

FOCUS ON: ALOUETTES Slower ticket sales, changing of the guard to challenge sophomore president Lalonde

A new look for greying franchise



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When Ray Lalonde was hired as Alouettes president last March, he joined an organization that had won two consecutive Grey Cups and, we were led to believe, had 104 consecutive sellouts at Molson Stadium. That's not counting 58,000 spectators who crammed into Olympic Stadium for the 2010 East Division final.

Nine months later, the landscape seemingly has changed. The Als, decimated by defensive injuries, struggled to a 10-8 record and were eliminated in the opening round of the playoffs. The team failed to record one sellout at home, averaging 24,060 through nine regular-season games at its 25,012-seat facility. And barely more than 33,000 saw the Als lose to Hamilton in the division semifinal.

And yet on Thursday, during an interview at the team's downtown administration office, Lalonde attempted to paint a rosy picture.

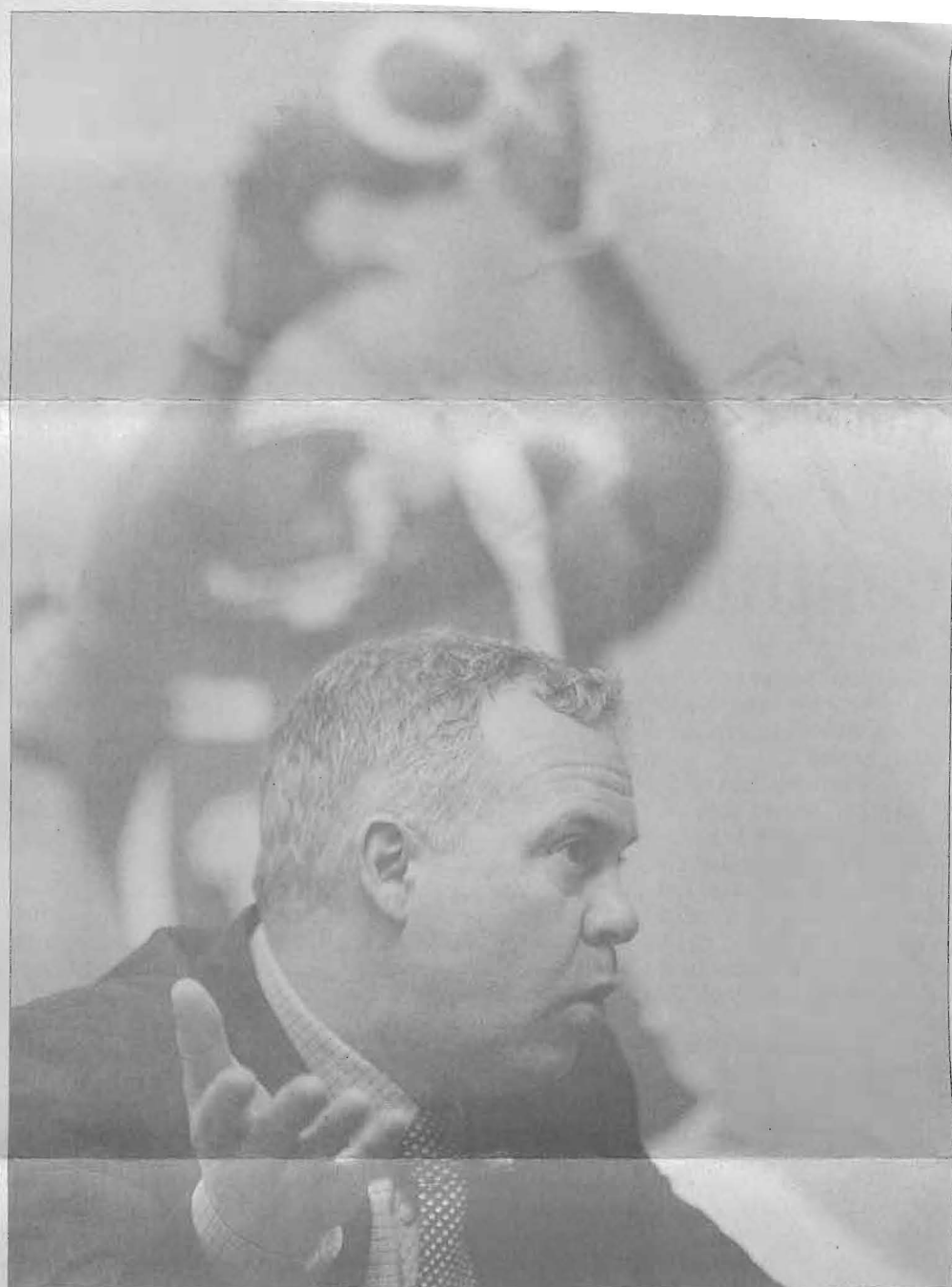
"My mission and objectives are tracking in the right direction," said Lalonde, who has spent 25 years in professional sports and joined the Als after a decade with the Canadiens, where he was a vice-president (chief sales and marketing).

"Is the organization headed in the right direction? Have we got better and are we better equipped for the challenges of the future, and are we structuring ourselves to become the best at everything? Yes. Are we there yet? No, but I didn't expect to be after nine months, either."

Lalonde claimed the Als sold more tickets in 2011 than they had the previous season, under former president Larry Smith, while giving away fewer. And sales for the semifinal were better than other seasons in which the team finished in second place. The majority of tickets that weren't sold during the regular season, Lalonde said, were singles.

"I'm not worried about the perception. I'm worried about the facts," he said.

It appears Lalonde is suggesting the Als distributed more free tickets under Smith, or merely fudged attendance figures. But the new president treads carefully here and is reluctant to take



PHIL CARPENTER THE GAZETTE

"People wouldn't just abandon us," Alouettes president Ray Lalonde insists yesterday at his Montreal office, explaining he's not worried about the prospect of a losing season.

an accusatory tone. "I'm not sure," he said. "I wasn't there and didn't ask. It was none of my business."

Nonetheless, the challenges for Lalonde and the organization remain abundant. While loath to provide figures for a privately owned franchise, he admits the Als clearly must increase their corporate sponsorship and suite sales. And ticket sales, he quickly added, must continue to rise.

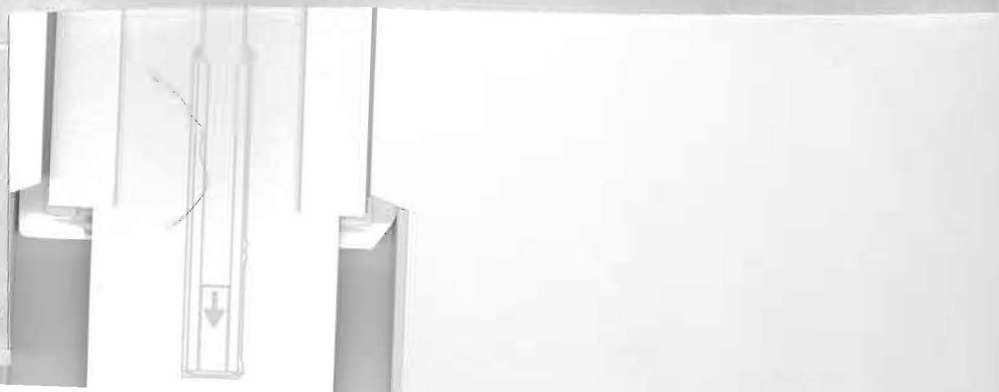
Lalonde and his front-office team - he has hired about a dozen mostly young employ-

ees in the early stages of their careers in sales and marketing - have worked diligently on developing a three-year strategic plan. For example, Lalonde said, the team had limited licensed product sales when he was hired. Now, he said, the Als are a legitimate pro operation, their products more available in outlets or on the team's website.

If Lalonde, through most of his years with the Canadiens, had the luxury of taking the prettiest girl to the ball, he's beginning to understand a

Canadian Football League team in Montreal must work harder to get noticed. And that task could soon become more difficult as he attempts to keep the franchise relevant on the city's sports landscape.

"When I joined the Canadiens in 2001, they arguably were far from the most attractive proposition," Lalonde said. "However, the potential was there. There was an opportunity to increase the demand and popularity. I believe the same opportunity exists with the Als."



The Als will never compete with the Canadiens, that's a given. But with the Impact joining the more-prestigious MLS, the pie might be distributed differently, with the football team in a fight to remain second in popularity.

Lalonde disagreed, saying there's ample room in Montreal, along with a large enough population base, for all three teams to thrive. He believes Montreal's a healthy and robust sports market.

"These sports cater to different seasons and different audiences," he said. "It forces teams to do better. You need competition to excel. You've got to understand your audience and fan base, while listening to them."

The Als, according to Lalonde, have a season-ticket base between 18,000 and 20,000. He's content with that figure, since tickets must be made available to the public. And he expects 90 per cent of the subscribers to renew, despite the fact ticket prices will increase, on average, 5 per cent next season. He said it's not uncommon for between 5 and 7 per cent to cancel their tickets annually.

"Most teams, if they had a competitive season, that's the cost of doing business," he explained. "I don't think the Als, making eight Grey Cup appearances in the last 11 or 12 years, have done anything to overcharge their fans."

But Lalonde understands the Als are on the verge of a new era, his arrival the first of many anticipated changes. Anthony Calvillo, the team's franchise player and quarterback, turns 40 next season and it might be his swan song. And head coach Marc Trestman is entering the final year of his contract. He might be unwilling to extend his deal and seek opportunities in the NFL or NCAA.

Lalonde said the key is to remain ahead of the curve, having a succession plan in place. He also believes the team could withstand a losing season. "People wouldn't just abandon us," he insisted.

Still, Lalonde must continue to make each home game its own entity.

"We need to continue offering an outstanding experience," he said. "That translates into making each game a unique sports event, where fans really and truly feel an Als game - since there are only 10 - is the ultimate sports experience. They have choices to make, and the competition's a lot greater."