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the entrepreneurs

BIG-NAME GOALIES call on Stéphane Bergeron to adorn their head cages

The man behind the masks

MARK CARDWELL SPECIAL TO THE GAZETTE

You know that Mastercard ad, where it suddenly dawns on the gangly teenage goalie that he might have a better shot of making it to the NHL as a Zamboni driver?

Goalie mask painter Stéphane Bergeron can relate.

As a kid growing up in Drummondville, he was a relatively old 12 when he first signed up to play minor hockey. There was no goalie at the first practice, so the coach asked for a volunteer.

"I was no good as a player," the 43-year-old recalled this week in his home workshop just outside Trois Rivières, where right now he is making the mask that Team Canada goalie Marc-André Fleury will wear at the coming Winter Olympics in Vancouver. "So I put up my hand."

Turns out Bergeron wasn't such a bad goalie (better, anyway, than that sieve in the ad). He played minor hockey until age 17 and has played 20 seasons since then in garage leagues.

"I love everything about being a goalie," he said. "But from the very first time I played, putting on and wearing all the gear and equipment is what I love the most. It's an amazing feeling."

An incessant drawer since age 3, Bergeron could reproduce almost any image by the time he enrolled in a graphic design program at the local CEGEP. Before he finished, however, he found a job – and spent six years – designing and making vinyl bike helmet stickers for a company in Drummondville.

It turned out to be an excellent school for a career he had not yet imagined.

"I learned to separate colours and work with them," Bergeron said. "It was in the early days of computers, too, so we did all the drawing and cutting by hand. It taught me to use tools like an exacto knife, which I now use every day."

Laid off in the 1991 recession and unable to find a similar position, Bergeron decided to start his own lettering business for trucks and vans. For the hell of it, he also bought an airbrush – a pen-sized tool used for painting in extreme detail – and painted cartoonish characters on the sides of his motorcycle helmet and goalie mask.

The latter – a fearsome face with clawed hands – got immediate reaction at the rink the first time Bergeron wore it.

"Everybody was saying: 'Wow, man, that's awesome!'" he recalled.



Stéphane Bergeron paints goaltender masks for pro and amateur players, locally and internationally. To see more pictures of Bergeron's masks, visit our photo gallery at montrealgazette.com/business

FRANCIS VACHON THE GAZETTE

"Back then, everybody was wearing basic white masks with the cage, so mine really stood out."

Word spread and, before long, Bergeron was doing two or three custom-made masks a month for other goalies at \$250-\$300 a pop.

After moving to Trois Rivières in 1994 to live his girlfriend, Marie-Josée Roy, (the couple today have two children – daughter Axelle, 14 and son Allen, 12) Bergeron dropped out of the fiercely competitive lettering business and focused on mask making.

His big break came in 1997, when a friend introduced him to NHL goalie Patrick Lalime, then a rising young star with the Pittsburgh Penguins.

"We met and I showed Patrick my catalogue of masks and he said he

wanted me to do one for him," Bergeron recalled.

Pro goalies, he added, don't pay for paintings. Instead, they arrange for the equipment maker who sponsors the goalie (in Lalime's case it was Itech, which was bought out by Bauer last year) to ship him the mask.

Once he's done, he ships both the mask and his bill to the goalie's team.

Since then, Bergeron has enjoyed steady business from goalies around the world at all levels.

One of only a few mask painters accredited with Itech, he works with and for several big-name goalies.

In addition to Lalime and Fleury, who has been a customer since junior hockey, Bergeron has done

masks for former Hab Cristobal Huet, Team Canada goalie Roberto Luongo, Jonas Hiller of the Anaheim Ducks, Jean-François Deslauriers of the Edmonton Oilers, and Yann Danis, who is the backup of all-time NHL shutout king and Team Canada stalwart Martin Brodeur of the New Jersey Devils.

Most of them can be seen on Bergeron's website (www.griffeoriginale.com).

Bergeron's favourite mask is the first of the half-dozen he's done for Ilya Bryzgalov of the Phoenix Coyotes. Made when the Russian netminder played for Anaheim, it portrays Daffy Duck in goal on one side and relaxing on the beach on the other.

Bergeron said the raciest design

he's done is of big-breasted women on the sides of a mask he painted for a men's-league goalie in Trois Rivières.

"Most guys – I'd say 75 per cent – come in with a picture or an image they want reproduced," Bergeron explained. "Some just have a theme in mind (and) I work with them to find something that will work."

He now paints about 80 masks each season, which for him begins in July and runs through to March.

His prices start at \$500 and go as high as \$850.

"There aren't many materials involved and I work at home, so I really just charge for time and talent," he said. "I really love what I do. I'll be doing this until I die. My last job will be my casket."