just lay lifeless. Georges’ teammates slowly picked him up in unison and somberly carried him off the ice.

Groggily, Georges opened his eyes and stared in confusion. He could not remember where he was, what he was doing or what happened. The trainer stood over Georges examining his body with a hand on his forehead. “Monsieur, do you have any chest pains?” Before Georges could answer, the trainer remarked to someone else in the room, “He’s burning up. He’s got a temperature of 105. This man needs to get to a hospital immediately!”

At the hospital, the first few words out of the doctor’s mouth were what Georges had feared the most for the past couple of weeks. He had an aching suspicion of what might have been causing his severe discomfort. He had tried to avoid it and prayed to God it was nothing. “Out of sight, out of mind,” he thought. He hid it from his wife, children, friends and teammates so he could keep playing, but it was inevitable.

The doctor affirmed, “La tuberculose.” The dreaded tuberculosis – Georges’ heart sank. “I’m afraid it appears to be quite advanced,” continued the doctor. “I’m sorry,” he touched Georges’ shoulder.

On that day, November 28, 1925, after playing for sixteen seasons, 328 consecutive games, winning three championships, including two Stanley Cup wins, with the Montréal Canadiens, Le Concombre de Chicoutimi was forced to retire involuntarily.

The next couple of months were agonizing for Georges and his teammates. Georges asked to repose in his hometown, Chicoutimi. The Habs were playing disastrously as they could not stop worrying about their star goalie.

Georges visited his teammates one last time to try to calm their nerves and say goodbye. He arrived at the arena the time he would have had he been playing. His uniform and equipment were laid out for him. The players stared in disbelief. Was this the same man they knew and loved? He was so pale that he could have been a ghost. His thin body looked frail, like it would crumble to pieces at the first touch. His eyes lacked the fervor and enthusiasm they were accustomed to. Instead, there stood an old, sickly man with sullen eyes and a gaunt face. Georges barely made eye contact. He nodded in recognition and whispered, "Good luck." He reached for his prized blue and red jersey, the one he wore when they won their last Stanley Cup in '24. He grabbed it and slowly walked away without staying for the game to begin.

Four months after collapsing on the ice, at age 39, Georges Vézina passed away.

The once powerful Habs performed poorly that season and did not make it to playoff contention.

To commemorate their star goalie, the owners of the Canadiens decided to present a trophy to the NHL during the 1926-27 season, aptly named the Vézina Trophy. To this day, the NHL annually awards the prestigious trophy to the "goalkeeper adjudged to be the best at this position."²

This fictionalized account is based on actual events.

² <http://www.nhl.com/trophies/vezina.html>