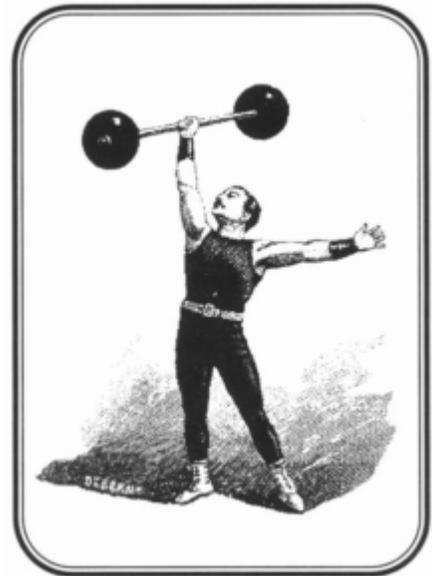


The Brothers Baillargeon

Excerpted from
Rejean Levesque and Kathy Paradis's
Homage aux célèbres frères Baillargeon
(Cap-Saint-Ignace, Quebec: 1997)

Translated by David Chapman



*Editors' Note: We recently received a gift from Gilbert Michaud, a friend from Quebec who shares with us an interest in strongmen. The book, by Rejean Levesque and Kathy Paradis, is **Homage aux célèbres frères Baillargeon**, and it details the careers of the famous French-Canadian lifter-wrestlers. We were fascinated with the book, and thought our readers would enjoy an excerpt discussing all the brothers, but featuring the most accomplished lifter among the six rugged men—Paul, the greatest bent presser of the modern era. (Paul died late last year.) The book is in French, and those interested in ordering a copy should contact La Plume d'Oie, 153A des Pionniers Ouest, Cap-Saint-Ignace, Quebec, GOR 1H0. We are grateful to David Chapman for taking the time to translate this section for **Iron Game History**.*

Whenver they visited, family members and friends from the village endlessly repeated to the Baillargeon parents, "Your boys will make a fortune in the city; they're strong!" By dint of hearing this confirmation, their curiosity was roused, and that was how the adventure began.

The years rolled on and the Baillargeon brothers gradually became aware of their physical strength. From one experience to another, they developed sur-

prising abilities that allowed them to lift heavier and heavier weights, but this phenomenon always amazed them. Jean was the first of the six boys to discover that his strength was equal to that of men who were much better trained and experienced than he.

One day Jean read an ad in the newspaper that mentioned that a wrestler named Sheik Abid challenged anyone to lift the same weight as he did in his performance on Sunday evening, November 26, 1946 at the Tour de Québec. One hundred dollars was offered to whoever was successful at this feat.

Jean was greatly tempted to go and give it a try. So then, on Saturday morning he asked his men to load his truck with wood. After supper, he left to deliver his wood to Onésime Chalifour, who had a wood yard in Lévis. That same night Jean slept in Québec City, and the next evening he went to the show.

It was a vaudeville show organized by the Champlain Athletic Club [*Le Soleil*, Québec City, November, 25, 1946]. When it came to Sheik Abid's act, he lifted a 725-pound weight with a type of apparatus that he slung over his shoulders. The strongman then performed several other feats of strength. When he was finished, Jean moved toward the stage and said to the announcer that he wanted to try to lift the weight. He was then told that it was impossible since the bill was too full. Jean argued, and he was given the chance to show his abilities; after all, if you are going to make a

challenge, you should at least set aside some time for the audience to try.

After Jean insisted, Sheik Abid was contacted, and he agreed to the demand. Jean wanted to lift the 725-pound weight—that did not call for any knack, just brute strength. Sheik Abid told him to start with a one-arm snatch; the Sheik then took a large barbell of 130 or 150 pounds by the center, did a “standing snatch,” that is to say he lifted it from the floor in only one movement, then brought it over his head, did a half-turn and then let it fall into his two arms. Finally, he threw it into the air and caught it in the center with just one hand.

For a lad who had never lifted weights before, this called for tremendous ability, and Jean succeeded. His hand, however, was not in the center of the barbell and as the weight tilted toward the back a little; it was much more difficult to hold on to. For the promoters, this was not acceptable. Jean asked to do it again; at this attempt his hand was a little more centered but the barbell was still out of balance. As the promoters got ready to tell him this [that he had failed once more], the crowd began to boo them. They then handed over the sum of \$25 to get him to leave the theater because he was upstaging the “star.” This was the beginning of Jean’s weightlifting career; he was at that time 31 years old.

Juliette Veilleux, the same person who would later become the wife of Antonio Baillargeon, was present at this show; she witnessed this feat and the reluctance of the promoters, since everything was designed so that Sheik Abid would be the star. At that time, Juliette was not yet married and did not even know Antonio. It was a complete coincidence that she was a fan of strength shows.

After this show, Jean met Jean-Yves Dionne and Gérard Michaud, a former Canadian weightlifting champion. Eager to know more of this impressive specimen, they asked him where he came from, what he did for a living, and if he knew anything about weightlifting. In order to pique their curiosity a little more, he told them that he had five brothers, all just as brawny and that three of them were bigger than he was. Gerard Michaud invited him to his gymnasium to discuss training and the possibilities that would be available to him in this field.

Some time later, Jean, accompanied by Adrien, went to Québec City to meet Gerard Michaud. For this

event Michaud had invited a lad from Saguenay named Bacon, a weightlifter who weighed 350 pounds. At a given moment, when it came time to match strength with Bacon, Jean defeated him and Adrien did the same. Mr. Michaud had been convinced that just the opposite would result and these proofs were not sufficient for him. He therefore invited them back, but this time to the gymnasium of a Mr. Pichette; both of them wanted to see what Jean was capable of doing.

At the time of this meeting when Jean came alone, it was a question of lifting weights, and on each attempt his observers increased the weight. According to them, if Jean could manage to lift 170 pounds (with one hand), this would be good. When someone is untrained, the more repetitions the weaker he becomes, but when one has trained the opposite is true: he gets warmed up and lifts more. Jean thus began to tire out, but he succeeded all the same in lifting 190 pounds. They were completely surprised for they compared him to a lumberjack of whom they had heard who was not used to lifting weights either but could lift 170 pounds. Later they learned that this lumberjack was Adrien. Shortly after this, Jean bought a weight set from Mr. Gérard Michaud during the winter and began working out.

At the end of November, Jean was invited to participate in a great weightlifting competition sponsored by the Bodybuilding and Weightlifting Association of Quebec. He appeared as the fifteenth and final attraction doing an act featuring muscle control and various feats of strength. For the contest, he participated in the heavyweight division; he succeeded in the military press, the snatch, and the clean and jerk. He therefore won the overall championship.

“It was Jean Baillargeon, the strongman who has already challenged Sheik Abid, who took home the honors of the evening. And Baillargeon is only a beginner in weightlifting which promises a very bright future.” [*Le Soleil*, Québec City, November 1946].

After these little experiments, Jean was convinced that he was capable of doing just as well as the others (if not better). He conceived the idea of presenting a strength show in Saint-Magloire, his native parish. For this occasion, he invited Mr. Gérard Michaud to do a weightlifting demonstration as well as the Dionne Brothers, who would do an acrobatic act. Jean gave a little strength demonstration consisting of some prone

(sic) presses and several other feats. The parish hall was packed with the youth of Saint-Magloire and by people who had come from neighboring parishes.

During this time Lionel and Paul lived in Colebrook, New Hampshire where they had purchased a dairy farm. When they learned that Jean had given a strength show and that he had met people who were interested in helping him put on a show, Paul went up to meet them. Paul was encouraged to work out, so he bought 500 pounds worth of weights from Mr. Gerard Michaud and returned to the United States with this equipment, determined to follow his advice.

At the same time that Jean was gaining a reputation in Québec City, Adrien and Charles had also been working in Colebrook for six months; they were logging their land. Jean wasted no time in telephoning Charles to ask him to organize a show in his area a bit like the one presented in Saint-Magloire. In order to do this, he sent him several placards and details of the show. Charles therefore had to choose the most promising location for this type of demonstration and since he was already well known in the eastern counties (of Quebec), he opted for Coaticook.

Jean went back to join his brothers in Colebrook and trained with Paul and the Dionne brothers. Charles put on the show at a racetrack on a beautiful Sunday afternoon in 1947; Jean lifted weights, including one of 1,000 pounds; Paul lifted a horse up a pole, and the Dionne brothers did acrobatics. They had attracted nearly 4,000 persons.

This performance caused them to be talked about in all the surrounding towns. In Colebrook there was an exhibition which was going to start in a few days. Having heard what happened in Colebrook, the promoters decided that an extra attraction would draw more people to the exhibition. They asked Paul to participate. Paul attached iron rods in a pole that had already been set up in front of the main stage and that is how in the afternoon and the evening, he lifted a horse up the pole.



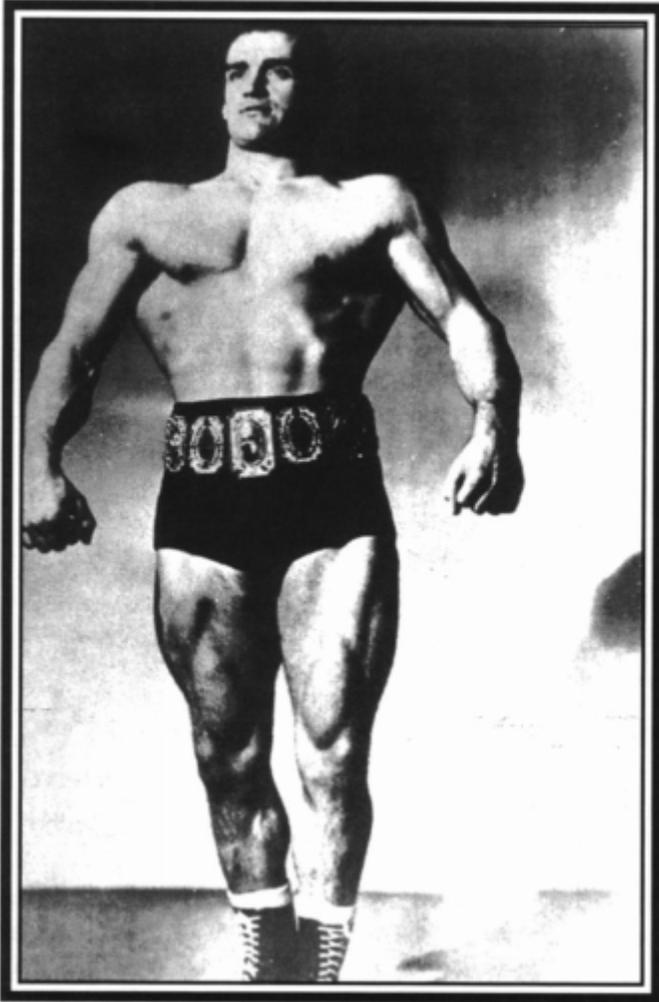
The six Baillargeon brothers pose in front of their touring truck. From the left: Adrien, Paul, Lionel, an admirer from Virginia, Jean, Charles, and Antonio.

This became the extra attraction for three days.

After this success, Jean wanted Charles to continue to organize performances. Thus, a month later they performed four other shows. At that time, the brothers only lacked Antonio, who was still at school in L'Islet. They performed in Colebrook, Berlin, and Farnham. It was moreover in Farnham where Antonio came to join them. This marked the six brothers' debut in weightlifting and strength feats.

The Baillargeon brothers possessed fabulous physical capacities, but they also developed an absolute trust in their abilities, which became a sort of moral contract. The endurance and explosions of power which are observed in weightlifting and wrestling encourage the will to win and to become strong. To develop the mind and the body: that is the essential element in success and in the ability of make extreme efforts.

Throughout their careers, these men knew how to be tenacious, courageous, humble, good, and generous. A spirit of solidarity linked one to another. They experienced neither jealousy nor envy. Their feats of strength and their training were carried on in a state of harmony. There was never a question of determining



Paul Baillargeon's strength is easily seen in this physique shot taken in 1951.

who was "the strongest." They encouraged each other and mutually respected one another's individual talents. They were men without malice and careful about protecting their honor.

The stage costume of the Baillargeon Brothers was distinguished by a maple leaf on which there was a beaver and by the inscription "6 Baillargeon Brothers" decorating the upper part of the costume. They sold these to fans for 25 cents in 1949.

Mr. Jean-Yves Dionne demonstrated a real artistic talent, so it was he who designed the advertising panels that were installed on Jean's truck. The truck was loaded heavily with props that would be used in the feats in the performance.

The lettering was in French as well as English

since most of their performances were in the United States, especially in the French-speaking parts (such as Lowell in Massachusetts), but just as often in English-speaking sections. The inscription "the strongest in the world" appeared all in colored letters.

Thus painted, the truck announced the "vaudeville performance" in ten acts during which the six Baillargeon brothers performed feats of strength while Messrs. Jean-Yves Dionne and Riverin Gosselin did acrobatic tricks.

The Strength Shows

At this time, every show was a game—a sort of entertainment to use physical strength and hear the gasps of the audience. The troupe had the duty of carefully preparing the show and of performing the feats of strength with great seriousness, all the while looking for ways to improve things. Here is a preview of the show program for the Tour de Quebec.

"The totally stunning show given by the six Baillargeon brothers lasts two and a half hours and will so astonish the audience that those who see it will still remember it fifty years hence."

Program

Afternoon

Charles Baillargeon pulls a bus with his teeth

Evening

1. **The six Baillargeon brothers**
2. **Mr. Riverin Gosselin, world-renowned balancer**
3. **The two Dionne brothers, sensational acrobats**
4. **The Baillargeons and the Dionne brothers in a series of pyramids**
5. **Mr. Jean Baillargeon, muscular control**
6. **The Baillargeon brothers**
7. **Mr. Jean Baillargeon lifts one ton**
8. **Mr. Adrien Baillargeon lifts 3,000 pounds with a platform**

Finale

Mr. Paul Baillargeon lifts a horse weighing 1,400 pounds

—*Le Soleil*, Québec City, December 4, 1949

The Baillargeon and Dionne brothers performed a special act in which the entire troupe formed human pyramids. With one single person at the bottom, they succeeded in forming pyramids of three, four, even five people. With their shirts off so that people could see their sharp and well-defined muscles, Jean and Paul

were most often the understanders. The most spectacular part of the pyramid was not just its weight, but even more the balance that it demanded. Their series of pyramids never fell apart, and they were appreciated by the audience.

After training vigorously during the winter of 1948 in order to do weightlifting, Charles organized the shows (i.e., performances in the parishes of Quebec). Still at the beginning of their careers and wanting to make a living from their shows, they needed to organize some promotions in the surrounding area. It was easier to fill parish halls than the theaters of the big cities since they were not yet well known. Attracting the same number of spectators in the cities called for lots of advertising. In 1949 they received excellent publicity in newspapers and in weightlifting magazines which added luster to their fame.

Still in 1948 during a visit to York at the gymnasium of Mr. Bob Hoffman, who celebrated his fiftieth birthday and at the same time sponsored a weightlifting exhibition, the Baillargeon brothers met all the Mr. Americas, "Mr. Physiques", and other weightlifters. At the York gymnasium there was a lad who trained without giving them any notice. But when Paul took Mr. Louis Cyr's weight and bent pressed it, the lad came up to him to question him and then went to find Bob Hoff-

man who learned what Paul had just accomplished. It was at this point that Mr. Hoffman sought to include them on his evening's program: Jean for his muscle control and Paul for his bent press.

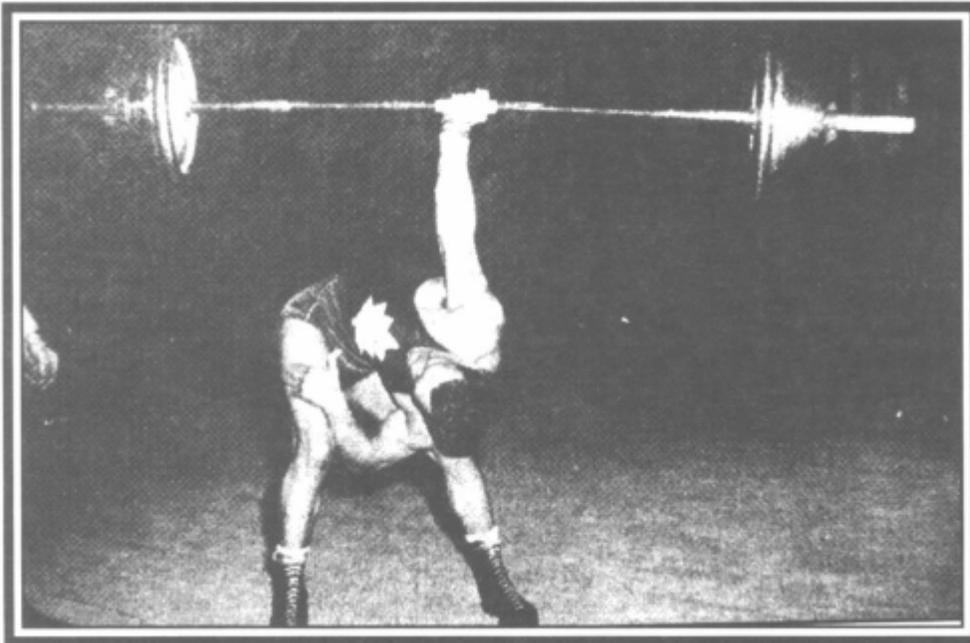
As they had agreed, the brothers were there that evening. Paul had to compete in the bent press with Mr. Charlie Dubus. Charlie weighed 260 pounds and Paul weighed 220 pounds. In the subsequent contest Charlie attempted 290 pounds but dropped the weight. It was then that Paul took the weight and bent pressed it, but after he got it to arm's length, he lost his balance, but everyone agreed he had succeeded in lifting it. (*Ed note: The S&H account of the exhibition indicates that both men failed with the heavier weight.*)

Then the show continued with Jean's muscular control. His demonstration was performed with such perfection of movements that he became the star of the evening. Thanks to these two fine performances, they earned good notices in both *Strength & Health* and *Time* magazines, and this allowed them to continue their performances while filling city arenas and parish halls. Now that they were much better known, they could try other strength shows.

Paul Baillargeon--From Strength Feats to Wrestling

Paul was born on July 10, 1922, and he followed in the footsteps of his brothers by working in logging. Around the age of 23, he took a 13-foot-long spruce log that was 13 inches in diameter and around 20 inches at the base, and picked it up in the middle in order to stack it on a pile of logs.

Paul's specialty in strength feats was lifting a horse. In the beginning, in order to do this trick, he climbed up a telephone pole. Thereafter he brought a portable aluminum scaffold since this was easier to carry around due to his frequent moves. It was a challenge for Paul to carry out this feat since everyone said that it was impossible to lift a horse



Paul Baillargeon was a master of the bent press. He was unusually flexible and this flexibility, coupled with his strength, allowed him to make 321 pounds in this lift in front of reliable witnesses.

**AFFIDAVIT ATTESTING THAT PAUL
BAILLARGEON BENT PRESSED 321 POUNDS**

Harry B. Paschall
Words and Pictures
1137 Franklin Avenue
Columbus, 5, Ohio
May 11, 1951

To Whom it May Concern:

This certifies that Paul Baillargeon has correctly lifted with his right arm only by the method commonly known as the one-arm bent press, at the Apollo Health Studio gymnasium at 74 East Gay Street in Columbus, Ohio, United States, on the afternoon of May 11, 1951, a barbell weighing three hundred twenty-one (321) pounds before witnesses and to the satisfaction of the following officers of the AAU.

HARRY B. PASCHALL
JACK LIBERTORE
FRAYSHER FERGUSON

Sworn before me,
this 11th day of June 1951,
at Columbus, Ohio, Franklin County
MARGARET W. HORCHOW
Notary Public

because they were too heavy.

It was in the village of Colebrook that Paul made his first attempt at lifting a horse weighing 900 pounds by climbing up a pole with a primitive harness. Some 800 spectators were witnesses to this feat, and that was the beginning . . .

Paul put the horse in a wooden crate and lifted the entire thing until the day when he realized the danger this might represent. (During the performance) the horse was made nervous by the excitement of the crowd, and it decided to depart from its wooden crate and to jump out with two feet on the ground. Paul felt a violent movement that shook his shoulders. This

unfortunate experience permitted him to make other more careful arrangements for future shows: he installed a harness on the horse and tied it to his own.

Paul knew how to show great determination and to marshal his spirit in order to be victorious—and at every performance, too. Since he never traveled with his own horse, he had to borrow one after he arrived in the village where the show was being presented. He therefore never lifted the same weight. Finally, he bought a horse that traveled with him, in order to avoid the variety of weights. (Before he bought his own horse) he lifted from 900 to 2,000 pounds at these performances.

In weightlifting Paul succeeded several times in bent pressing 321 pounds with just one arm. What was remarkable with this young man was his physical appearance: he was very tall, 233 pounds, with sharply defined muscles, surprisingly wide shoulders, a narrow waist, and a youthful face. His lively and open spirit seemed to promise great intelligence. He exhibited determination in his character and a perfect balance in his movements.

Paul was forced to maintain the reputation of the Baillargeons at a demonstration of his superhuman strength at the Apollo Health Studio gymnasium in Columbus, Ohio in 1951, before an audience that was very skeptical of the French-Canadian's strength. With a determined attitude, he attacked the arduous task of lifting a 321-pound barbell with just one arm. In a titanic effort, he lifted this barbell that had defeated many strongmen before the witnesses and to the greatest satisfaction of the qualified officers of the A.A.U. By accomplishing this feat in 1951 he became the holder of a new North American record.

Paul had always tried to surpass himself in the bent press; that is why in 1950 he won the "Championship of Canada" trophy with a 301-pound bent press. Officially, he succeeded in lifting 321 pounds. In training, he twice succeeded in lifting 375 pounds. His goal was to attain 400 pounds, but much to his annoyance, an elbow injury prevented him from doing this. This lift is spectacular and specialized. It calls for strength, good balance, and endurance for it must be done slowly while using all the muscles of the body.

The newly opened Saint Damien's arena was the

location of Paul Baillargeon's debut as a wrestler in 1949. Circumstances were such that his first professional match was against Paul Lortie. Paul Baillargeon was very impressed because he remembered their first encounter and Paul Lortie's arrogant remarks when the wrestler had been introduced to Paul several years earlier. At that time Lortie had told Paul that he was a strapping young man, certainly very strong (as he took him by the biceps). This was all very well, he continued contemptuously, but it took guts to be a wrestler.

These words coming from Lortie, the famous wrestler, had made a deep impression on Paul. This would be a very exciting start to his career because Paul wanted to prove to him that he had guts! He would never forget this first match.

In order to entertain the audience before the match, Paul liked to present his favorite act: lifting his famous 1,400-pound horse. This was always met with the greatest enthusiasm by the spectators. Paul understood the importance of gaining the audience's confidence and of raising their adrenaline level in order to get them on his side when he had a wrestling match.

In everyday life Paul was extremely charming, but he transformed himself into a veritable tiger once he got into the ring. Paul's quickness and agility during a match increased the audience's excitement. In the newspapers, the wrestler was described as "the colossus of Saint-Magloire" who was endowed with phenomenal strength.

Paul used several holds such as the full Nelson, the bear hug, the head scissors, and the body scissors. But his most dangerous move was the "flying Nelson" with which he enjoyed twirling his adversaries around in midair.

His method of wrestling used a combination of strength, wrestling knowledge, and acrobatics. Once he was in the ring, if he saw that wrestling knowledge was not enough, or (more often) if he found himself up against a rascally opponent who took advantage of Paul's good character, he called on his strength.

In Minneapolis, the wrestler became a hero known as "the French-Canadian Bear," a super champion of Herculean strength thanks to his working out with weights. Paul's regular training with barbells had allowed him to attain a truly remarkable muscular

development.

Because of his successful record, Paul wrestled against Lou Thesz in 1954 in Toronto. Despite his defeat, Paul got a lot of satisfaction from this match, noting that the Toronto media such as *The Globe and Mail*, the *Toronto Star*, and the *Telegraph* described him as being the biggest and the best wrestler ever to appear in Toronto. Paul was very proud of his excellent performance in this match, which lasted an hour and a half with only one fall.

Paul also wrestled in a team with Lionel, Antonio, and Adrien. It was with the latter that he presented very popular fights. He was "Canadian Champion" in 1956 and 1957, and he won the "American West-Coast Championships" with Adrien.

The wrestlers who impressed Paul Baillargeon most by their strength were (among others) Lou Thesz, Yvon Robert, Wladek "Killer" Kowalski, Bobby Monagof, Pat O'Connor, Bill Miller, Edouard Carpentier, Don Eagle, Don Leo Jonathan, and Yukon Eric.

Paul was "World's Champion" for a week because the champion, Wladek Kowalski, had lost his title due to a disqualification, and in the meantime Paul had been victorious over the new champion. But the Montreal Athletic Commission decided that a title could not be lost by disqualification, thus Paul's glory was of very short duration.

Virtually throughout his entire career, Paul wrestled while he was injured: sometimes in the back, sometimes in the ankle. But despite his injuries (broken fingers, cracked ribs, etc.), he continued to wrestle, and this merely aggravated his condition. During a fight, one's concentration is so intense that those who suffer an injury don't even realize it until the end of the match. Paul lost around eight to 15 pounds in some fights, and that shows how exhausting the effort was!

When his career is all totaled, Paul probably won 85% of his matches. Wrestling allowed him to travel throughout eight Canadian provinces and forty-five American states, fighting two thousand matches in eleven years.

Today, Paul Baillargeon is a resident of Sainte-Foy and "makes the time" to bask in the pure air of his native village, having purchased property in Saint-Magloire, the land of his birth.