


Niagara County Tribune/Sentinel

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NHL Hall of Famer, Buffalo Sabres great Pat LaFontaine teams with Niagara University for Sports Summit



Pat LaFontaine addresses the audience, left, and speaks with members of Niagara University's club hockey teams. (Photos courtesy of Thomas J. Burns, Niagara University // Michael J. Billoni)

BY MICHAEL J. BILLONI
Senior Contributing Writer

Pat LaFontaine grew up loving the game of hockey, as he played on backyard rinks in his hometown of Waterford, Michigan. As a teenager, his parents saw such tremendous potential in this future National Hockey League and United States Hockey Hall of Famer they allowed him to play junior hockey for Verdun in the Quebec Major Junior Hockey League in 1983. He was recognized that season as the Canadian Major Junior Player of the Year.

The next year, at 18, he embarked on what would prove to be an extremely successful NHL career on and off the ice, by signing with the New York Islanders, who traded up to select him with the third pick in the 1983 NHL Entry Draft. He played eight seasons with the Islanders before being traded to the Buffalo Sabres in 1991. There, he played six seasons before a concussion and brain injury impacted his career. He did go on to play one more season with the New York Rangers, giving him the unique hat trick of being one of five players in NHL history to skate for all three teams based in New York

state, all part of a 15-year career that saw him total 1,013 points on 468 goals and 545 assists.

LaFontaine's most memorable moment in hockey occurred in the 1987 Stanley Cup playoff finals, when he scored the winning goal in the fourth overtime period of the seventh and decisive game between the Islanders and Washington Capitals, known as the "Easter Epic." The game began on Saturday, April 18, and concluded just before 2 a.m. on Easter Sunday, the 19th.

During his illustrious career with the Sabres, he served as team captain from 1992-97. During the 1991-92 season, his playmaking ability helped linemate Alexander Mogilny set a team record with 76 goals, while LaFontaine registered 95 assists and 148 points. Sadly, in a game against Pittsburgh early in the 1996-97 season, he was hammered by Francois Leroux with a high hit to the head, knocking him out with a concussion, resulting in a post-concussion syndrome.

Despite the Sabres' front office reluctance to allow him to play, LaFontaine would practice on his own at a suburban rink where he rented ice time, vowing to play

again, with team doctors advising against it. In a cost-saving move, the Sabres traded him to the Rangers on Sept. 29, 1997, and, during his one season with the Blue Shirts, he tied for the team lead in goals scored – and he recorded his 1,000th career NHL point. Late in the season, though, in a game against Ottawa, he accidentally collided with teammate Mike Keane and suffered another concussion, which kept him out the remainder of the season and the next season. This led to him to formally retire on Oct. 12, 1999.

LaFontaine, now 58, but looking as if he could put on his No. 16 jersey and still perform on the ice, was standing before a capacity crowd last Saturday morning in the Russell J. Salvatore Dining Commons on the Niagara University Campus to open the College of Hospitality, Sport, and Tourism Management's annual Sports Summit.

Looking more like a corporate CEO with a blue, open-collar shirt, sleeveless sweater, blue slacks, shiny, polished shoes and a full head of black hair with no trace of gray, the passionate athlete and parent stood before an

SEE LAFONTAINE, on Page 8

Former Lewiston businessman goes back to Turkey to help his community



Above: Semir Huzmeli and his sister, Kamil. • Semir Huzmeli and his sister-in-law, Funda. (Submitted)

BY ELIJAH ROBINSON
Contributing Writer

Kindness and charity has the power to change people's lives. In wake of the devastating Turkey-Syria earthquake that took place in February, former Lewiston salon owner Semir Huzmeli felt he could not just stay here and witness the suffering of his family and community overseas.

On Feb. 6, Huzmeli and his son were coming home from a soccer game when he got word from friends that an earthquake, with a magnitude of 7.8, struck in his home country in Turkey. His old neighborhood in Samandag, in the city of Antakya, was among the areas that was hit the hardest.

When he was told, he said he instantly wanted to know if his parents were OK. Huzmeli said he couldn't get in contact with his brother and sister who lived in the area. He explained he couldn't sleep after hearing the news about the earthquake. It was after a few days of restless nights that he decided to get a plane ticket at the last minute and go back home.

"I couldn't just stay here and watch the news," Huzmeli said.

He described the journey to his hometown, as he traveled



from Istanbul to the affected area where his family resides, as scary and emotional.

"When I get there, I start to get a little bit stronger," Huzmeli said.

Once he finally arrived, Huzmeli described the area as a war zone. His parents' house was dilapidated, and the community had tents set up for shelter after the houses were destroyed. People were only able to wash up once a week in tents, and water had to be heated by wood.

This is what Huzmeli saw, but he said he couldn't imagine the suffering his family and others

SEE HUZMELI, continued on Page 2

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