

***Intense English personified  
local golden age of sports***

For many fans over 50 in Montreal, the last glorious weekend of the football season was marred by the sudden death Saturday of Keith English, one of the great local football players and role models of the late 1940s and early '50s.

English, 61, suffered a fatal heart attack while cross-country skiing with two old friends, Ray Binnmore and Wally Denver, on the trails of Plage St-Jacques on the North Shore.

Two days earlier, he had chaired his final meeting as president of the Summerlea Golf Club. Always the competitor, Keith, despite a heart condition, had decided to unwind by tackling the ski trails, icy blasts notwithstanding.

It seems such a short time ago that Keith, the quintessential all-Canadian boy, was in the front line of an army of fine athletes who came out of NDG in that era, the last golden age of sports for English Montreal.

There were stars coming off every block in NDG and Westmount at the time: Doug Harvey, Ken Mosdell, Fleming Mackell, Cliff Malone, the Porteous twins and Connie Broden in the NHL and AHL; Johnny Greco and Harry Hurst, both world-ranked fighters; the Baillie twins, the Adrian brothers, Wenty Young, Moe Martin, George Economedes, Gerry Hogan and Gerry Apostolatos in the CFL... and scores of others in senior and semi-pro ranks.

Though he was good at all sports, Keith English was exceptional at football, so good that he went directly from Loyola High School to the Alouettes, with whom he won the league's rookie-of-the-year award in 1948.

It may be difficult for the current generation to comprehend, but in Keith's heyday, the annual Thanksgiving Day game between Loyola and West Hill High drew more than 7,000 fans and McGill regularly played to crowds of 20,000.

It was a time when numerous athletic brother acts came out of large families and Loyola had more than its fair share: the Shaughnessys, Meaghers, Malones, Porteouses, O'Shaughnessys, Gagnons and Marchesseaults, to name a few.

The Englishes were as good as any of them. Keith's younger brother, Herbie, was a star quarterback/halfback at Loyola and McGill, good enough to turn down a contract with the Ottawa Rough Riders. Equally skilled at hockey, Herbie was a nifty centreman on the 1950 Junior Canadiens Memorial Cup championship team.

Another brother, Bruce, now a professor at Concordia, played football for Loyola and McGill.

Both Keith and Herbie are in the Loyola Sports Hall of Fame.

For football fans, though, Keith English was something special.

A classic tackler and superb receiver, he was one of the Als' four "Eager Beaver" ends who came out of NDG, with Ralph (The Terrible) Toohy, who had played with him at Loyola, and their arch-rivals at West Hill, Glen Douglas and Johnny Taylor.



The late Keith English, posing here with his wife Barbara, was among the best of many fine athletes from NDG during the 1940s.

All four of them starred on the Als' 1949 Grey Cup championship team. Toohy, who kept getting bigger, tougher and meaner, later became a legendary hard rock with the Hamilton Ticats.

Keith was the smallest of the four — five-foot-11 and 160 pounds — but in the estimate of Bruce Coulter, his teammate and closest pal at the time, he was also the best.

"What always amazed me about Keith was that he worked so hard at his job, then came down to practice and give everything there, up against guys 30 and 40 pounds heavier than him all the time," said Coulter, a slender quarterback-safety.

"The competitive juices really boiled in Keith in everything he did."

Said Keith's youngest brother, Bruce English: "He set very high standards for himself, which he got from our father. Integrity and principles meant everything to him."

What struck everybody who met the likeable Keith was that, despite becoming a big success in the business world — he was president of a paper company — he remained the affable

self-effacing all-Canadian boy. To the very last, he wore the blush of boyish wonder on his handsome features.

When I met him last year at a St. Patrick's Day dinner, nothing seemed to have changed since he was romping around end out at the Loyola campus, shifting gracefully, then digging for those extra yards that only to him seemed possible to gain.

"The one nice thing about St. Patrick's Day," he told me, "is that it guarantees that all the guys get together at least once a year."

It was probably that intensity which Keith took to everything he approached in life that claimed him too early.

For all those who watched or played with him on the football field and who met him later in his productive life, Keith English will endure as a model of the old values.

He is survived by: his wife, the former Barbara Commins; four children, Linda, Carol, David and John; and five grandchildren.

The funeral is at 10 a.m. today from St. Edmund's of Canterbury Church (105 Beaconsfield Blvd.).