

'The CFL is all about community': Smith

From Skip Prince to Ray Lalonde, nobody else has succeeded as team's president

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If there's an elixir, Larry Smith seems to be the only chemist with any clue how to brew the potion.

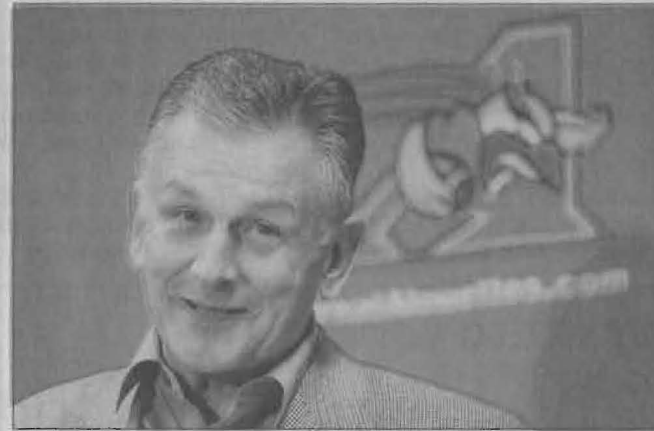
Through two stints, Smith survived 12 years as president of the Alouettes and, as one of the most-recognized sports figures in Quebec, deserves his share of credit for the team's off-field success. Smith tasted the success that Skip Prince and, now, Ray Lalonde, failed to achieve. Prince, an American, resigned following two seasons with the club a decade ago while Lalonde, the genius

behind many of the Canadiens' marketing plans, resigned last Friday for "personal reasons," following barely more than a year on the job.

As a former player for the team from 1972-80, it pains Smith, now a member of the Senate, to see the organization again in a potential state of flux.

"I feel badly for the club. We all want it to be successful. A lot of us put hard work into it," he told *The Gazette* in a telephone interview on Monday.

Smith, a former publisher of *The Gazette* who left the Als following the 2010 season,



ALLEN MANNIS GAZETTE FILE PHOTO

"It's about partnership and connecting to the community. That's key in Quebec," former Als president Larry Smith says.

had plenty of knowledge and insight into Canadian professional football, having been a commissioner of the Canadian Football League for five years. While the league's ex-

pansion into numerous U.S. markets under Smith ultimately failed, the cash infusion it brought was generally credited for saving the CFL.

While Lalonde has NHL

and NBA experience – and even spent two seasons with the World League's Montreal Machine, first in communications, then as director of football operations – this was his first relationship with a CFL team.

Rather than passing judgment on Lalonde – which he said wouldn't be fair from afar – Smith said there are tendencies any potential new president must understand and address.

"The CFL is all about community," Smith emphasized. "It's about partnership and connecting to the community. That's key in Quebec. We're in the sports entertainment business. You're creating a relationship. That's an important ingredient that's required.

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"I don't know what Ray Lalonde did," Smith added. "But I can tell you getting out in the community was our way of mobilizing the people. You have to sell a vision."

Lalonde, who gained a reputation as a brilliant marketer, did improve the team's visibility and was working hard to improve its merchandising. But, because of his football pedigree, he also meddled in the team's football operations. The Als eventually might have been seeking a new general manager and head coach had Lalonde remained in the picture.

"You need a shared vision - at all levels," Smith said.

Montreal general manager Jim Popp, predictably, is reluctant to pour fuel onto the fire now that Lalonde has departed. "I just do my job," he said from North Carolina.

Popp admitted he spoke to owner Robert Wetenhall last week, but won't disclose what was discussed. As the only GM this team has known since it returned to the CFL in 1996, Popp will now be forced to address matters with a number of front-office personnel, rather than simply reporting to the president. But he's experienced enough to forge ahead.

"It'll be a work in progress," Popp said. "Fortunately, with football operations functioning smoothly all the



GAZETTE FILE PHOTO

Former Alouette Éric Lapointe would be a good choice as president.

years I've been there, a lot of people have been together for a lot of years. We'll continue to function, attempting to put together a productive team we're all proud of."

Popp has seen this movie before and will continue dealing with the Als' pair of experienced vice-presidents - Mark Weightman (operations and events) along with Laurie Bennett (finance and administration). Not to mention Wetenhall.

"It shouldn't be much of a hiccup," Popp said.

Nonetheless, an influential columnist at a Montreal French-language daily newspaper has taken umbrage with the team's plight, believing

too many anglophones represent the team's hierarchy. This negative publicity is disconcerting to Paul Harris, chairman of the Als' board of directors. He was scheduled to meet with Jacques Ménard, a team director, on Monday to contemplate the organization's next step.

Harris, who has said he has no desire to become interim president again, refused to answer questions from The Gazette on Monday, but emphasized it was Lalonde's process of implementing his vision, not the decisions, that might have irritated some people - not the other way around as The Gazette reported.

If the Als choose to quickly replace Lalonde, Éric Lapointe - again - will be considered a leading candidate.

Lapointe, a former tailback with the Als, is president of the team's alumni along with a successful South Shore stockbroker. He's well-respected, popular and has a strong business background.

It's also believed two former Als vice-presidents, Richard Blais and Claude Rochon, would consider returning to the organization now that Lalonde has left. Blais handled corporate partnerships, while Rochon was in charge of marketing and communications.

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