

JEWISH EXPONENT

— WHAT IT MEANS TO BE JEWISH IN PHILADELPHIA —

Ed Snider Passes Away

APRIL 11, 2016

Jon Marks



Long before Bruce Springsteen came onto the scene, Ed Snider truly was “The Boss.”

Nothing went on with his beloved Philadelphia Flyers without his input — even if he didn’t always have final say — be it coaches, trades, free agent signings or anything he could do that might give his team a better opportunity on the ice.

The hope, of course, was that the orange and black would eventually hoist another Stanley Cup — like it did back in 1974 and ’75 when the team was the hated “Broad Street Bullies” who’d stop at nothing to win.

But much less-publicized about Snider, who passed away April 11 at his Montecito, Calif., home following a long battle with bladder cancer at 83, was his passion and commitment to his Jewish identity and community.

A longtime board member and former co-chair of the Simon Wiesenthal Center, and one of the original donors to the National Museum of American Jewish History, Snider often preferred to stay in the background while making philanthropic contributions to several causes.

He played an active role in the fight for Soviet Jewry back in the 1970s, once donating proceeds of a 1975 appearance by the renowned Panov Ballet to that cause. The following year, when the Flyers met the Soviet Army team in a memorable exhibition game, Snider made sure signs placed in the building in support of “refuseniks” were seen by the media and broadcast back to Europe and Russia. They eventually were removed at the Soviets’ insistence.

An iconic figure, historians will be left to argue whether anyone ever played a more significant role in Philadelphia sports.

Snider was a charter member of the Philadelphia Jewish Sports Hall of Fame in 1997, a member of the Washington Jewish Sports Hall of Fame, Hockey Hall of Fame, Flyers' Hall of Fame, the Philadelphia Sports Hall of Fame and the U.S. Hockey Hall of Fame.

“He was a visionary and was very concerned about the rise of anti-Semitism,” said Rabbi Marvin Hier, founder and dean of the Los Angeles-based Wiesenthal Center founder, who accompanied Snider on a 2014 trip to Jerusalem, where they had an audience with Pope Francis. “Besides his passion for sports and the great accomplishments he made in Philadelphia and hockey and, later, basketball, Ed never forgot his own heritage.

“He loved Mr. Wiesenthal and was major benefactor for the new Museum of Tolerance in Jerusalem that should be finished in 2017. Ed was a believer in tolerance, but was very firm in his conviction you can't just wish evil away. Somebody has to make it go away.”

Closer to home Snider's impact was just as large.

“He will be remembered as a giant in business and life, and was a trailblazer in so many facets of business,” said local Jewish community leader Gary Erlbaum. “He always wore his Jewish identity on his sleeve, notwithstanding the fact that he was not religious. He was a great Jewish philanthropist, who responded whenever there was a need in the Jewish community. He raised six wonderful children, who will certainly miss his warmth and wisdom.”

Among them is his daughter, Lindy, who recently assumed Snider's place on the board at the NMAJH, while her father took a role on the museum's national leadership council. Prior to that, he'd been an active participant.

“Ed was involved with the museum for a long, long time,” said NMAJH Director of Development Cobi Wiessbach, who revealed that Snider actually met his fourth wife, Lin, at the museum where she was a volunteer.

“In fact, he was one of the original donors to the museum when we opened back in 1976 and has been supportive ever since,” she said. “Most notably, when the museum made its plans to move to Independence Mall into the new building in 2006, Ed stepped up with a very significant leadership gift to the museum that really put our capital campaign in a national spotlight and really helped us build some traction and momentum. That gift was to name our ‘Only in America’ Gallery and Hall of Fame on the first floor.

“That was always a very significant passion of Ed's,” continued Wiessbach. “He cared a lot about it, that American Jews have been able to achieve some great things on these shores. He was very proud to celebrate that.”

Snider leaves behind a legacy of not only business and sports accomplishment, but as someone who touched his players in a way that made them want to make him proud. Among their deepest regrets was the team's failure to win the Cup since 1975, going on 41 years.

To that end, when the current Flyers finally clinched a playoff spot in the next to-last game of the season, April 9, almost to a man they said they were doing it for Snider, who was clinging to life in California.

That's been the case for several years, though.

"All I knew about them before I came here was that it was his team and it was run with a first-class attitude," recalled NBCSN analyst Keith Jones, who played for the Flyers from 1999-2001 toward the end of his career. "When I got here, I was not disappointed. "I loved how involved he was. I loved his attitude. I loved the fight he had. He made you want to play for him, and when you played Flyer hockey for him he let you know how much he appreciated it. When he told you that you had a good game, you felt pretty good about it."

But Jones says Snider's commitment went beyond cheering for his players and backslapping.

"He had a great reputation around the league from every player who ever played here," added Jones. "So much of it had to do with all the little things that went into it — from the way we traveled, to the way we practiced, everything was first class, no cutting corners. He did everything he could to make sure his players had the best of the best. When we were eliminated, you could see it in his eyes. He felt really down, and you felt a sense of letdown because you didn't hold up to your sense of responsibility."

That feeling persists years later.

"Obviously, he brought a lot to this organization and he cares a lot," said Flyers team captain Claude Giroux, who was almost distraught following the team's 3-1 win over Pittsburgh April 9 that clinched a playoff spot, knowing the gravity of Snider's condition. "Having an owner like that is great. "He's a really passionate guy about his team, He was fun to talk to when we saw his place and to talk about hockey and life. You get a little emotional thinking about it. We're definitely playing for him."

They've been playing for him for 50 years — back when the man who'd started off as a CPA, then became a successful record distributor before becoming vice president of the Philadelphia Eagles in 1964 became the driving force bringing the NHL to Philadelphia.

"We would get together with Ed, and he'd tell us stories," recalled defenseman Jimmy Watson upon being inducted into the Flyers' Hall of Fame Feb. 29. "They had done a survey which said Philadelphia, of all six teams added, would have the least chance to succeed.

"Ed said 'Are you kidding me? We'll prove them wrong.' Ed, you made it happen."

But building a hockey team was by no means the only thing Ed Snider made happen.

For starters, he needed a suitable building for his team to play in, which wound up being the Spectrum. Decades later, when that became outdated, he played a huge role in the construction of what was then the CoreStates Center — now the Wells Fargo Center.

He also had the foresight to recognize the future of broadcasting was in cable television, first creating PRISM, which would lead to the birth of Spectacor, the management company that ran both the Flyers and the Spectrum and, eventually, Comcast Spectacor. The latter became one of the world's leading cable and entertainment corporations.

In addition to his commitment to those organizations and to his philanthropic endeavors within the Jewish community, the 2005 creation of Ed Snider Youth Hockey Foundation was among Snider's proudest achievements. It also was the only where he permitted his name to be used.

The goal of the foundation was provide children from the inner city in Philadelphia and Camden an opportunity to play hockey while, at the same time, enhancing their life experiences. A \$14.5 million partnership with the city led to the construction of four refurbished public rinks, as well as new classrooms, learning labs and meeting spaces.

The foundation, which administers funds to some 3,000 children, and Flyers' Charities, which have raised more than \$26 million since 1977, are among his lasting legacies. Snider also recently began to sponsor the Philadelphia Sports Writers Association's Ed Snider Lifetime Humanitarian Award.

But if anything sums up Ed Snider's sense of loyalty and justice, it was his actions during the Soviet Jewry struggle for freedom in the mid '70s.

"The Panovs had been refusniks in Leningrad who were released," said Connie Smukler, whose late husband, Joe, chaired the local Soviet Jewry council. "Ed Snider came to Joe and me and said he wanted to share the proceeds for Soviet Jewry. We had no money at the time. We were a fledgling group, He raised \$17,594. That check started the whole ball rolling so that we became a viable organization. We owe a lot to Ed Snider."

Bud Newman, president of the Jewish Federation of Greater Philadelphia, agreed.

"Ed Snider's sustaining philanthropy was inspirational, as much as for its impact as for how quiet it was," said Newman.

Snider spent the last days of his life without regret.

"The last time I saw him was at his house in Santa Barbara about four weeks ago," Hier said. "He wanted to discuss his own funeral.

“He was typical Ed Snider — very brave,” added the rabbi. “At the end of the conversation, he walked over to his library and pulled out a book. It was a book about a significant birthday of his. He looked at each of the photos, stopped at some of the pages and just said twice ‘I’ve had a fabulous life. I’ve had a fabulous life.’

“Then he walked us to the door. We hugged him and said goodbye.”

The Snider family will host a private funeral service. There will be a public remembrance ceremony at the Wells Fargo Center in the near future, too.

Edward M. Snider leaves behind his wife, Lin, three sons, Craig, Jay and Sam, and three daughters, Lindy, Tina and Sarena, along with 15 grandchildren.