

# Making a difference

Canada's Gilles E. Neron, lost everything due to an untrue article - and the subsequent "pack instinct" of journalists. However, he still believes that a close relationship with the press is an effective means of promoting fair play

**He** was one of the few delegates to the Play the Game conference not working in the field of sports journalism. He was, however, speaking to journalists every single day of the conference. The pleasant middle aged man, always smartly dressed in shirt and tie, did not speak too much about himself - but he was very interested in the international journalists' stories from their respective homelands. He appeared especially interested in stories regarding the unveiling of corruption and wrongdoing in the world of sport.

Then, on Wednesday, it was his turn to speak. His address came as a surprise to many. It detailed the story of a man standing face to face with real danger - for the sake of justice.

Gilles E. Neron is a strong believer in freedom of speech, democracy and the value of a free press - but not a press that can do as it likes. He stressed that ethical rules must exist in the gathering of information, analysis and publication.

## What would you do?

Gilles E Neron was educated in physiology, and lives in Quebec, Canada. His story dates back to the 1970's when he penned a damning report on violence in ice hockey - one of the reasons he was subsequently named President of the newly-founded Quebec Sports Safety Board - a public organisation which was set up to ensure safe practice in sport.

In this capacity he decided to take a closer look at the sport of boxing, and soon discovered that many boxers were routinely adopting a highly dangerous practice. They were wrapping so many hard bandages around their hands that a clenched fist could punch a hole through a wall or a toilet cistern. With the bandage in place, they could punch so hard that just a small number of blows to

the head of an opponent would be enough to risk permanent brain damage.

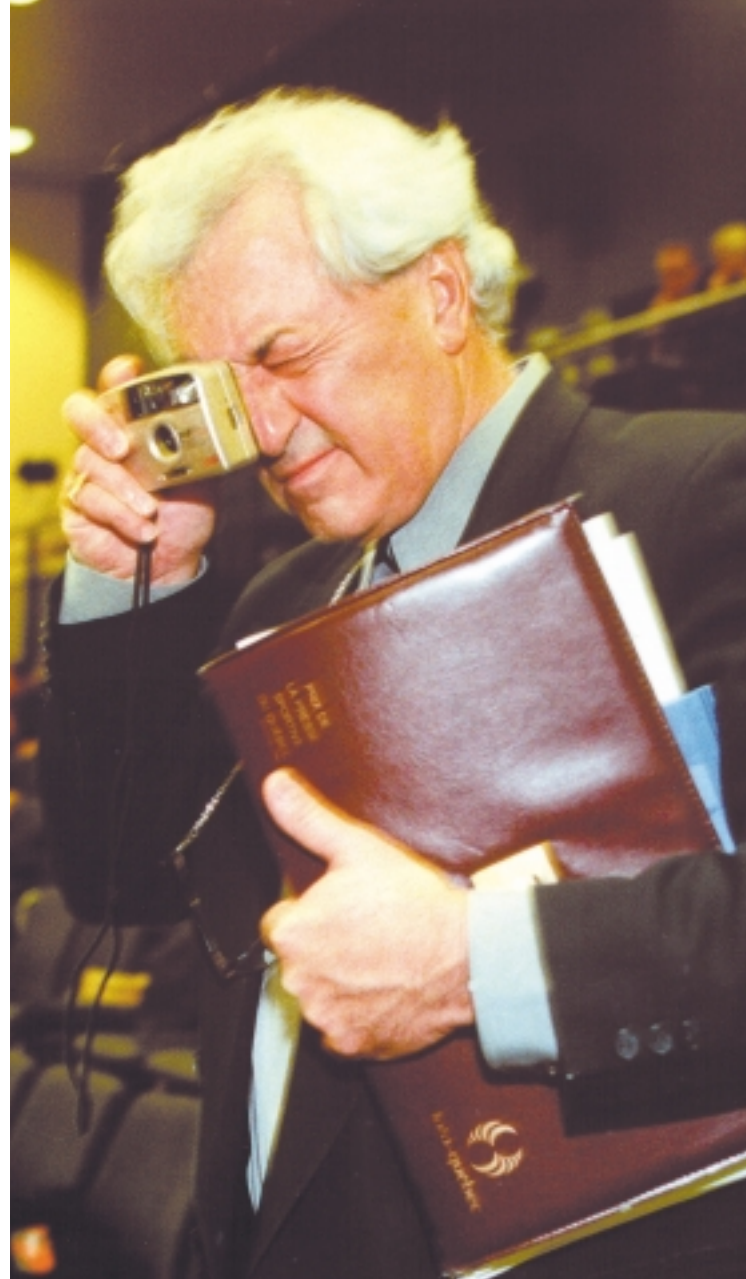
In his capacity as president of the organisation, he proposed a rule which would limit the use of bandages - because, as he stated at the time, the 'head is more important than the hands.' However, many in the boxing business were unhappy at his views - including the large bookmakers that covered the sport in Canada.

At the same time, Gilles E. Neron was in the process of building up a communications business to provide for himself and his family, including two children. Shortly after he had made his views known, he says, he found himself the victim of a major smear campaign. Slandorous articles were written about him by a journalist who, says Neron, had related interests in the field of boxing promotion.

After the articles began appearing, the rest of the media did little to support him. The resulting accusations saw him lose his reputation, his business, and his post as sports safety officer. He even received threats against his family.

After countless legal battles and numerous court appearances, a court finally ruled that he had been the victim of slander, and awarded him compensation of 2.3 million dollars. This was the first time in Canada's history that such a large sum was awarded to an individual due to their misrepresentation in the media. However, the case is still ongoing, as the media group that he sued is appealing against the ruling.

Despite his victory, the Quebec Sports Safety Board has since been disbanded and his case has received almost no coverage in the media. Few other sports journalists have been interested in the way he was treated. In



**Gilles E. Neron launched a strong attack on, among other things, excessive violence and unfair practice in Canadian boxing. His opinions cost him dearly. He lost his position as Sports Safety Officer, his business and his reputation - and even his family was subjected to threats of violence**

fact, it was only during the "Play the Game" conference he received his first personal contact with a Canadian journalist regarding the case.

»I am not angry or disappointed - I'm just fed up with it,« he said. »We must now look to the future. What we can do to prevent cheating and how we can promote the notion of fair play.«

»You can warn all you like against negative developments,« he continued, »but you are not necessarily going to be heard. Often it takes a catastrophe to get changes implemented. This happened in Canadian boxing - a boxer died before the sport's safety was given priority.«

»Journalists should remember,« he said »that they have an important job in passing their knowledge on to educate their readers. We can all do small things in our daily lives that can make a difference. Whether it is writing a story or helping a fellow human being. The question is, how we go forward after this conference. Based on what you have learnt here, what have you decided to do tomorrow?« ♦ KBR

