Petitclerc worthy Marsh winner

“t’s now official, according to committee chair Silken Laumann, that all future winners of the Lou Marsh Trophy will have one thing in common with all past winners: they will be human rather than equine.

Count the present as having a human face, too, with the decision from the 15-voter panel yesterday to name Chantal Petitclerc as Canada’s athlete of the year for 2008 and, if she didn’t get this vote, she certainly gets those congratulations and deserves them. Her level of achievement, not only this year but in her career, makes her worthy of any accolade she acquires. This is a champion, through and through.

Once again, there wasn’t a unanimous selection and, once again, there wouldn’t have been a bad winner from the short list of final candidates.

PETITCLERC: Capping a dream year, p6

DAVE PERKINS

PETITCLERC: p6
Petitclerc caps year with another victory

‘Makes Beijing live a little longer for me,’ says racer after taking top spot in national voting

CATHAL KELLY

Three months after winning through Beijing, wheelchair racer Chantal Petitclerc is still stuck in an Olympic fog. 

“It’s been so crazy since I got home. My life has changed. I can’t go out and have a normal day,” Petitclerc said. “I feel I’m still on an adrenaline rush. I know at some point it will wear off and I’ll be able to take a snap back.”

Maybe. But probably not today.

Petitclerc capped a year of sized achievements yesterday by winning the Lou Marsh Trophy as Canada’s top athlete for 2008.

Named for a former Toronto Star sports editor, the award is voted on by sports journalists from across the country. Petitclerc is the award’s 72nd recipient since 1936.

Speaking from Montreal, Petitclerc, who turns 39 next week, seemed alight with glee after her win.

“It makes the magic of Beijing live a little longer for me,” she said of the award. “It’s a great recognition for Paralympic sport... it gives us great respect.”

Petitclerc beat out several higher-profile pro athletes (basketball’s Steve Nash, baseball’s Justin Morneau) and Olympic colleagues (cross-country runner Eric Lamaze, tennis player Simon Whitfield and figure skater Jeffrey Battle, among others) for the prize.

She did it by entirely dominating her sport. In Beijing, Petitclerc won five gold medals. She set three world records, two of them coming in races held only 90 minutes apart.

Her win in the T54 category of spinal injury ranged from the 100-metre sprint to the 1,500-metre test of wills. She retired from track racing after the Games, bringing her consecutive gold medal streak to an end at 16.

“The thing that defines her is the breadth of her excellence over such a time period,” said Rick Hansen, the only other wheelchair athlete to win the Lou Marsh, in 1983.

Hansen first met Petitclerc during his Man in Motion tour when she was a young teenager. He followed her career with keen interest since and clearly took personal pride in her win yesterday.

“They’ve made the smart choice,” Hansen said.

Success has hardly turned Petitclerc’s head. She found out she’d won the Lou Marsh by email, just as she was leaving to reward herself with a post-Olympic picnic.

“I was on my way out to buy a new car. This was a very exciting day, all together,” Petitclerc laughed.

Petitclerc grew up in the Quebec village of St-Marc-des-Carrières, about 75 kilometres south of Quebec City.

She was paralyzed from the hips down in a childhood accident – a barn door she and a friend were trying to prop up to use as a bike ramp fell and crushed her.

At 16, she was introduced to wheelchair racing. A last-place finish in her first race has become a cornerstone in her legend.

In four years, an uncommonly strong will and a Herculean training regime had transformed Petitclerc into an elite racer.

In her first Olympics the Barcelona Games in 1992, the 22-year-old Petitclerc won two bronze.

Maybe something of what drove her is explained by the five “heroes” she lists on her personal website.

They include Canadian astrophysicist Hubert Reeves and Australian runner Peter Norman, the third man on the podium during the famed black power salute at the 1968 Olympics. Who lists those two most? “Passion and conviction,” Petitclerc said. “That’s what inspires me, no matter how they express that passion.”

Since Barcelona, both Petitclerc and the Paralympics movement have taken strides of quality and level of performance.

No shortage of first-rate athletes

OPINIONS FROM AROUND THE WORLD

The Lou Marsh Trophy is one of Canada’s top athletic awards, and the list of recipients is a Who’s Who of Canadian sports.

In an era when professional athletes dominate the headlines, the Lou Marsh Trophy is a reminder of the hard work and dedication that goes into making athletes the best they can be.

From Olympic champions to Paralympic heroes, from world-record setters to Canadian records, the Lou Marsh Trophy celebrates the achievements of athletes across a wide range of sports.

The trophy, awarded annually since 1936, is a testament to the enduring spirit of athletic excellence in Canada. It is a symbol of the hard work and dedication that goes into making athletes the best they can be.

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