



ONE-SPORT TOWN?

In a city where the Canadiens are king, and memories of the Expos still sting, does another pro sports team stand a chance in Montreal?

WORDS AND IMAGES BY DAVID MEFFE



It's Saturday night and Montreal is ablaze in a sea of teeming *bleu blanc rouge*. La Station Des Sports, a hip resto-bar on downtown St-Catherine, slowly fills with patrons as the air of burnt chicken wings wafts over flat screens covering every conceivable vertical surface. The game is on, and there's no need to ask who's playing.

"Hockey games always draw a crowd, it's where we make most of our money," says the waiter, barely audible over the blaring commentary as he balances burgers against a 4L pitcher of cheap blonde ale. "It doesn't even need to be hockey. Football, UFC, whatever. This city goes nuts for a game."

Synchronized screams and shouts become a soundtrack to the kind of bilingual beleaguered malcontent Montreal fans are famous for, directing raw hatred at whoever the Canadiens are up against—tonight, it happens to be the Ottawa Senators. It's hard to tell where the *'estis'* begin and the *'shits'* end.

Ask anyone: the referees are against us. So are the league commissioners. In fact, the whole NHL is part of the conspiracy. It's not just a chip on the city's collective shoulder, it's the whole damn forest.

Outside, a group of young men stand in a circle smoking cigarettes and recapping the last period in drunken, boisterous voices. "There's only room for one team in this town," one says, hacking a mulch of phlegm onto the slushy pavement. "Everything else is just passing the time until hockey is on. Feeding the pigeons."

There's no two ways about it: Montreal is a rootin' tootin' hockey town. Here, the Canadiens aren't so much a franchise as an

institutional identity, gods in an arena that might as well be Olympus. Fans joke that they could lose every game this season and still sell-out the Bell Centre, with scores of merchandise to boot. The only thing that seems to bring Montrealers together more than *Les Glorieux* is a communal distaste for all things Toronto.

But for a city so seemingly obsessed with sports, Montreal offers few fares for its sports fans compared to its long-time rival. In recent years, the success of Toronto's basketball and baseball teams have brought it back to international relevance, and with a little help from hip hop homeboy Drake, "The Six" has rebranded itself as the country's premier multi-sporting powerhouse.

With some U.S. franchises faltering and leagues looking to expand northward, Montreal seems a logical destination, but with the Alouettes football team and Impact soccer club barely clinging to the scraps of attention, is there enough fan love left for a new kid on the block?

"We are, in so many ways, an events city, and there aren't many things that can sustain themselves long-term here," says Sean Coleman, a sports anchor with CTV Montreal. "The Canadiens proved to be one of them, but everything else tends to be a flavour of the week."

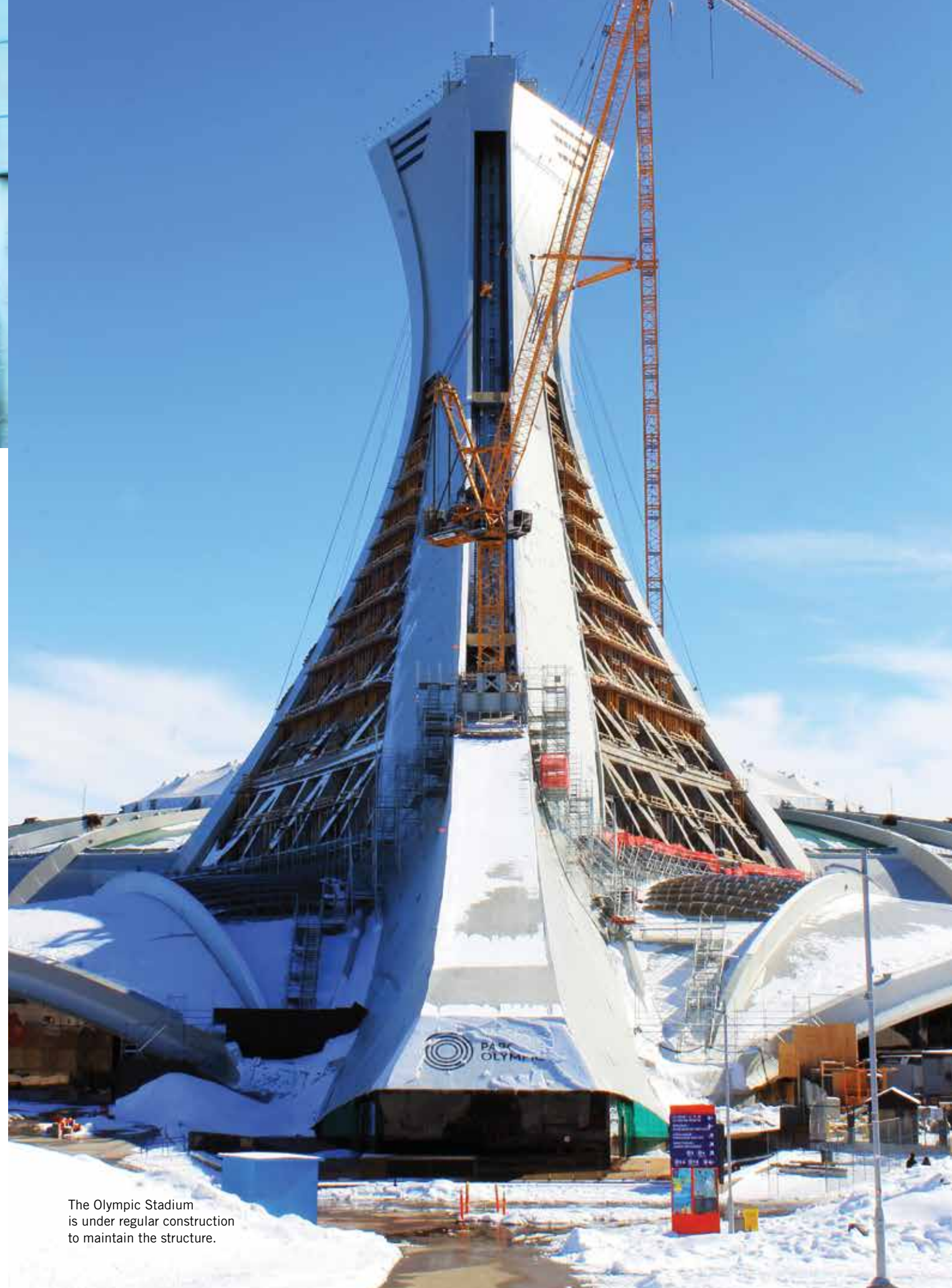
He adds: "Winning breeds loyalty, and Montreal demands what's best. This is a tough place to be a loser, especially if you're new in town."

Montreal's history and contemporary culture are inextricably tied to sports.

Any local can proudly boast how the first recorded indoor hockey game was played at the Victoria Skating Rink in 1875.

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—Sean Coleman, CTV Montreal



The Olympic Stadium is under regular construction to maintain the structure.

Jackie Robinson may have broken the colour barrier with the Brooklyn Dodgers, but the Montreal Royals had him first. And long before Georges St-Pierre brought fame and a name to mixed martial arts, he was a scrawny kid practicing karate in the South Shore suburbs.

In the early decades of the NHL, the Canadiens grew themselves into one of the most iconic and established franchises in the league, indirectly becoming a symbol for the fledgling Quebecois nationalist movement.

Le Tricolore represented the pride against perceived Protestant anglophone domination.

Maurice Richard was the physical incarnation of all French-Canadian greatness; his suspension from the league in 1955 prompted a riot of Francophone fans who saw it as another injustice against their people. It was on the ice—not in city hall—that the coming cultural rebellion first bubbled and began to take the shape of a Fleur-de-lis.

THE FIELD OF DEAD DREAMS

The Montreal Expos were Canada's first Major League Baseball team in 1969. In the 1980s, they were one of the top MLB teams for attendance, and during the legendary 1993-1994 season, they consistently drew crowds well north of 30,000. No one knew what the team's furry orange mascot, Youppi!, was supposed to be, and no one seemed to care—he remains the only

mascot to ever be ejected from a game for misconduct on the field.

The honeymoon ended sometime in the late 1990s, as attendance dwindled and the team eventually moved to Washington in 2004. Instead of being put out to pasture, Youppi! sold out, changed jerseys, and started working for the Canadiens. Traitor.

"Montreal has always been sort of a bandwagon town. Unless it's the Canadiens, everyone else is just 'what have you done for me lately?'" says Matthew Ross, chairman and founder of ExposNation, a non-profit that promotes Montreal as a viable MLB market.

Some people blame the Expos' downfall on the 1994 baseball strike, while others, like Ross, point the critical finger at a more recognizable symbol: the Olympic Stadium, former stomping grounds of the Expos.

The 1976 Olympic Games marked the apex of the Quiet Revolution, when Montreal came to prominence as a truly international city in the wake of Expo 67—a great swell of civic passion bathed in athletic glory. But this monumental flop marked the crest of that tall wave, and when it finally rolled back, it revealed the sagging underbelly of a city plagued by organized crime, government corruption, and a sovereignty movement that would later gut its financial sector.

The stadium was not completed in time for the games, and 'The Big Owe,'—as it's affectionately known in Montreal—ended up coating taxpayers an estimated \$1.47-billion when it was finally paid off in

2006, owing largely to construction graft and constant repairs caused by its absurd and, by most-accounts, incompetent design.

So naturally, when it came time to build a new stadium for the Expos, the city simply retailored its white elephant into a baseball park. It might as well have been a giant coffin nail.

"For anyone that went to an Expos game at the Big O and didn't enjoy it; that's not baseball. That's not even close to baseball," says Ross, visibly angry at the mere mention of the place. "There was no smell of grass, no sunset in the background. That stadium was an awful piece of crap and a detriment to the franchise."

A NEW ERA OF EXPOS?

Ross remains convinced that baseball and the Expos are due for a comeback, and he's not the only one.

A feasibility study published in 2013 and presented to the Board of Trade of Metropolitan Montreal stipulated that bringing back the team would run a little more than a billion dollars, which includes the cost of building a new 36,000-seat stadium.

Last year, Montreal businessmen Stephen Bronfman and Mitch Garber publicly announced their commitment to a new team. If money talks, these guys shout.

Bronfman and Mayor Denis Coderre also co-signed a 2015 letter that was sent to the 30 MLB teams, essentially laying out the red carpet.



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Saputo stadium is the home of the Montreal Impact soccer club.

To make matters even more confusing, in late March, the Canadian Press cited a confidential source who boasted that Expos plans were not only in the works, but also backed by big money. For the time being, all of this is hearsay. For his part, Garber told a Montreal radio talk show that while there is “great desire” to bring Major League Baseball back to Montreal, plans are “not as advanced as this story would make it sound.”

Ross agrees that “the appetite for baseball is absolutely still here. Enrollment in baseball across the province is up. The success of the [Toronto] Blue Jays has been a tremendous help for the visibility of the sport here.”

He adds that a revival of the Expos logo has become something of a hipster fashion statement. “A few years ago, the Expos were actually one of the top teams in hat sales. It’s nostalgic. Anything retro or ’80s is cool right now.”

Regardless, a new team would demand a new stadium, likely something closer to downtown. But the Big O’s looming presence on the skyline—and unofficial status as the province’s largest bird toilet—could be a contributing factor to the general uneasiness about another grand sporting venture and the inevitable bill that taxpayers would have to foot to get it afloat.

There’s actually very little evidence to support the notion that sports teams boost local economies, or bring any additional revenue to cities, especially if they’re financed by the public.

A 2004 report published by the Cato Institute in Washington, D.C., noted that professional sports generally have little, if any, positive effect on a city’s economy. A similar study on minor league hockey stadiums in Canadian small towns published in 2015 noted that after a brief three-to-five-year period of novelty excitement, attendance generally tended to drop.

“It’s a giant sham when commissioners negotiate these new stadiums for owners who could pay out of their own pocket, but would much prefer to have public funds pick up the tab. The reality is that the city never really recoups that cost,” says Coleman. “It definitely puts you on the map. Who the hell knew where Sacramento was before they had a basketball team? But is it worth spending half a billion on a stadium? I don’t think so.”

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MPs’ spouses reveal what it’s like being ‘the other half’ of an elected-official

CPAC, text messages, FaceTime, and trips home: How spouses of MPs manage their lives and make their relationships work despite long distances and long hours.

BY SHRUTI SHEKAR

With talk of making the House of Commons more “family friendly” in the shadow of Parliament Hill’s reputation as a home-wrecker, *P&I* spoke to four MPs and their spouses about what it’s like when you

haven’t seen your partner for more than a week—or sometimes longer—but can turn on CPAC and watch them in action.

While all four couples handle it differently, and live lives with different

dynamics, their ways of coping are very similar, from turning on the TV, to penciling-in a FaceTime call.

Here, MP spouses share their personal stories of love, success, challenges, and choices.



Stelios Doussis and husband, Liberal MP Seamus O’Regan. *P&I* photograph by Jake Wright

STELIOS DOUSSIS & LIBERAL MP SEAMUS O’REGAN

Ottawa’s newest hotspot, Riviera, was buzzing with about 150 guests enjoying unique cocktails with their meals when *P&I* walks through the doors to meet Stelios Doussis, general manager of the Sparks Street restaurant, and husband to St. John’s South-Mount Pearl, N.L. Liberal MP Seamus O’Regan.

“I’ll be running around the restaurant, while I’m doing this interview. It’s going to be great. Seamus is on his way,” says a sharply suited Doussis, who changed his first name from Steve back to his original Stelios because, as he put it, there are just too many Steves in the world.

As Doussis runs around, he offers a glimpse into his life as the spouse of a Member of Parliament. He and O’Regan have been together for about 10 years and were married in the summer of 2010. They met in Toronto when O’Regan was working at CTV’s Canada AM.

“[Doussis] was brought to Toronto... to help around a bespoke club and I met him then. Then again a few years later at a party... we’ve been inseparable since then,” says O’Regan, who joins us bar-side after a day in the Commons.

The restaurant business runs in Doussis’ family. His father was a chef who owned restaurants in Montreal, where he was raised.

“I love what I do, I’ve been doing it for 25 years. I started off in banking when I was a young kid, but I really didn’t enjoy it. It wasn’t personal,” Doussis says.

In 2014 when O’Regan decided to enter politics, Doussis joined him in moving to Newfoundland.

“I was working at Soho House [in Toronto] at the time and my contract was coming to an end... things just fell into place properly... It’s a give and take, it’s always been very much. I think that’s what worked,” he says.

While Doussis is not new to leading a chaotic lifestyle, he notes his day would be ruined if he didn’t make the bed before leaving their place.



The Olympic Stadium is also referred to as 'The Big Owe' as it's cost the city \$1.47-billion.

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Yet—and perhaps of more relevance to Montreal—other academic studies have shown that only sports teams that perform consistently well actually help generate revenue for a city. So if you build it, they will come...for a while. As long as you're winning. All aboard the bandwagon!

An anecdotal example: Frederico Munoz, a bar manager at Mexican restaurant Milagro, located in downtown Toronto, told *The Globe and Mail* that during the Jays' 2015 late-summer winning streak, business boomed.

The key word being 'winning.'

"When they win, everyone is happy, they want to stick around and drink. When they lose, everyone just wants to go home," Munoz told the *Globe*. "Right now, they are winning, and that's a win for us, too."

HOOP DREAMS WITHOUT THE STEAM

But what if a franchise could come to Montreal, poach an established fan base from Toronto, and cohabitate a centrally located facility? That might be a slam dunk.

Basketball has a tepid history in Montreal, evidenced in promising beginnings with Dr. James Naismith's holes in peach baskets Canadian Heritage Moment, which took place only *after* he left McGill University. The Montreal Dragons (National Basketball League, 1993-1994), Montreal Matrix (American Basketball Association, 2005-2008), and Montreal Jazz (National Basketball League of Canada, 2012-2013) all failed to gain solid traction in the city, or prove the market to U.S. franchises thinking about a relocation.

“
The money people spend on sports, on season tickets, beer, popcorn, or hotdogs, can just as easily be spent on the Just For Laughs Festival, or a concert.”

—Sean Coleman, CTV Montreal

Since 2012, Montreal has hosted several NBA pre-season exhibition games at the Bell Centre, which were both well-received and attended. But do these games reflect a demand, or even desire for an NBA franchise, or do they simply fill the craving for novelty spectacle in this event town?

"If a franchise were to be awarded to Montreal, there's 82 games, 41 home dates—how long will the love affair last before the building is empty? I give it a two-to-three-year honeymoon period," says Montreal native Dwight Walton, a veteran player for both the Matrix and the Canadian national team. "Montreal fans want winners. Towards the end of the Matrix's last season, you couldn't even give those tickets away."

He adds: "Listen, all of us want an NBA franchise here, but it's all hope—not reality."

But despite his outward cynicism, there's a hint of hope in Walton's eyes when he talks about the idea of the NBA laying roots in Montreal. While his pro days are behind him, he still works as a basketball analyst for TSN radio and coaches high school students in the East End of the city. He says his players need role models closer to home.

"For young players in Toronto, the Raptors are there—they can touch them; they can smell them. They're not a mythical figure on a 42-inch TV. They can see that he bleeds like me, he sweats like me. He has pimples just like me. I could be like him one day," says Walton. "So when you see young kids from Toronto walk into our town for these tournaments, they have a swagger about them. They're trying to *be* a Raptor. So if an NBA team was in this town, I think basketball, at the grassroots level, would go through the roof."

The problem remains in proving that the NBA can survive the Canadian market outside of Toronto. The NBA commissioner Adam Silver explicitly said last year that it was not time to bring another team to this country.

But Montreal's hoop dreams might be bolstered by changing demographics and a projected influx of migrants in the coming years, much like how the Impact's incarnation was heavily influenced by European, North African, and South American diasporas craving a soccer team.

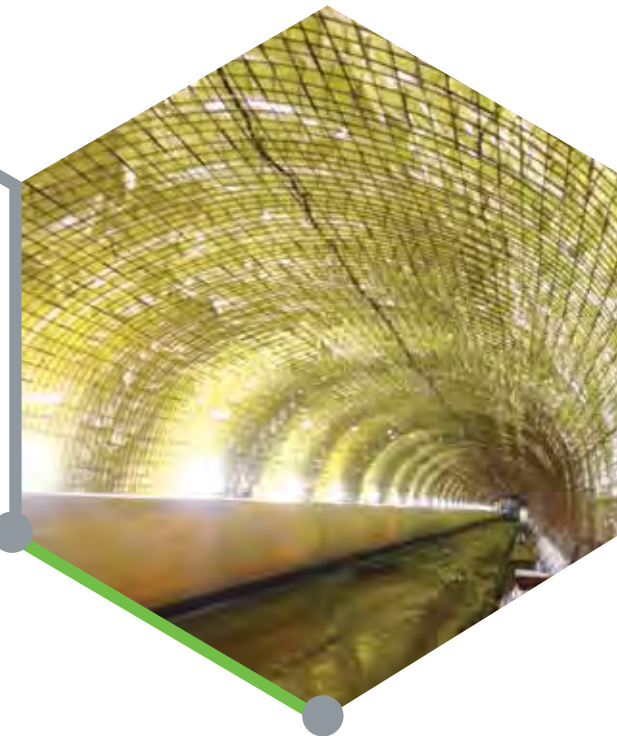
"The thing I love about this province is the racial diversity—there are people from all around the world here," says Walton. "Adam Silver is constantly talking about how he wants to make basketball a global game. Well, welcome to a global city."

Ultimately, established annual sporting affairs like the Formula One Canadian Grand Prix whet appetites for excitement without overstaying their welcome, or draining taxpayers' wallets. For the time being, Montreal remains an event-driven city, symbolic of its mercurial people and their fleeting passion for everything but hockey.

"It'll stay this way, at least for the foreseeable future. The money people spend on sports, on season tickets, beer, popcorn, or hotdogs, can just as easily be spent on the Just For Laughs Festival, or a concert," says Coleman. "There's no shortage of things to do here. So the idea that Montrealers are just sitting at home in their basements, crying, and waiting for a new team to love is just ridiculous." **P&I**



ZERO TO EXPERT



BY CHELSEA NASH

IMAGES COURTESY OF THE CITY OF OTTAWA

Ottawans have mixed feelings about the Light Rail Transit; some locals are excited for what they think will revolutionize and modernize the city, and the more competitive residents hope it will allow Ottawa to catch-up to the public transit systems of friendly neighbours like Toronto and Montreal.

Some are a little more apprehensive, concerned that the one express bus they currently take during their commute to downtown will soon turn into an array of confusing transfers that will actually make their travel time even longer than it is now.

And then there are others, whose steadfast disdain for OC Transpo and its oft-delayed and overly crowded busses will not likely subside anytime soon, no matter how many fancy trains we might get. (And admit it, all transit-taking Ottawans have felt that way at one time or another.)

OTTAWA'S LIGHT RAIL TRANSIT

