



CANADIAN FOOTBALL CHEERLEADERS **ALUMNI ORGANIZATION**

The CFCAO Announces Second Honorary Member

April 6, 2021

Annie Larouche is our latest honouree and recipient of our CFCAO Honorary Membership.

Among CFCAO members, we all have stories, experiences, and memories ranging from a single season to several seasons. And then there's Annie Larouche. Annie has spent half of her life, 25 years, as part of the Montreal Alouettes cheer and football organization, with 10 of those years spent both on the field cheering as well as serving as Director. Her journey began in 1996.

A little history here... The Montreal Alouettes franchise operated from 1946 – 1982, at which time the team collapsed but was revived as the Montreal Concordes for four years. After that period, there was no CFL team in Montreal until 1996.

Annie recalls, "I was working as a clerk in criminal court at the courthouse, and I was also a cheerleader for the Montreal Roadrunners Roller Hockey team. I had heard that the Baltimore Stallions were moving to Montreal to become the Alouettes. With the Roadrunners, we had a small group of 10 cheerleaders, so I said, you know what? I'm going to find out who's in charge of the Alouettes and send them a resume - back then. I typed it out on a typewriter! I made them an offer that our squad could be the cheer team for both the Roadrunners and the Alouettes."

Typing the proposition was one thing, but then Annie faced the challenge of whom to approach. The Stallions didn't have an office or a point-person in Montreal yet, so Annie decided the best thing to do was to call Olympic Stadium and see what she could find out. The people at the stadium didn't have information yet, but they put Annie in touch with the lawyer handling the sale of the team.

There she was, 24-year-old Annie pitching her idea to the big boss. "It ended up being Mitch Garber," Annie goes on, "He is huge in Montreal. You might remember him from Dragon's Den, and he was involved with Cirque du Soleil, and he said, thank you for your perseverance (because I had kept calling to see that they got my resume). He said, I got you on top of the pile, but we're not at the stage of thinking about cheerleaders yet, but I do want to talk to you."

Mr. Garber called Annie a couple of weeks later, which led to a meeting with the new owner and president of the Alouettes, at which time they offered her the job of being in charge of the cheer team.

"I was 24 years old at the time, freaking out a bit. They said we don't want ten girls on the team; we want about 40 girls on the team. I thought, wow, this is something else! And this is how it all started."



Asking Annie whether she was always an Alouettes fan, she points out that it was tough to say so since there wasn't a Montreal CFL team for ten years, but she recalls being a fan in 1982 reaching out to the team.

"When I was about 11 years old, I watched a movie called "The Dallas Cowboys Cheerleaders." I watched the movie and decided I wanted to be a cheerleader, so I wrote a letter to the Alouettes back then in 1982 saying that I knew I was too young but asking if there was anything I could do to be prepared for when I grew up and could join. I never got an answer." Annie laughs, "I don't know if my mom even posted the letter, but 13 years later, I was in charge of the team!"

So, her journey began in 1996 and spanned 25 years. Annie recalls how the world has changed over the years and how cheerleading has evolved.

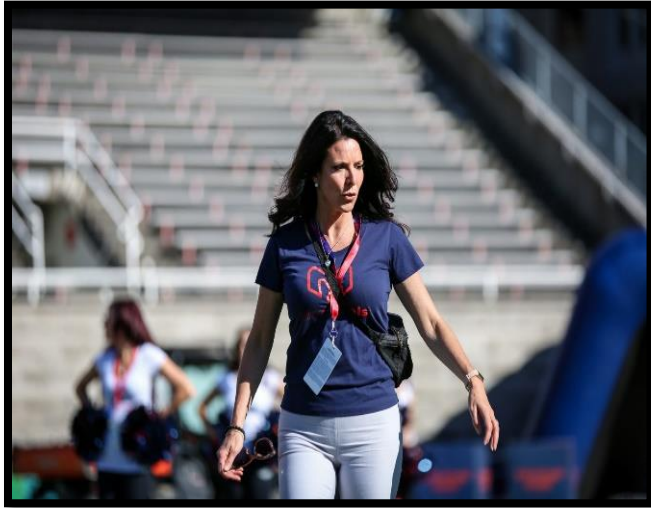
"I would say at first we were compared to the Dallas Cowboys Cheerleaders. It was more the dance side and the sexy side of things. There's a fine line between the two, and we made sure we never crossed that line if we wanted to be taken seriously. It was most challenging for about the first four years because I had to defend and justify the cheerleaders' presence and why they were there. I would explain that we provided entertainment.

Fortunately, over time the perception changed. People that came to the games could see that there was talent and a purpose to it all, but it did take a while."

The Alouettes cheerleaders with Annie at the helm had the opportunity to be involved in various projects, including an annual calendar that began in 2001. It was fun for the team and sold quite well for some time, but this also changed as society experienced changes.

"The swimsuit calendars, the first was in 2001, was shot in Jamaica and was definitely a bit sexier. In those early years, we would sell about 11,000 calendars a year, but in the last years, we had trouble selling even 2000. Now that everyone has smartphones, people don't buy calendars, and overall, society evolved a bit. Over the years, I would say we did 13, 14 calendars, and while the first was swimsuit calendars, we changed over time to be more fashionable and more focused on information about our province."

Time saw changes to the team's makeup and performance on the field too. "We went from the all-girl dance group to a co-ed team on the field and stunts as well as dancers. I guess we just adapted and adjusted to the changes in society and what people wanted to see."



In early 2020 the CFL cheer community was rocked by the news that there would no longer be Alouettes cheerleaders taking the field. This was felt across the league and particularly by Annie and her team members.

"Well, the situation was simple. New owner and the new president. Neither had seen a game, and neither came from football. No judgment here; these are just the facts. When the new owner bought the team, he looked at the numbers and said, well, cheerleaders cost a lot, so we're writing them out. It was a simple financial decision. **But the fans didn't agree!** There was a petition, and some season ticket holders were going to cancel their tickets. It was a rollercoaster ride of emotions for me, but then, five days later, the president reversed his decision. Sadly, this had to happen, but at the same time, it shed light on the cheer team."

Annie continues, "Cheerleaders can be taken for granted. They're just always there but then when something like this happens; everybody starts thinking about it. What's the purpose of cheerleaders? It's a show. It's entertainment. It's part of the culture. They're a role model for girls and boys, and it's a sport! They're athletes. All good things came out of this, so while it's unfortunate we went through this, the cheer team came out stronger."

Of course, 25 years with the organization is filled with memories and stories. So many it's hard for Annie to isolate them. But there was Grey Cup in 2009 in Calgary!

We were on our way to the Cheer Extravaganza and as every cheerleader knows, besides the game itself, it's the biggest event for the Cheer teams. The schedule was a quick run through for every team and then we would be the first team to perform. We were on our way to the venue in a school bus and all of a sudden, the bus stops the driver tells us he can't go any further. We were on a steep road and it's icy. I immediately called the organizers saying that we would be a few minutes late. The driver was making phone calls trying to find a solution and so we waited and waited until the Calgary firemen came to escort us! They all had a moustache and this is where we first heard of "Movember"! The whole episode took one and half to two hours which resulted in us missing our rehearsal. I told the girls to do their hair and makeup and get dressed on the bus! When we finally arrived, we ran inside the venue taking off our winter gear, leaving our suitcases by the stage and with no warm up or preparation we landed on the stage arriving in time to be the last show of the evening!!!



And then there were, of course, situations where folks would gossip, especially about the rule that cheerleaders and football players cannot date. Annie remembers when she was approached by the team equipment manager, who said, "well, your girls are not respecting the rules. I've seen one of your girls leaving with one of the players every time. They come in together, and they leave together all the time! So, I had to take her aside and ask what was going on. She said very simply, and casually oh yeah, he's my neighbour, like right next door, so we carpool together all the time. I was so relieved."

As if working with the Alouette cheer team and the football team wasn't enough, Annie is a highly regarded choreographer whose talents have extended beyond the sports world. The movie "The Sum of All Fears" has been part of several TV shows and commercials, music videos and shared the stage with Bryan Adams during his "18 til I die" tour.

Annie Larouche has become synonymous with the Alouettes, but this year she's taking on a huge career change. Annie is now the Director of Operations in Montreal for the CEBL, (Canadian Elite Basketball League) heading up the organization and putting everything in place to arrive at a Montreal basketball team by May 2022. It's a big job, but she's up to the task.

"Most people know me as Annie, Alouettes Cheerleaders, but that's just what they would see on the field. Behind the scenes, I've done it all. This new job is very much like my work with the Alouettes but with more responsibilities. In my 25 years with the Alouettes, I did the branding, marketing, human resources, communications and PR. My toolbox is full, and I'm ready for this challenge."



A lifetime of experience will be put to work in her new position, fuelled by all she learned in her time with the Alouettes.

"I am the person I am today because of the Alouettes and because of all of the people that have been part of this journey. I learned from every single cheerleader that was on my team. They're my second family. We've been through many emotions, good and bad, and it's made us all even closer. I've seen it all, weddings, divorces, babies, cancer, losses. We're family.

And how does Annie feel about being named our Honorary Member?

"It means a lot. I'm humbled. I'm so privileged to have been in my position to have people's trust and never took any of it for granted. To be part of this new organization, the CFCAO. To be recognized with this honour is a real gift. I already feel like I've been so very lucky in my life, then I get this honour. That's like double lucky – double rainbow! I don't really know how to express it, but it means so very much."

About the Canadian Football Cheerleaders Alumni Organization (CFCAO)

The Canadian Football Cheerleaders Alumni Organization (CFCAO) is the only official alumni organization solely for former CFL cheerleaders. Our membership is comprised of former CFL cheerleaders, dancers and majorettes from all nine CFL teams as well as the U.S. Expansion teams of the 1990's. Our vision for the CFCAO is to be a thriving valued organization that provides support to those in need. Through our fundraising initiatives & volunteerism we will give back to the community, both locally and nationally.

The CFCAO was founded in 2018 by Tiffany Beveridge and Raeanne Milovanovic, both Hamilton Tiger-Cats Cheer Alumni.

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For more information on the CFCAO visit www.cfcao.ca