

The Gazette

Rioting, looting mar Habs' Cup win; Merchants claim police slow to act

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Downtown merchants bitterly counted their losses yesterday, after a night of rioting and looting touched off by the Montreal Canadiens' Stanley Cup win.

Stores were looted, windows smashed, a firetruck stripped of its equipment, a huge bonfire lit in the middle of St. Catherine St., and cars stomped and overturned as thousands of celebrants converged downtown early yesterday after the Canadiens' series-ending victory in Calgary Saturday night.

Sgt. Daniel Randall of the Montreal Urban Community's police station 25 estimated at 5,000 to 10,000 the mob that took to the streets.

Although police had 40 men on duty - 24 more than usual - they did not expect such a huge crowd to gather downtown, Randall said.

Police reported 30 cases of mischief and 23 break-ins on St. Catherine St., mostly between Bishop and Crescent Sts. They made six vandalism-related arrests, and have charged two people with breaking and entering.

But many observers said police were woefully slow in responding to the emergency.

N.D.G. resident Patricia Schutz, who witnessed the rampage, said the trouble started around 1 a.m., but police were nowhere to be seen until about 3:30 a.m.

"People started trying to defend themselves," Schutz said.

"Since the police weren't doing anything, private citizens began directing traffic away from the area, and some people took steel bars and stood in front of stores to protect them.

"It was hard to believe this was happening in the name of fun."

Between 12:15 and 1:30 a.m., a Gazette reporter saw only one police cruiser in the St. Catherine and Crescent area, making its way slowly along St. Catherine and flashing its lights, while people banged on its hood.

"We're waiting," said one policeman, interviewed shortly after midnight, as he sat in his cruiser on Peel St. just south of St. Catherine.

"It's peaceful in here (inside the patrol car), not out there," said the unidentified police officer from Station 25.

Some merchants said they are considering legal action against the city because police did not show up until hours after the looting began.

"We will definitely sue the city," said Rene Lepine, surveying the damage to the clothing store Splash on the northeast corner of St. Catherine and Bishop.

"It was negligent on their part. There have been hockey riots before, so they should have been prepared."

Lepine said the street "looks like a war zone."

"It's demolished. There's nothing left to sell. In an hour, these people dismantled a business," said Lepine, a business associate of Splash owner Viateur Bissonnette.

Bissonnette said 20,000 garments, valued at about \$500,000, were stolen from the store.

"The police must answer for what happened," he said.

"It's not just me. There must be \$5 million of damage on this street. We're all going to get together and see what we can do."

Mario Funes, the store manager, arrived at the scene around 3 a.m. after he was told the burglar alarm had gone off.

"When I turned down Bishop St. I saw hangers strewn all over the street and mannequin limbs all over.

"I thought there had been an explosion. I swear it. When I first saw the damage, I thought that the only thing that could have caused something so terrible, so crazy, so destructive, was some kind of explosion," Funes said.

"I thought we were under siege."

Nearing the store, he saw about 20 "very violent" people inside throwing clothing into the street.

He scared off the group, but not before the store, recently renovated at a cost of \$100,000, had been torn apart from top to bottom.

Every piece of glass was shattered, the mirrors were cracked, the cash register was found smashed in the middle of the road, the track lighting on the high ceiling was torn down, the racks were empty and overturned and there were blood smears on the white countertops.

"Good," said Ron Petronko, a friend of Bissonnette's. "I'm glad that at least they hurt themselves doing all this."

Guy Descary, chairman of the Montreal Urban Community public security committee, said in an interview yesterday that "people were just having fun. They were enjoying themselves. A few overdid it, but most people were laughing and having a good time."

Descary said it's the merchants' privilege if they want to sue, but he defended the police response.

"If the police had taken their sticks out, it would have caused worse problems," Descary said.

"I think they acted well and did exactly what they should have done. We don't want a police state."

He said that when he went downtown yesterday he saw "practically no traces" of any kind of riot.

But at 11 a.m., a reporter saw stores replacing their windows, shattered glass on the sidewalks and street, dented cars that were waiting to be towed and stores - like Fellini - that had been wiped out and had no merchandise inside.

The rampaging mob lit a bonfire on the corner of Crescent and St. Catherine Sts., using wood from nearby buildings that are under renovation.

When fire trucks from Station 25 showed up at about 1:30 a.m. to put out the fire, the firemen were chased off the truck, said district Chief Robert Way.

He estimated damages to the trucks at about \$25,000.

"Tools were stolen and burned, windows smashed," said Way. "I'm very disappointed in these people."

Elio Schiavi, owner of the Ferrari pizzeria on Bishop, said he shut down early Saturday night because he was scared.

"The people were wild and drunk and I knew there would be trouble, so I shut down at 11:30."

His business, next to Splash, was not damaged.

David Amar, owner of the Dany shoe store, suffered losses of about \$10,000 - made more painful by the fact they were uninsured.

"It's very hard to rob a shoe store, because only one shoe is displayed and who wants one shoe?" said Amar.

"But I found my shoes in the street and in other stores. They poured beer into my cowboy boots and danced around on my furniture.

"The city should have dispersed the group immediately. It's unbelievable that this was allowed to happen."

Denis Durnin, owner of Cafe Supreme on the same block, was luckier than most.

"I was open the whole time, so nothing happened here," Durnin said.

"But these merchants are my neighbors, and when I went to visit them in their stores this morning I found some of them sitting down, crying. They're devastated."

At Aldo, the manager of the shoe store estimated his loss at \$100,000. For starters, he said, "the cash was busted into 50 pieces. Just to get \$125 inside."

Manager Gino Marinaccio said he found one clothing rack tied around a tree outside the store.

Eyewitness Patricia Schutz said that "even well-dressed people were walking into stores and grabbing clothes."

Among the injured was a 7-year-old boy cut by broken glass who had blood running down his head, she said.

In the Studio Mixte store, a print of Ken Danby's At The Crease - a painting of a hockey goalie poised in front of his net - was smeared with blood from looters.

Ron Petronko, looking at the blood, said, "Apparently nothing was sacred last night."

During the game, the downtown area was uncommonly quiet for a Saturday night, as fans jammed bars that have TV sets, or stayed home to watch.

But the scene became one of pandemonium minutes after the game's end, and Crescent and St. Catherine quickly become the focal point for the celebrations.

Hundreds of people, mainly youths, converged on the street, stopping traffic.

About 20 youths climbed atop a five-metre-high wooden scaffold at St. Catherine and Crescent, and jumped up and down on it.

Vandals then picked up a mailbox from the street, hoisted it atop the scaffold, and tipped it over in an effort to dump letters out. Failing at that, they proceeded to jump up and down on the mailbox.

Several others made their way into a building under renovation on the southwest corner of St. Catherine and Crescent and started emptying its contents into the street.

Some looters got hold of fire hoses and began to spray the crowds on the street, as several people stampeded east on St. Catherine to escape the streams of water.

Others found fire extinguishers and sprayed their contents on passersby.

Several street signs on Crescent and St. Catherine were torn off lampposts, and traffic lights were twisted.

"My mother's going to see me walking around with this," one teenager walking off with a direction sign told his amused friends.

Some people climbed decorative street lamps and tried to shake the fixtures loose. Small trees on St. Catherine were torn apart.

Motorcycles roared up the street.

People banged on bus doors and jumped up and down on cars parked in the area. They set off firecrackers.

To shouts of 'Go Habs, go' and 'We're No. 1,' celebrants tossed confetti, toilet paper, paper airplanes and other objects.

Cars, jammed with people, made their way along St. Catherine with drivers honking horns, cheering and shouting. People sitting on the roof occasionally went flying as the cars jolted to a halt.

Witness Rick Adams of N.D.G. said a row of riot police, walking arm in arm along Crescent and St. Catherine, finally put an end to the rioting around 3:30 a.m.

Montrealer Daniel Desy, another witness, said it reminded him of 1969, when Montreal police went on strike and similar rioting and looting occurred.

"It was the same (last night), maybe worse," said Desy, interviewed at Dorval airport just before the arrival yesterday of the Canadiens' charter.

Before the partying degenerated into looting and vandalism, people interviewed on the streets voiced full approval of the celebrations.

"This is bloody incredible," said Richard Lazanik of Cote St. Luc, who immediately headed downtown after the game ended. "This place is going wild."

"Montreal fans are so cool," said David McGimpsey of Anjou. "They waited until the last moment and then went crazy. I can't believe it. It's about time."

He said the victory reminded him of Canadiens victories when he was a child. "It's the same feeling. It's so great."

"Montreal's a great city," said Bob Donegan of Rochester, N.Y., who made a special trip with about 20 Americans to be on hand for the victory and the celebrations. "This is fantastic."

Donegan, who joined an impromptu victory parade of several hundred people heading east on St. Catherine, said celebrations were also going on in Rochester, a city he said has many Canadiens fans.

"It's crazy," said Brian Petrie. "I was in my apartment on St. Mathieu and Dorchester (on the 15th floor) and heard the noise."

Petrie, a sociology professor at Concordia University, said he was walking the streets to study the crowd reaction after the Canadiens' victory.

"They just want to participate," he said of the crowd.

"Most of it seems good-natured, but there are a few yahoos," Petrie said. He said he saw a group of youths vandalizing a bus on St. Catherine.