



At home with the Habs

Susan Pinker

Dr. Douglas Kinnear is one of those few lucky souls to find the perfect meld of vocation with avocation. For the past 35 years, the self-confessed “hockey nut” has spent much of his professional time as chief physician with the Montreal Canadiens.

His dream position came about by chance. In 1962, Kinnear was working in internal medicine at the Montreal General Hospital when a patient presented with viral hepatitis. After a few weeks of hospitalization, the convalescing patient became agitated about missing work. It turned out he was Dr. Ian Milne, one of the hockey team’s physicians. The Habs needed someone to look after the hockey players during games, and Kinnear offered to fill in. Milne never returned to his post, and the rest is history. “They even pay me a retainer to do this,” enthuses Kinnear, 72, whose love for the game hasn’t dulled during the years of close contact.

As a youth in Quebec City, Douglas Kinnear — “like every red-blooded Canadian boy” — used to head for the rink after school to play hockey. He claims he was “too small and not good enough” to keep it up after high school, which explains the medical career. But despite the accolades and academic appointments that have punctuated his 50-year medical career, he’s best known as the Canadiens’ chief doctor. “In 8 pages of CV there’s only 1 line about hockey,” he says with a grin. “I don’t want people to think I’m a straight, simple jock-doc.”

Hockey has changed significantly since 1962. No one wore helmets back then, says Kinnear, and “we’d have to suture up facial lacerations 3 or 4 times a night.” While there are fewer facial and head injuries since helmets became compulsory, concussions are still common. “Against the boards, hitting their heads on the ice, fights — players are still having their bells rung.”

Kinnear says hockey is now played more aggressively, perhaps because the equipment makes players feel invincible. “The sticks seem to be higher. There’s a lot of stick checking instead of pure body checking.”

And the players are much bigger and stronger than they were in the past. Today’s average defenceman is 6 ft 2 in tall and weighs 215 lbs, which makes it much harder for

smaller players to compete. “The Henri Richards of today wouldn’t stand a chance,” says Kinnear ruefully.

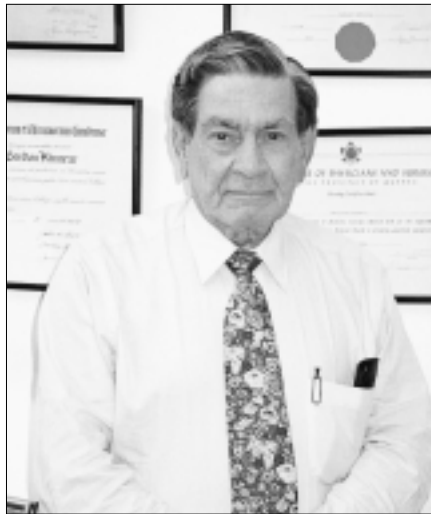
Nutrition theories have also changed. Continual rehydration, now the norm, was once frowned upon. “When I first started, Toe Blake [the coach] didn’t allow water on the bench. The players used to suck orange quarters in the dressing room in between periods. The players would lose anywhere from 5 to 7 lbs. in a game, just from sweating. And the pregame meal used to be a big steak. Now it’s pasta and salad — they load with carbohydrates.”

Players do skate with aches and pains, but Kinnear adamantly denies being under pressure to put injured players on the ice. After all, the managers are all former players, he says. One of Kinnear’s favourite hockey sagas is the drama surrounding Patrick Roy’s stomachache about 7 years ago. It turned out that the Canadiens’ all-star goaltender had appendicitis. Roy, “who was God around here,” flatly refused surgery and insisted that he had to play the next game. So Kinnear and his colleagues hospitalized Roy for 5 days, gave him massive doses of antibiotics,

kept him away from food and drink, did daily ultrasounds, monitored his temperature and watched him “like a hawk.”

Yet Kinnear remembers being vilified by the press and public opinion. “They accused us of practising bush medicine because we did not operate.” The postscript? Roy played 2 games well, “although we lost to Boston,” and then returned to have an elective appendectomy. He was grateful that he was treated with a conservative approach, says the unflappable Kinnear.

He seems to have an “aw shucks” attitude to the attention he’s getting upon his retirement. He was recently fêted at Montreal’s Molson Centre for “his exemplary contribution to medicine, sports and community,” and his colleagues at the hospital have called him “a renaissance man” who’s “the best around for sports injuries.” But Kinnear downplays the glory. “You’re there for all the games, 1 hour before the game. You go down and check in at the dressing room, treat minor injuries, check out the walking wounded. Most of it is just regular medicine,” says Kinnear, who then adds, “but you do have to love hockey.” ?



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Dr. Douglas Kinnear: it helps to love hockey