

ERIC LAPOINTE takes thoughts of a recent death and a life-changing university career into football's Hall of Fame

Emotional night celebrates life



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WINNIPEG — When he stepped off the plane Wednesday afternoon in Winnipeg, Éric Lapointe understood the ramifications of what had occurred not even a week earlier. And why he ultimately decided, with some gentle persuasion, to travel here. Originally, he thought he was coming to celebrate his career. Instead, it became a celebration of lives — his own and those closest to him.

“I was ready not to go,” Lapointe admitted. “Or to fly in and out.”

Lapointe, the Alouettes’ former running back, is being inducted into the Canadian Football Hall of Fame this weekend. The celebration began with the unveiling of busts on Thursday, a lavish \$250-a-plate dinner Friday night, and will conclude with a halftime ceremony on Saturday, during the regular-season finale between Montreal and the Winnipeg Blue Bombers at Canad Inns Stadium.

Joining Lapointe will be this year’s inductees, including former Bombers receiver Milt Stegall, along with Damon Allen, Ty Jones, Jack Abendschan, David Braley, who owns the Canadian Football League franchises in Toronto and British Columbia, and Peter Connellan.

Although Lapointe, now 38, had a respectable — considering he was released from his first training camp by Edmonton — eight-year CFL career, including the last six with the Als, he’s being honoured for his stellar collegiate career at Mount Allison.

But not far from Lapointe’s thoughts this weekend — and the face he’ll undoubtedly see each time he looks into the eyes of his wife, Nelly Ladouceur — will be that of his late mother-in-law, Suzanne. She waged an epic 11-year battle with cancer — it began in her breasts before spreading to her uterus — before dying a

week ago Thursday.

Lapointe and Ladouceur, together since 2004 and the parents of twin 4-year-old girls, decided to marry last year on May 26 — her parents’ wedding anniversary, knowing time was their enemy. Suzanne’s uterus was removed three months earlier.

“It was probably one of the last times we saw her smile,” Lapointe said.

“It’s a great honour,” Lapointe said during a telephone interview this week. “But it’s also bittersweet, with what happened last week. It’ll be a little tougher to smile and enjoy it. It’s a big loss for all of us.

“I’m excited, but it’s hard to push aside (the fact) someone important to myself and my family is now gone.”

There have been few more talented tailbacks, let alone Canadian collegiate players, than Lapointe. He becomes only the second player — after St. Mary’s quarterback Chris Flynn — inducted based on his university merits.

A two-time winner of the Hec Crighton Trophy, given annually to the top university football player in the country — Lapointe, Flynn and Western running-back Tim Tindale are the only multiple winners — Lapointe was named the outstanding CIAU rookie in 1995, a year before he established a single-season rushing record with 1,619 yards. A three-time all-Canadian, Lapointe concluded his four-year career with 4,666 rushing yards — just 29 short of the CIAU all-time record. That mark and others, undoubtedly would have been obliterated had Lapointe not torn his anterior cruciate ligament, followed by a fractured arm upon returning to health in 1997.

“Éric was one of those once-in-a-lifetime players from a coaching perspective,” said Gordon Graves, his college coach for two seasons and now the athletic director at the University of Windsor. “He was that kind of running back. You gave him the ball and you had a chance to



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Éric Lapointe attributes his success to his experiences at Mount Allison University.

score. I know people say that about certain skilled players, but Éric was one of those guys. He was capable of going 110 yards and it was a pleasure to coach him.

"He was highly skilled, but had all the other attributes ... the leadership, hard work, all that stuff rolled into one guy. He could do it all. He was a flat-out speedster. He could run over a guy or cut back against the grain. He was fast by anybody's standards. He was that special."

Born in Jonquière, La-

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pointe's family moved to Brossard when he was 12 and he started to play football two years later with the St. Hubert Rebelles. A physical kid who liked to run and tackle, his first position was tight end. He moved to defence and enjoyed playing safety, although it was the defensive co-ordinator at the bantam level who saw a running-back in Lapointe. He made the transition as a midget.

Lapointe, then a unilingual francophone, committed

to Mt. Allison, in Sackville, N.B., in 1994. The team was coached by Marc Loranger, a francophone, its roster filled by many players from Quebec. Besides, Université Laval was launching its program only in '95, Lapointe believing the Rouge et Or would struggle until becoming established.

Lapointe went to the Maritimes not knowing a single word of English, he admits, so ill-equipped he couldn't register himself for classes in French literature. Indeed, asked on the form for his mid-

dle name, Lapointe printed "Ric," his nickname. For four years his student-identification card at the school listed him as Éric Ric Lapointe.

"I thought the transition would be easier with a francophone coach in place," he said.

Although his major enabled him to take some courses in his native language, Lapointe went to his English-based classes with a dictionary.

"The first semester, I was so afraid of everything," he

remembered. "I didn't know anything about the rest of the country. I learned by bringing my dictionary and trying to figure out what was going on. You learn on Saturday night. After a couple of beers, you feel bilingual. Then you wake up on Sunday and you can't speak at all. It's unbelievable how a human being can adapt when you don't have the choice."

In virtually no time, Lapointe became bilingual, graduating not only with his degree, but a minor in finance. The Washington Redskins sent a scout to Sackville his second year, but declaring his name for the National Football League draft would have ended his collegiate eligibility. So Lapointe spurned the temptation, returning only to blow his knee out in an exhibition game his third year. That required a fourth season, but the Redskins were never to return.

It was symbolic in many ways, Lapointe's pro career a series of near misses and could-have-beens, too many of his coaches unwilling to look beyond his birth certificate and non-import status. Drafted in the third round (20th overall) by Edmonton in 1999, the Eskimos attempted to convert him into a fullback.

When the experiment failed, he was released at training camp.

Lapointe was preparing for a fifth university season when he was signed by Hamilton. Lapointe gained 187 yards on only nine carries his first game against Winnipeg, but was traded to the Argonauts the following season, signing with the Als as a free agent in 2001. In the 2005 East Division final, Lapointe replaced an injured Robert Edwards in the second half, gaining 112 yards on 15 carries, along with three touchdowns, in Montreal's 33-17 victory. Lapointe started in the Grey Cup the following week. He scored twice, but was held to 46 yards on 11 carries in the double-overtime loss to Edmonton.

Lapointe, a financial analyst, retired one season later and now heads the Als' alumni association.

With the emergence of talented Canadian backs — B.C.'s Andrew Harris and Jon Cornish of Calgary — it would be easy to suggest Lapointe was ahead of his time. But he has no regrets.

"I had a great eight-year career," he said. "You can always make it sound like your career could have been better. At one point, you must accept what happened. If you looked at my first training camp, it looked like I was done, right away. I have nothing to be ashamed of."

And, while acknowledging it wasn't going to be easy delivering his speech at Friday's dinner, Lapointe was clear on its theme before he got on the plane.

"I'm going to talk about the impact Mt. Allison had on my life. It made a huge difference," he said. "I'm a more complete person after going to Mt. A. I work in finance. That comes from Mt. A. I speak English. That comes from Mt. A. I'm a better person, and that comes from Mt. A."

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