

COMMEMORATIVE EDITION

The **Hockey News**

CHAMPIONS

AT LAST!

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THE BIG WINNERS

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RIVETERS
ACADIE-BATHURST
MINNESOTA-DULUTH
& MORE

+
TOP 10
MOMENTS
OF 2017-18

12
THN AWARD
WINNERS

31
PLAYERS READY
TO BUST OUT





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COMING SOON: HALIFAX, NS (BASS PRO SHOPS)

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2018 SEASON COMMEMORATIVE | VOL. 72 NO. 01



COVER STORY

ALEX, MEET STANLEY | 20

The Washington Capitals doused the choker narrative in gasoline, struck a match and defied expectations to win their first Stanley Cup after 43 seasons of trying. The catalyst was, of course, Alex Ovechkin, playing the most complete hockey of his life and cementing his legacy as an all-time legend of the sport. **BY KEN CAMPBELL**

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ON THE COVER



PHOTO BY BRUCE BENNETT/GETTY IMAGES

GETTING TO THE ROOT OF IT

I HAD A ROOMMATE IN university who loved tennis. He was watching the final of a major one day, let's say the French Open (just because), when another housemate – one who was even more fanatical about team sports than me – asked him who he was pulling for. The first roomie ruminated on it for a couple moments, then said, "I'm cheering for tennis." Chuckles ensued.

He may as well have said he was rooting for opera. For those of us raised on rivalry and the tribalism of Them versus Us, neutrality isn't an option. Even if you're Swiss. Histories breed underdogs and favorites, villains and heroes. The stories stoke our passion and give us additional incentive to emotionally invest.

I confess, even though I've been schooled to be unbiased, I've always favored one team over the other in the Stanley Cup final, even if it's just by a toe save. And I'd wager that my stone-faced peers on press row feel likewise. It's unprofessional and frowned upon to cheer in the press box, but nobody dictates what happens in your gut. Witnessing ultimate triumph and heartbreak, intimately, is part of the draw of the profession. There are varied and personal reasons for allegiances. Regionalism. Hatred. Schadenfreude. Long-shot love. Gambling. Pool play. One team's PR department is easier to work with than the other. (Did I write that or just think it?)

Author/journalist and popular podcaster Malcolm Gladwell has said he often instinctively pulls for the favorite out of empathy. He reasons that a Goliath will feel more profound sorrow than a David in the event of a loss. It's the "happiness equals reality minus expectations" theory. It's logical enough but not always applicable. A perennial winner, for example, presumably has a bank of success to draw from to cushion the agony of defeat. Think Sidney Crosby and the Pittsburgh Penguins this year. If Crosby were Cup-less, you could imagine him being haunted this summer by failures of playoffs past. But the three Cup rings in his ears must be muffling echoes of ghosts.

And how do you root for a hated rival? How many Penguins fans do you think were yearning to see Alex Ovechkin hoist the Cup, no mat-



ter how crushing a loss would have been? In fact, there's probably a large segment of them who would've revelled in his pain.

Another consideration is parity. Not just among teams, but players. Because it's so dauntingly difficult to repeat in today's NHL, the large majority of players are tied in Cup rings at zero. The Caps and Knights entered the final with two previous champions on their combined rosters – Brooks Orpik and Marc-Andre Fleury. The other 40-odd guys didn't have the armor of a previous title to absorb trauma. Would Nicklas Backstrom have been more anguished in defeat than Deryk Engelland had the Knights completed their miracle season? How do you choose where to place your empathy, if that's what's important to you?

Ultimately, that's what our choice comes down to: us. We back the horses that will provide us with the most satisfaction if they win, regardless of whether the primary intention is glee, caring or malice. I won't divulge what would have made me happy this spring, but I can confirm I was not cheering for hockey. **H**

Jason Kay
Jason Kay
 Editor in chief
 @JKTHN

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ASK ME ANYTHING

THE BEST OF ASSOCIATE SENIOR WRITER MATT LARKIN'S MAILBAG FEATURE ON THN.COM

🐦 Ecb (@bce1801) asks: "Where do you rank Nicklas Backstrom in the history of Swedish forwards? Could he get enough points to pass Mats Sundin all-time?"

I believe he's one of the best Swedish players, not just forwards, of all-time. He's already 11th in points (799) and ninth in assists (590) among his NHL countrymen, and he's fifth in points per game among qualified Swedish NHLers, too. He's been excellent relative to his competition, ranking second in assists and fifth in points among all NHLers since he debuted in 2007-08. Backstrom, for me, should be mentioned in the same breath as Joe Thornton, Henrik Sedin and Ryan Getzlaf when we're talking about the best pure play-making centers of this generation.

Backstrom has, of course, often had the luxury of playing with Alex Ovechkin on one wing, so Backstrom will never join the elite pantheon of Swedish forwards alongside, say, Peter Forsberg and Mats Sundin, both of whom spent much of their careers elevating lesser players into stardom. Daniel Alfredsson probably ranks ahead of Backstrom in many people's eyes right now, too. And Henrik and Daniel Sedin would for sure. Backstrom has no first- or second-team all-star selections and no major individual accolades in his career. Fair or not, he's the Swedish center who played with quite possibly the greatest goal-scorer of all-time. Kent Nilsson was a dominant NHLer in a relatively small sample size, too, and Markus Naslund reached solo heights that Backstrom hasn't. So I view Backstrom as a top-10 Swedish forward but not necessarily much higher.

If he plays long enough, there's a decent chance he accumulates enough volume to finish second all-time in points among Swedish NHLers. Backstrom is just 30 years old and has been consistent and durable for most of his career. He averages 80 points per 82 games. Even if, say, he averages just 60 points for his next five seasons, that would get him to about 1,100 points by age 35. Backstrom has the smart, mature type of game that should keep him in the NHL longer than that if he wants to keep playing, too. I see him finishing his career with 1,200 or 1,300 points but not quite catching Sundin.



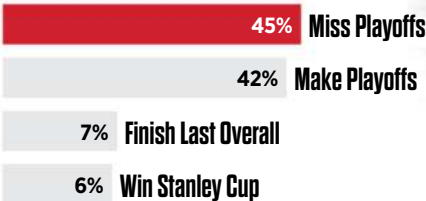
NICKLAS BACKSTROM

THN POLL



@TheHockeyNews

What will the Golden Knights do for an encore in 2018-19?



SOAPBOX

What's your favorite moment from the 2017-18 NHL season?



📍 When the Jets and Hawks stood together to pay tribute to Humboldt.
- Greg Tretick

🐦 @NHLBlackhawks emergency backup goalie Scott Foster stopping every shot he faced against the @NHLJets on March 29.
- Christine Cutler

🐦 Brian Boyle scoring a goal on "Hockey Fights Cancer Night" in New Jersey.
- @nike__davis

🐦 Sedinyer vs. Arizona after the retirement announcement.
- @RamadonCherry

📍 Gotta be the first home game in Las Vegas, hands down.
- Josh Avedisian

🐦 Watching Connor McDavid slowly creep his way up the scoring race to pass Nikita Kucherov and then take a big lead. Amazing for him to repeat as a scoring champ.
- @mpaulm2002

📍 Carey Price receives a standing ovation in Montreal after passing Hall of Fame goaltender Jacques Plante for first all-time on the Habs' games-played list.
- Jacob Pate

🐦 The blink-of-an-eye moment when Alex Tuch was for sure shooting the tying goal, just before it became 'The Save' instead. That brief ecstasy before the enduring agony.
- @bezdovets

🐦 Adam Henrique's nifty move around the defenseman he was traded for, Sami Vatanen, and then his goal - plus celebration during his return to the Prudential Center.
- @KMCKenna_tLT5

🐦 The Buffalo Sabres winning the draft lottery.
- @OMGitsGball

🐦 Auston Matthews' OT winner against Montreal to break the Leafs' 14-game losing skid against Montreal. Takes the cake, no question.
- @AdamCam69926043

📍 Tyler Toffoli's game-winning OT goal off the Anze Kopitar faceoff win with 0.9 seconds on the clock at puck drop. All the other amazing stuff in '17-18 could be repeated by someone, somewhere, someday... but that? Probably never again.
- Mel Powell

🐦 Big Buff's 17-minute stay in the penalty box vs. Colorado.
- @LannyMcInnes

🐦 Islanders vs. Red Wings. Isles score four goals on a five-minute major. Nelson wins it in OT with his hat-trick goal. Barzal wins five points.
- @KevG983

🐦 When Alex Ovechkin scored his 600th goal against my Jets.
- @Darcyokemow29

🐦 As a Rangers fan I have none. RIP John Amirante.
- @Marklgr

A photograph of Alex Ovechkin lying on his back on a wet, reflective floor. He is wearing a red wetsuit with a white logo on the chest and a white baseball cap with a black brim. His arms are outstretched, and his hands are open, resting on the wet surface. The floor is covered in water, creating ripples and reflections. In the top right corner, the foot of another person is visible.

A THOUSAND WORDS

I WISH IT WOULD REIGN DOWN

It looks like there's 99 bottles of beer on Alex Ovechkin as the Capitals celebrate their Stanley Cup. Ovechkin, who also won the Conn Smythe Trophy as playoff MVP, was happy to soak up every last bit of the post-game party.

PHOTO BY DAVE SANDFORD/NHLI VIA GETTY IMAGES



BUZZ

▶ FOR UP-TO-THE-MINUTE COVERAGE, VISIT THN.COM

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Montgomery won an NCAA title with Denver in 2017. Can he lead Dallas to NHL glory?



TIM HEITMAN/DALLAS STARS

NEW BREED OF COACH

GIVING IT THE OLD COLLEGE TRY

More and more teams are looking to the NCAA ranks for coaches who can guide their NHL benches **BY RYAN KENNEDY**

WHEN DAVID QUINN WAS named the 35th coach in the history of the New York Rangers, it represented another piece in a puzzle being assembled by GM Jeff Gorton. The Rangers are rebuilding and wanted a fresh voice to lead behind the bench.

But the hiring made NHL history as well, with Quinn now the fifth current coach who previously coached in the NCAA. Quinn joined Detroit's Jeff Blashill, New Jersey's John Hynes, Philadelphia's Dave Hakstol and Dallas' Jim Montgomery to eclipse the previous high of four (1981-82 - Herb Brooks, Marshall Johnston, Harry Neale and Glen Sonmor, according to College Hockey Inc.)

Three of the most recent hires came directly from the U.S. college ranks in Boston University's Quinn, North Dakota's Hakstol and Denver's Montgomery. Clearly, NHL front offices are opening their minds when it comes to the NCAA, and Montgomery theorizes the net could be cast wider soon. "The percentage of NHLers coming from college and Europe has risen," he said. "You're going to see European coaches soon. It's a natural progression."

In retrospect, it seems strange how so few bench bosses have come from the NCAA, but old habits die hard at the executive level. The college schedule is sparser than in major junior or the AHL and, frankly, being coach of a top-notch NCAA program is a pretty sweet

gig - so the motivation to leave isn't the same as riding the buses in junior or even the AHL. "The quality of life is outstanding," Montgomery said. "College coaches get paid better, plus you're the coach, GM and scout for the team. It's your baby. It's not an easy decision to leave."

Quinn had similar feelings. In his press conference with the Rangers, he noted how much he loved coaching the Terriers. Gorton and assistant GM Chris Drury (a Boston U. alum) had their work cut out for them, though the specific situation in New York was tempting. "Everything aligned," Quinn said. "From where they're at as an organization to my relationship with Jeff and Chris. This was really the only situation I would have left Boston University for."

For a lot of college coaches, that situation never came up. Red Berenson ruled Michigan for decades, while Quinn's predecessor, Jack Parker, was coach of the Terriers for 40 years before retiring. Jeff Jackson now has 13 years of service at Notre Dame and began his career with a decade at Lake Superior State, while Boston College's Jerry York has run a college bench since 1972-73 when he took over at Clarkston.

Like Quinn, Montgomery is ruling an NHL bench for the first time. The incoming Stars coach is coming off an impressive stretch with the Denver Pioneers that included a national title in 2017 and scores of up-and-coming NHLers, from Will Butcher and Troy Terry to Henrik Borgstrom.

Montgomery sees another reason to hire college coaches right now, one rooted in development and economics: many key NHLers are now college-aged. On top of being rising stars, guys in their early 20s are on their entry-level deals or, most likely, reasonable bridge contracts. "We've been working consistently with those players," he said. "Most NHL teams have seven or eight players in that age range now. You have to develop them because of the salary cap."

Communication is also key. Quinn mentioned it in his opening remarks, while Montgomery began his summer phoning his

implement a culture, and with the NHL going so young (hello, 20-year-old team captains), getting the kids ingrained in the team concept is important. "The days of rookies shutting their mouths for the first three years are gone," Montgomery said. "Pittsburgh is the perfect model, Mike Sullivan has done a great job there, and that was our culture at Denver, too."

Which is great news for the Heiskanens and Julius Honkas in the organization, not to mention the vets who will benefit from Montgomery's structure.

So who's next? Minnesota-Duluth's Scott Sandelin is an obvious candidate, as he has



Stars players before realizing face-to-face is more effective. Dallas GM Jim Nill got the message and gave Montgomery the green light to fly to Europe, where he met with the Swedes and Finns on the roster (including impact rookie Miro Heiskanen). It's almost like being back on the college recruiting trail, right? "It's similar, but now it's a slightly different mentality because you're already working together," Montgomery said. "You have to start the relationship as soon as possible."

Building those relationships allows a coach and his staff to

AN 'A' FOR BIG APPLE

Quinn became the fifth former NCAA coach in today's NHL when he left Boston University for the Rangers.

won two national titles while showing a penchant for developing young D-men. If you can believe it, the last former NCAA coach to lead a team to the Stanley Cup was Pittsburgh's 'Badger' Bob Johnson in 1991. But that will change in the coming years. With five NCAA products now leading NHL benches, it's just a matter of time. **H**

THE INSTIGATOR

BY CHARLIE TELJEUR

THEY WEREN'T KIDDING WHEN THEY SAID THAT ALEX OVECHKIN COULDN'T WAIT TO GET HIS NAME ON THE CUP...



Treasures FROM THE HALL

HERB GARDINER | WCHL CHAMPIONS RING



THOUGH THE 1923-24 CALGARY

Tigers were swept in the best-of-three Stanley Cup final, they didn't walk away empty-handed that season.

The Tigers captured the Western Canadian League title in an era when that league was on par with the NHL, earning championship rings in the process. Calgary then beat Vancouver, winners of the Pacific Coast Association, earning the right to battle the NHL's Montreal Canadiens for the Stanley Cup.

The owner of this ring was 33-year-old Tigers defenseman and coach Herb Gardiner. He was a rock-solid defensive stalwart who played 60 minutes a game and hit Howie Morenz so hard it knocked him over the boards. The champion Canadiens were so impressed that after the final game, coach-GM Leo Dandurand shook Gardiner's hand and offered him a job on the Montreal blueline the following season.

Gardiner stayed in Calgary for two more years but joined the Canadiens at age 35. As a rookie, he again played 60 minutes every game, most of the time with future Hall of Famer Sylvio Mantha. So dominant in a shutdown role was Gardiner, that despite just 13 points in 44 games, he won the Hart Trophy as league MVP. He's one of just three rookies to ever win the award.

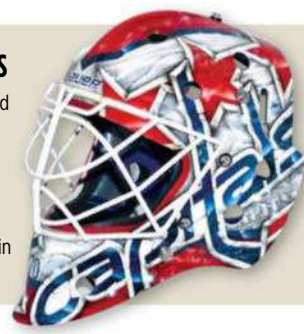
Gardiner played two more NHL seasons before moving into coaching, first in Chicago, then the amateur and minor ranks in Philadelphia where he settled. In 1967, Gardiner became the first season-ticket holder of the expansion NHL Flyers, a gift from team owner Ed Snider. Gardiner was inducted into the Hall of Fame in 1958 and died at 80 in 1972. He and his wife had two daughters who have since passed away. They donated Herb's ring to the Hall of Fame. — **BRIAN COSTELLO**



Behind THE MASK

BRADEN HOLTBY | WASHINGTON CAPITALS

HOLTBY'S MASK JIVES WITH his personality: calm and uncomplicated but complex if you look beneath the surface. His longtime artist, Dave Gunnarsson, crafts what looks like a clean and simple design featuring the current Caps logo. If you get close to the mask, however, you find a sea of older logos, including the Capitol Building logo, plus the shoulder-patch crests in the white portion of the mask. — **MATT LARKIN**



NEW HIRE CHALLENGE-O-METER

Every fresh coach and GM has his work cut out for him. But not all jobs are created equal. Who has the biggest mountain to climb? **BY MATT LARKIN**

MICROMANAGED



> **DON WADDELL**
Hurricanes GM

Good luck, Mr. Waddell. No one knows exactly how much owner Tom Dundon plans to meddle in the decision-making process, but his reported struggles to even find a GM say a lot.



HANDS ARE TIED



> **PAUL FENTON**
Wild GM



Fenton takes over a team wanting to contend yet completely hamstrung by its veteran salaries. Fenton will have to get creative if he wants to improve the Wild quickly.

GREAT EXPECTATIONS



> **BILL PETERS**
Flames coach

Peters is respected but never made the playoffs in four tries with Carolina. He won't have that much of a leash in a Canadian market.



INHERITED ASSETS



> **JIM MONTGOMERY**
Stars coach



Nice to start your NHL coaching career with Jamie Benn, Tyler Seguin, Alexander Radulov and John Klingberg.

TURNKEY OPERATION



> **KYLE DUBAS**
Maple Leafs GM

He'll be scrutinized more than any new hire, but he takes over a rising Stanley Cup contender. He's looking for finishing touches now, not foundational pieces.



BRIGHT LIGHTS, BIG CITY



> **DAVID QUINN**
Rangers coach



The Rangers are rebuilding, so Quinn doesn't have to be a hero on Day 1. Going from the U.S. college ranks to Manhattan is a big step up in the spotlight, though.

THE CLEANER



> **ROD BRIND'AMOUR**
Hurricanes coach

With so much turmoil and potential personnel change around him, it is Brind'Amour's job to take whichever players remain and whip them into shape.



COOL AS A CUCUMBER



> **LOU LAMORIELLO**
Islanders GM



The Isles are such a mess that whatever Lou does will look like an improvement. Can he help them retain John Tavares?



ANTON KURYANOV

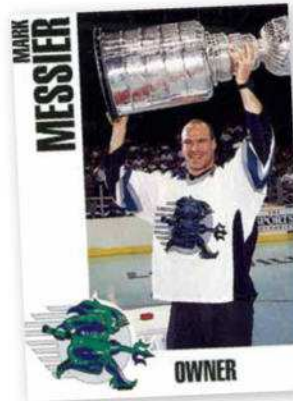
Jersey HOUND

YUGRA KHANTY-MANSIYSK | 2017-18

STRAIGHT UP, WE DON'T have enough elephants in hockey. Perhaps it's because big creatures don't traditionally represent speed or dexterity, but Yugra Khanty-Mansiysk prove that a cool mascot can still be burly.

Yugra actually has a woolly mammoth as their totem, and it's a pretty nice one at that. The franchise picked the prehistoric animal since a lot of mammoth fossils have been found in the permafrost around Khanty-Mansiysk.

Yugra joined the KHL in 2010 but will have to play in the lesser VHL circuit next year (think AHL), as the franchise, along with Lada Togliatti, was relegated in late March. — **RYAN KENNEDY**



MARK MESSIER

OWNER

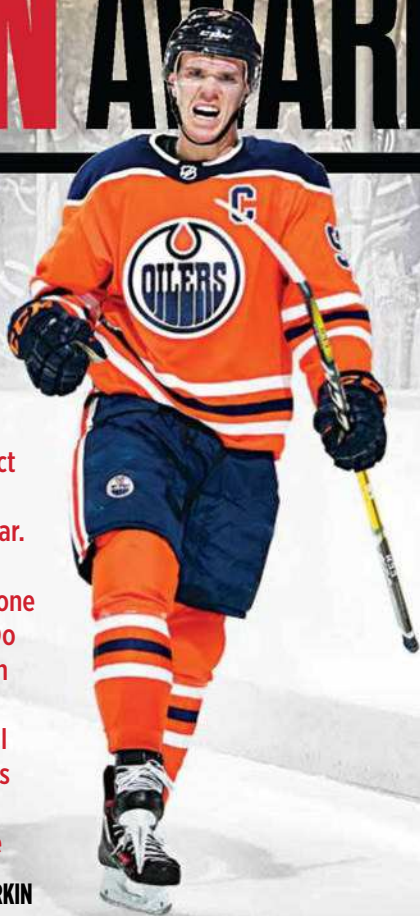
In the CARDS

ROLLER HOCKEY INTERNATIONAL WAS an inline league that existed from 1992 to 1999 and had its share of fly-by-night teams. One such club was the Tampa Bay Tritons, who went 11-11-0 in 1994, missed the playoffs and folded soon after. The team was owned by Mark Messier, who kept it all in the family and employed his older brother Paul as the Tritons coach, and father Doug as director of hockey ops. The Tritons issued a set of trading cards that included the team owner, hoisting the Stanley Cup he had just won earlier that summer with the Rangers. — **SAL BARRY OF PUCKJUNK.COM**

THN AWARDS

The annual NHL accolades neglect some special players every year. Are 'best' and 'most valuable' one and the same? Do defensive D-men deserve more spotlight? We fill in the blind spots with our own virtual hardware

WORDS BY MATT LARKIN



WAYNE GRETZKY AWARD

(Most valuable player)

NATHAN MACKINNON COL

Colorado dealt Matt Duchene... and rose instead of tanking because of MacKinnon's spectacular breakout. He upped his career high in points from 63 to 97 and factored in on 38 percent of Colorado's goals. As the head of a one-line team, he also faced stiff competition every night. He carried the Avs to the post-season.

RUNNERS-UP

1. Taylor Hall, NJ
2. Anze Kopitar, LA
3. Connor McDavid, Edm
4. Claude Giroux, Phi

SAKU KOIVU AWARD

(Comeback player)

CLAUDE GIROUX PHI

Giroux's five-year points trend: 86, 73, 67, 58...102? He reversed the trend in his age-30 season, largely because he found tremendous success moving from center to play left wing with Sean Couturier. Giroux has always possessed tremendous raw ability as a playmaker. He's healthy, happy and back among the elite.

RUNNERS-UP

1. Dustin Brown, LA
2. Anze Kopitar, LA
3. Steven Stamkos, TB
4. Marc-Andre Fleury, Veg

MARIO LEMIEUX AWARD (Best player)

CONNOR McDAVID EDM

Must an MVP make the playoffs? Our voters indicate so, but there was little debate over McDavid being hockey's best talent. Make that two straight Art Ross Trophies and 100-point seasons for the Oilers' franchise face. The only players with two scoring titles by age 21: McDavid and Wayne Gretzky.

RUNNERS-UP 2. Nathan MacKinnon, Col 3. Taylor Hall, NJ 4. Sidney Crosby, Pit 5. Claude Giroux, Phi



PATRICK ROY AWARD (Best goalie)

PEKKA RINNE NSH

Rinne's size, glove hand and athleticism have always made him an "eye test" darling, but the analytics crowd condemned him as over-rated. This year, he was so good that even advanced stats supported the idea. Rinne was especially spectacular when the calendar reached 2018, going 23-6-1 with a .930 save percentage and five shutouts.

RUNNERS-UP 2. Connor Hellebuyck, Wpg 3. Marc-Andre Fleury, Veg 4. Sergei Bobrovsky, Clb 5. Andrei Vasilevskiy, TB

BOBBY ORR AWARD (Best defenseman)

DREW DOUGHTY LA

Doughty's 26:50 of ice time per game led all NHLers, and he ranked among the best blueliners in points, Corsi For, Corsi Against, Quality of Competition and shorthanded minutes per game. The Kings ask him to do everything, and he answers the bell every night. He blends high skill with gritty physicality. Doughty is a complete defenseman.

RUNNERS-UP 2. Victor Hedman, TB 3. P.K. Subban, Nsh 4. John Carlson, Wsh 5. Seth Jones, Clb



MCDAVID/DOUGHTY: ANDY DEVLIN/NHL VIA GETTY IMAGES; RINNE: MINAS PANAGIOTAKIS/GETTY IMAGES; MACKINNON: MICHAEL MARTIN/NHL VIA GETTY IMAGES; GIROUX: FRANCOIS LACASSE/NHL VIA GETTY IMAGES



CAM NEELY AWARD (Breakout player)

WILLIAM KARLSSON VEG

Nine. That was Karlsson's career high in goals before the Golden Knights landed him in the expansion draft. Even 20 goals would've been a breakout, but 43? Otherworldly and epitomizing Vegas' shocking season. 'Wild Bill' led the league in shooting percentage and was a unanimous first-place pick in our voting panel.

RUNNERS-UP 2. Sean Couturier, Phi 3. Nathan MacKinnon, Col 4. Connor Hellebuyck, Wpg 5. Mikko Rantanen, Col



GUY CARBONNEAU AWARD

(Top penalty-killer)

JAY BEAGLE WSH

Beagle had some of the league's most extreme defense-heavy usage, which included 2:31 of shorthanded ice time per game, placing him among the top 10 forwards. Winning defensive draws is a crucial part of penalty killing, and Beagle won more short-handed faceoffs than anyone else in the league.

RUNNERS-UP
2. Mark Giordano, Cgy
3. Austin Watson, Nsh
4. John Gibson, Ana
5. Patrice Bergeron, Bos

ROD LANGWAY AWARD

(Best defensive defenseman)

MATTIAS EKHOLM NSH

The stacked Predators have four of the league's top blueliners, and Ekholm is the best of the bunch in pure shutdown ability. He logged major shorthanded minutes, blocked more than 100 shots and produced elite possession numbers despite regularly matching up against opposing teams' best forwards.

RUNNERS-UP
2. Mark Giordano, Cgy
3. Drew Doughty, LA
4. Marc-Edouard Vlasic, SJ
5. Victor Hedman, TB

BOB PROBERT AWARD (Toughest player)

TOM WILSON WSH

Look at the second- and third-place names. One hits like a freight train, the other punches like one, and Wilson does both. Not only does he regularly lay out – and injure – opponents, but when an angry teammate jumps in to attack Wilson afterward, that guy pays the price as well. They don't come any bigger, stronger or nastier.

RUNNERS-UP 2. Dustin Byfuglien, Wpg 3. Ryan Reaves, Veg 4. Micheal Haley, Fla 5. Zdeno Chara, Bos



TEEMU SELANNE AWARD (Best rookie)

MATHEW BARZAL NYI

Barzal ran away with our rookie vote just like he did the freshman scoring race. He joined Alex Ovechkin, Sidney Crosby and Evgeni Malkin as the only rookies in the past 25 years to record 85 or more points. Barzal also littered highlight reels with his ability to rag the puck and make jaw-dropping plays.

RUNNERS-UP 2. Brock Boeser, Van 3. Charlie McAvoy, Bos 4. Clayton Keller, Ari 5. Kyle Connor, Wpg

SCOTTY BOWMAN AWARD

(Best coach)

GERARD GALLANT VEG

The Golden Knights lack superstars and triumphed largely because (a) they played as one speedy, buzzing unit every game and (b) so many of their players realized untapped potential. Runaway winner Gallant deserves a lot of credit for getting the most out of a group no one expected to accomplish anything.

RUNNERS-UP
2. John Hynes, NJ
3. Jared Bednar, Col
4. John Stevens, LA
5. Barry Trotz, Wsh

SAM POLLOCK AWARD

(Best GM)

GEORGE MCPHEE VEG

McPhee didn't merely get lucky with expansion draft picks like Karlsson and Erik Haula. McPhee also used trades to add crucial contributors such as Reilly Smith, Shea Theodore and Alex Tuch. It was one act of wizardry after another. McPhee has set an impossible standard for Seattle's incoming GM.

RUNNERS-UP
2. Kevin Cheveldayoff, Wpg
3. Steve Yzerman, TB
4. Ray Shero, NJ
5. Joe Sakic, Col

ANZE KOPITAR

BEST TWO-WAY PLAYER

Kopitar and Bergeron are elite in nearly every facet, but there can be only one two-way king. Who is it? **BY TOM THOMPSON**

IN THE NHL PLAYOFFS this spring, much attention was paid to high-scoring wingers who can one-time the puck, power forwards with a physical edge, defensemen who can generate points and spectacular goalies. All of them are essential to a championship team. However, analytics experts are virtually unanimous in declaring the most important statistic for a winning team is puck possession. That starts with your centers. They take the faceoffs and control a team's attack in the neutral and offensive zones. They lead the forecheck and provide puck support in the defensive zone. They handle the puck more than any other player and check the player on the opposition who is their leading puck-carrier. These are all important responsibilities. Very few perform at the elite level in all these categories – but two who do are the Los Angeles Kings' Anze Kopitar and Boston Bruins' Patrice Bergeron. How do these splendid two-way centers compare? Who is better able to keep all elements of his team functioning smoothly? Who is the better two-way player?

ROLES

TO BE AN ELITE two-way center, you have to excel in all situations. You have to lead the No. 1 line and produce offense whether going up against the opponent's top line or its top checkers. You have to defend against the opponent's top line. You have to win crucial faceoffs, especially on power plays and penalty kills. You have to be a good power-play performer and kill penalties. You have to be a go-to guy in the late stages of close games. Both Kopitar and Bergeron have excelled in all situations.

EDGE: NEITHER

CAREERS

THEY HAVE HAD REMARKABLY similar careers. Bergeron entered the NHL at 18 in 2003 and has played 14 seasons. He has played 963 regular-season games and 112 playoff games. Kopitar entered the NHL at 19 in 2006 and has played 12 seasons. He has played 922 regular-season games and 79 playoff games. The Bruins have won 11 playoff series with Bergeron while the Kings have won 10 with Kopitar. Both have been to two Cup finals, with Bergeron winning once and Kopitar twice. In the past seven years, Bergeron has won the Selke Trophy four times, been runner-up twice and is one of the finalists this season. Over the same period, Kopitar has won the Selke once, been runner-up twice and is one of the finalists this season. Both have established Hall of Fame credentials perhaps one notch below players who are referred to as "generational" superstars.

EDGE: NEITHER

OFFENSIVE PRODUCTION

BERGERON IS A VERY good offensive performer. Kopitar is better. In a career marked by consistency, Bergeron has averaged 0.762 points per game during the regular season and 0.768 during the playoffs. Kopitar has averaged 0.898 during the regular season and 0.835 during the playoffs. In even-strength situations, the two players are close. Bergeron has accounted for four percent of his points shorthanded, while Kopitar's shorthanded share is just two percent. Kopitar's edge is on the power play. He gets 36 percent of his points with his team on the power play compared to 30 percent for Bergeron. Remarkably, the two players each have 87 power-play goals during their careers. Kopitar has a wide edge in power-play assists. Kopitar is a better offensive player than Bergeron primarily because he has generated more production on the power play.

EDGE: KOPITAR



ANZE KOPITAR

PATRICE BERGERON



PATRICE BERGERON

DEFENSIVE PLAY

KOPITAR IS A VERY good defensive performer. Bergeron is better. In fact, he's the gold standard for defensive forwards. He has already tied Hall of Famer Bob Gainey for the most Selke Trophies with four. What makes Bergeron so good? Performance and consistency. Let's start with faceoffs. Begin each shift with the puck and you have decreased the chances the opposition will score. Bergeron has an excellent record in the dot, winning 58.4 percent of his career faceoffs. In the playoffs, his faceoff record is an identical 58.4 percent. That's what I mean by consistency. Kopitar has been a good faceoff man, winning 52.1 percent in the regular season and 52.4 percent in the playoffs, but he is not at Bergeron's level. Analytics experts have convinced me that the other key stats in defensive effectiveness are takeaways and giveaways. In takeaways, they're close. Bergeron has 615 to Kopitar's 550 in the regular season, and Bergeron has a 62-49 edge in the playoffs. The big difference is giveaways. In the regular season, Kopitar has 613, averaging 0.65 giveaways per game. In the playoffs, he has 50 for an average of 0.63 per game. Bergeron has only 343 giveaways, an average of 0.36 per game. In the playoffs, he's even better, at just 0.29 per game. This is outstanding puck management.

EDGE: BERGERON

DURABILITY

KOPITAR IS ONE OF the legitimate ironmen of the modern era. In his 12-year career, he has appeared in more than 97 percent of L.A.'s games. Bergeron has appeared in 86 percent of Boston's games. Most of his absences were early in his career, when he missed substantial time because of concussions. There is still some nervousness about Bergeron, who had a few injury stints this season, including Game 4 against Toronto in the playoffs.

EDGE: KOPITAR

TEMPO

THIS WAS A FAVORITE word of the late Bob Johnson. He wasn't referring to a player's pure speed going from one place to another. He meant the ability to respond to all the directional changes in a normal NHL shift and to keep up with or force the pace of play. This was the only concern about Kopitar when he came to the NHL. He overcame it. For over a decade, tempo wasn't a problem. Then came 2016-17. Kopitar had by far the worst season of his career, finishing with only 12 goals. More importantly, he often looked lead-footed. To his credit, he bounced back in 2017-18 with the best offensive output of his career. However, the season didn't end well for him. Kopitar couldn't keep up with Vegas' William Karlsson or Erik Haula in the first round of the playoffs. If he hadn't missed the last month of the season, Bergeron might've been a Hart Trophy finalist. In the playoffs, he was outstanding. He didn't have to worry about keeping up with the tempo. He was forcing it.

EDGE: BERGERON

CONCLUSION

THIS IS THE ERA of the salary cap. Players can't be rewarded for past performance. How much can they contribute going forward? These have been two of my favorite players for the past decade. They're both great team players and Hall of Fame candidates. Kopitar, however, makes me nervous. I don't believe he can succeed against some of the league's younger centers when the tempo increases in the playoffs. Bergeron is two years older, but he's a more fluid and natural skater, and I see no decrease in his tempo. In fact, there were times during the regular season and in the playoffs where he looked as good as any player in the league. The edge Bergeron enjoys in defensive play and tempo is much more pronounced than Kopitar's advantage in offense and durability. Bergeron can do more to ensure the smooth functioning of an NHL team than any other NHLer. He's the best two-way player in the league.

Tom Thompson has been an NHL scout/director/assistant GM since 1985.

THE COUNTDOWN

SURPRISE SUCCESS STORIES

They were supposed to be jokes, but the joke was on everyone else. Which NHL franchise can stake claim to the greatest underdog story of all? **BY MATT LARKIN**

WE MAY NEVER SEE a story as spectacular and unexpected as the 2017-18 Golden Knights again. Yet Vegas alone doesn't do justice to how topsy-turvy this entire season was.

The Washington Capitals weren't expected to do anything in the post-season. They opened the playoffs dropping two straight home games. When they rallied to get past Columbus, the Caps had to conquer the Pittsburgh Penguins, a.k.a their Daddy. So Washington's run was astounding in its own right. And what about the Colorado Avalanche? Their jump from 48 points in 2016-17 to 95 this season marked one of the largest year-to-year improvements in league history. So we saw several franchises enjoy their best underdog runs ever.

What are the top surprise seasons for every NHL team? And why have so many involved upsetting Detroit? We've ranked their best, most stunning entries in order of improbability. Low playoff seedings, hopeless pre-season expectations and unlikely runs to the Stanley Cup all factored into the criteria for this list. But let's be clear: there's no touching Vegas. No first-year team in any major North American pro sport had even enjoyed a winning record in the past 50 years, let alone made the playoffs, let alone accomplished what the Golden Knights did. It's the most shocking NHL story of all-time.

1 **VEGAS GOLDEN KNIGHTS**

2017-18

Supposed to be so bad that pundits accused them of tanking. Most improbable success story in pro team sports history.

2 **LOS ANGELES KINGS**

2011-12

Kings of Corsi won Cup losing just four games in playoffs – as No. 8 seed. Legend born in 'Playoff Jonathan Quick.'

3 **DALLAS STARS**

1990-91 (AS MINNESOTA NORTH STARS)

Sixth-worst record in league, 68 points. Naturally, they beat first-overall Chicago in Round 1 and went all the way to final.

4 **FLORIDA PANTHERS**

1995-96

Topped Flyers' 'Legion of Doom' and peak Penguins of Mario Lemieux era, reached final in third year of existence.

5 **EDMONTON OILERS**

2005-06

Heroes? Fernando Pisani? Dwayne Roloson? Beat 124-point Detroit in Round 1, went to Game 7 of final as No. 8 seed.

6 **ANAHEIM DUCKS**

2002-03

Stunned Wings with Round 1 sweep, rode J-S Giguere's epic goaltending to Game 7 of final as No. 7 seed.



7 **NEW JERSEY DEVILS**

1994-95

The Trap is born! Swept juggernaut Red Wings in final. Claude Lemieux: six regular-season goals, 13 playoff goals.

10 **MONTREAL CANADIENS**

1992-93

"Underdog" is revisionist label. They won 48 games. But 10 straight OT wins en route to Cup is an incredible story.

8 **PHILADELPHIA FLYERS**

2009-10

Rallied from 3-0 series deficit to stun Boston in Round 3. Had ragtag Michael Leighton/Brian Boucher tandem in net.

11 **NEW YORK RANGERS**

1949-50

Finished in bottom half of league. Upset Rocket's Habs. One goal away from Cup. And no home ice with circus in town.

9 **VANCOUVER CANUCKS**

1981-82

Kings' upset of Oilers paved easy path for a Canucks team three games under .500. One of strangest Cup berths ever.

12 **BUFFALO SABRES**

1998-99

Leading scorer in playoffs? Defenseman Jason Woolley. Had no business reaching final. Dominik Hasek carried them.



13 **NASHVILLE PREDATORS**

2016-17
First No. 16 overall seed to reach the Cup final. Started in style with a stunning sweep of their nemesis: the Blackhawks.

18 **OTTAWA SENATORS**

2016-17
Weren't supposed to beat anyone. Came double-OT goal away from ousting eventual champion Pens in conference final.

14 **CALGARY FLAMES**

2003-04
One overtime goal from winning Cup. Not bad for a sixth-seeded team not one expected to survive the first round.

19 **ARIZONA COYOTES**

2011-12
Top scorer: Ray Whitney, 40 points. Upset Hawks in Round 1. Only time the franchise has reached conference final.

15 **CAROLINA HURRICANES**

2001-02
2006 champion team was a beast. 2002 squad? Pure Cinderella. Aging Ron Francis, plucky Arturs Irbe were amazing.

20 **SAN JOSE SHARKS**

1993-94
The 58-point jump year over year is NHL's largest ever. Pulled upset for ages in Round 1 over frontrunner Detroit.

16 **NEW YORK ISLANDERS**

1992-93
David Volek's Game 7 OT goal in Round 2 ruined three-peat for legendary Penguins squad, produced all-time upset.

21 **WASHINGTON CAPITALS**

2017-18
Conquered Pittsburgh demons and shocked top-seeded Tampa Bay. Few expected anything from this team.

17 **CHICAGO BLACKHAWKS**

2012-13
These champs were never underdogs. But no one predicted they'd open lockout-shortened season at 21-0-3.

22 **TORONTO MAPLE LEAFS**

1966-67
Seven players older than 36, two older than 40. Even in a six-team league, they were surprise story in last Cup crusade.

23 **MINNESOTA WILD**

2002-03
Overcame 3-1 series deficit to oust star-studded Colorado. Only Wild squad to reach Round 3. Won two road Game 7s.

29 **PITTSBURGH PENGUINS**

2000-01
Lemieux unretires mid-season, plays at MVP level, scores 'Immaculate Deflection' goal, Pens reach conference final.

24 **COLORADO AVALANCHE**

2017-18
Lowest point total of cap era, traded Matt Duchene, improved by 47 points. Among fastest team redemptions ever.

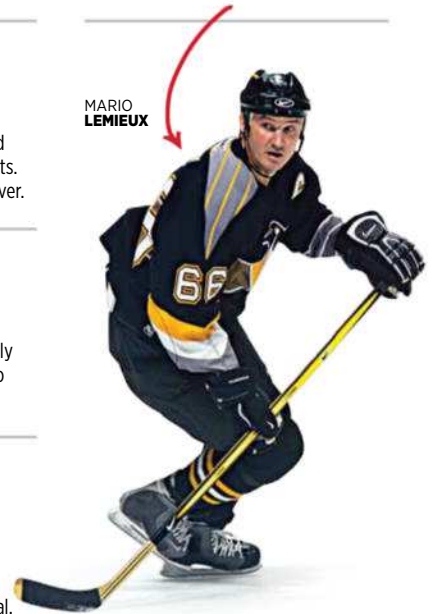
25 **BOSTON BRUINS**

1967-68
From 17 to 37 wins thanks to a freshly acquired scorer named Phil Esposito and teen D-man named Bobby Orr.

26 **DETROIT RED WINGS**

1986-87
'Dead Things' came alive, doubled win total under new coach Jacques Demers and reached conference final.

MARIO LEMIEUX



27 **COLUMBUS BLUE JACKETS**

2008-09
First playoff berth doesn't happen if rookie Steve Mason doesn't get 10 shutouts en route to Calder Trophy.

30 **TAMPA BAY LIGHTNING**

2010-11
Bolts have no real Cinderella season. One win from 2011 final with 41-year-old Roloson as their goalie, though.

28 **ST. LOUIS BLUES**

1967-68
Expansion automatically placed a new club in final, but the Blues were third in their division. Goalie Glenn Hall was 36.

31 **WINNIPEG JETS**

2017-18
No shocking stories yet for young franchise, but beating Presidents' Trophy winner Nashville this spring was a thrill.

SENATORS: MINAS PANAGIOTAKIS/GETTY IMAGES; WILD: BRIAN BAHRI/GETTY IMAGES; INHLI; LEMIEUX: JIM LEARY/GETTY IMAGES

THE TWO MARTINS

Brodeur and St-Louis sure to get stamp of approval from Hall of Fame. After that, it's an open field **BY BRIAN COSTELLO**

MARTIN BRODEUR, WE'VE been waiting for you. Or at least the Hockey Hall of Fame has been waiting for you.

Since his forgettable seven-game stint with St. Louis early in 2014-15, Brodeur has been out of the spotlight but still in the background in his capacities as assistant GM with the Blues and in rental-car commercials. But he'll be center stage in November when he enters the Hall at the head of the statistical pack in the 100-year history of NHL goaltending.

The debate on the best goalie of all-time will always be open, but Brodeur, in his 20 years with New Jersey, is the runaway leader in wins and shut-outs. He's one of up to four ex-NHLers who will be approved for induction in the players' category this June. Candidates need at least 14 affirmative votes from the selection committee's 18-member panel. The voters also determine candidates in the builder's category. Women's great Hayley Wickenheiser is expected to gain immediate entry after retiring last year. Here are the top first-year eligible candidates.

> MARTIN BRODEUR

HIS 691 REGULAR-SEASON WINS are 140 ahead of the No. 2 name on the list, Patrick Roy. How daunting is that number 691? Consider that longtime active star stoppers Pekka Rinne, Jonathan Quick and Carey Price aren't even close to half that number. Also, 33-year-old Marc-Andre Fleury, wrapping up his 14th season, would need five more seasons of 40 wins just to get to 600.

MARTIN BRODEUR



> MARTIN ST-LOUIS

HARD TO BELIEVE THAT the tiny but powerful winger from Laval, Que., was an NHL waiver-wire pickup at 25 after a failed four-goal, 69-game trial with Calgary. And that he didn't even make it to Tampa Bay's top line until he was 27. From then on, he was pure magic, scoring 29 or more goals eight times. He was one of the game's best playmakers and difference-makers for a decade. His award collection includes a Stanley Cup, a Hart, a Ted Lindsay Award, two Art Ross Trophies and three Lady Byngs.

> DANIEL ALFREDSSON

IF BRODEUR IS AN automatic and St-Louis a shoo-in, Alfredsson is classified as on the bubble. The 18-year sniping winger blew through 400 goals and 1,000 points, won the Calder, played in six All-Star Games and was regarded as one of the most respected players of his era. Holding him back is a lack of Cups and/or multiple awards and the prevailing sentiment he was very good but not a Hall of Fame-worthy great.

Previously passed-over candidates are also up for consideration again. The most popular names include Alexander Mogilny, Theoren Fleury, Jeremy Roenick, Rod Brind'Amour, Curtis Joseph, Keith Tkachuk and Guy Carbonneau. **H**

MARTIN ST-LOUIS



RAPID FIRE

WITH ANAHEIM DUCKS LEFT WINGER RICKARD RAKELL

Who was your mentor growing up?

Probably my brother (Robin). He was the one I started watching, and we've always been competitive with each other. It was nice to have somebody you could work out with and try all the moves you see on TV and have someone to try them on. It's good to have somebody to test your skills on and just have someone to be competitive with.

Best piece of advice you received?

Don't listen to the coach. It was actually Roger Ronnberg, our coach in the (2012) world juniors when we won the gold. He said, "Don't listen to the coach because he wants you to never make mistakes." I felt that was pretty good advice. You can't play scared. So I always try to listen to the coach, but I also try to be creative when I have the puck.

Who did you model your game after?

Obviously, Peter Forsberg was really big in Sweden. He was good at everything and at the same time a tough player to play against. Everybody would like to be that kind of player and have him as a role model.

Did you have a favorite team?

Not really. I used to watch all the Swedish players in the NHL. Mats Sundin was from my hometown, so not that I followed Toronto that much, but I looked up to him, and it was a special moment if you saw him on the golf course every once in a while back home.

What skill did you work on the most?

I always tried to work on my shot. I had a net in my backyard, and we'd hang up pop bottles and try to shoot them down.

Did you splurge on anything after signing your first NHL contract?

Not really. The first thing I got myself was an apartment in Stockholm. It's nice to have somewhere to live.

Favorite spot on the ice?

At the side of the net where no one else is.

Favorite way of scoring?

Backdoor tap-ins are really nice.

What part of your game do you still want to improve?

The league is getting faster every year. If you can work on your skating or get a little bit faster just to be able to create space and that extra second for yourself, it can make a big difference.

Best thing about being an NHLer?

I get to live my dream. It's what I always wanted to do, and now I'm here.

Is there a worst thing?

Not really. Not yet.

What advice would you give to your 13-year-old self?

(Laughs) I did everything right. Don't change anything. — WITH SAM MCCAIG



HAS PENGUINS' DOOR CLOSED?

Time and cap issues caught up to the Chicago Blackhawks. Pittsburgh is going down that same road, but at a slower pace

THE PITTSBURGH PENGUINS WERE two-time defending Stanley Cup champions, at home, facing the Washington Capitals, who had choked away so many opportunities against them in recent playoffs. All of a sudden, Alex Ovechkin intercepted a puck, threaded a pass to Evgeny Kuznetsov, and he beat Matt Murray, five-hole. Overtime over. Game 6 over. Series over.

The Pens begrudgingly saluted their fans as if to say, "It's been a great run." Was Pittsburgh's era of dominance really finished?

The Blackhawks had to pop up in the minds of many concerned Penguins fans at that moment. The Hawks were the NHL's pseudo-dynasty from 2010 to 2015, winning three Cups in six seasons. Like the Penguins, they built their roster by paying a handful of elite stars mega bucks and repeatedly replacing the depth around them via trades, clever signings or internal promotions. The model worked great for GM Stan Bowman...until it suddenly didn't. Patrick Kane remains an elite star, but Jonathan Toews has slipped into the next tier down, while workhorse blueliner Duncan Keith has reached his mid-30s, longtime partner

Brent Seabrook has fallen apart in his early 30s and Marian Hossa has retired due to an equipment allergy.

Once the extremely wealthy stars stop performing at peak levels, the system collapses, because the support players aren't talented enough to shoulder increased weight. That's why we saw Chicago slip from Stanley Cup to consecutive first-round losses to out of the playoffs altogether in three seasons. There's no shame in that, of course. The Blackhawks emptied out their draft-pick supply in the name of championship pursuits, and they may not be an elite team again for many years, but they won three Cups using Bowman's plan.

The question now is: are the Penguins destined to follow the Blackhawks' recent trajectory and start sinking slowly?

The Pens have more than \$32 million invested in just four players: Sidney Crosby, Evgeni Malkin, Phil Kessel and Kris Letang. They have more than \$70 million in payroll already committed for 2018-19. This June will mark their fourth consecutive draft without a first-round selection. In our 2018 Future Watch magazine, our panel of NHL

THERE'S ALWAYS NEXT YEAR

Pittsburgh's three-peat bid came up short. Do Crosby & Co. have what it takes to contend for another Cup in 2018-19?

scouts and executives graded the Pens' farm crop dead last out of 31 franchises. There's no blue-chip help coming for this team.

Letang enjoyed a healthy season but played some of his leakiest defensive hockey in years. Murray endured multiple injury-related absences and has now missed time with health problems seven times in the past two years. His .907 save percentage this season also ranked 42nd among 51 qualified goaltenders – and he wasn't much better in the playoffs at .908.

So, sure, the pessimists have some ammunition. But is it Pittsburgh's time yet? Not so fast. Here's why it's too early to declare the dynastic years over:

1. Their elite forwards are still elite. Malkin, Kessel and Crosby finished fourth, seventh and 10th in scoring. Malkin will earn Hart Trophy votes, while Crosby remains arguably the NHL's most complete player. And Kessel had the best season of his career.

2. Goaltending remains a strength, not a weakness. Give Murray a break. He endured a tough year emotionally after losing his father mid-season. He's still just 24, younger than Connor Hellebuyck and John Gibson, and has two Cups to his credit.

3. The Pens don't need high draft picks to develop good players. Jake Guentzel has been legendary as a playoff performer. He also went 77th overall in his draft year. Bryan Rust went 80th. Conor Sheary wasn't even drafted. The Penguins' AHL affiliate has a history of turning marginal prospects into legitimate NHL contributors.

4. Extreme depth up the middle. On top of Crosby and Malkin, the Penguins have Derrick Brassard signed for another year, plus Riley Sheahan. That gives Pittsburgh two Hall of Fame pivots in the top-six and two solid options in the bottom-six.

5. More cap space than meets the eye. The salary cap projects to rise into the \$80-million range, and the Pens have no impact UFAs to re-sign. Guentzel is the only major RFA next year. Pittsburgh thus has some money to play with – perhaps to pursue an impact defenseman. Heck, how about Erik Karlsson? The Pens only have so many prime years of Crosby and Malkin left, so there's no reason for GM Jim Rutherford to stop chasing aggressive upgrades.

It's thus too early to treat 2017-18 as the end of the Penguins' glory days. They'll enter 2018-19 as true contenders again, and they'll be an important team to watch in the off-season. **H**



ALEX OVECHKIN

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BY THIS WE'LL DEFEND

IT WAS A LONG TIME COMING FOR **ALEX OVECHKIN**.
IN FACT, FOR A LONG TIME IT LOOKED LIKE IT WOULD
NEVER COME AT ALL. BUT IN A SEASON FULL OF SURPRISES,
HE POWERED THE CAPITALS TO THEIR FIRST STANLEY CUP

BY KEN CAMPBELL

OVECHKIN'S DYSSEY

M
C THE COSMOPOLITAN
AT LAS VEGAS



LABOR



T

HE WHOOPING and hollering and hugging and carrying on had gone on long enough, he decided. So there he stood in the middle of the ice at the T-Mobile

Arena, a place that didn't even exist a little more than a year ago, the Stanley Cup firmly in his grasp held at waist level. Wearing Evgeny Kuznetsov's shower flip-flops, he began ordering his teammates off the ice. "Backy, let's go. Locker room. Steve-O (Chandler Stephenson), locker room. Who's left?" There was Lars Eller, chatting with Tony Robbins, team owner Ted Leonsis' buddy from Palm Beach who's only worth about a bajillion dollars. "Tiger, let's go, locker room," he said. "I'm freezing out here." And like the others, Tiger nodded his acknowledgement and went on his way. All the while, he stood steadfast, refusing to move until every one of his teammates was on his way to the room.

Then just before leaving the ice to go to the dressing room, Alex Ovechkin turned back, kissed the Cup, then held it over his head and yelled, "Thank you, Vegas!" Throughout the 2018 NHL playoffs, the Capitals talked about how their captain was constantly "dragging us into the fight." And now that it was finally over, 56 days after an OT loss to the Columbus Blue Jackets that gave everyone a major case of the here-we-go-again complex, Ovechkin was dragging them out. And for the first time in his 13-year career, he was doing it with the beautiful, shiny chalice in tow.

Prior to this spring, every time Ovechkin got anywhere near the Cup, he and his team reacted like tongue-tied teenagers, staring at their shoes and mumbling while it went home with far smoother operators like Sidney Crosby, Jonathan Toews and Anze Kopitar. But on this night, with Ovechkin cradling the Cup and handling it as though they'd been together for years, it was finally going home under his arm. And his mind went back to a day more than 13 years ago when he was swimming in Leonsis' backyard pool. It was there that Leonsis told Ovechkin that one day they would win the Stanley Cup together. "We waited so long," Ovechkin said, with the Stanley Cup to his right and the Conn Smythe Trophy as playoff MVP to his left. "We're waiting 13 years to win the Cup."

The Stanley Cup is the most breathtaking trophy in team sports and, as such, it plays the hardest to get. It took Steve Yzerman 14 years to win his first, and then he won three of them. Ray Bourque needed 22 years to win the only one of his career. Bobby Hull won only one of them, Bobby Orr only two. Jaromir Jagr, who



FINAL HURDLE

For Ovechkin, the most celebrated goal-scorer of his era, the Stanley Cup had proven ever elusive. No more.

was hanging around the T-Mobile Arena sporting a man-bun the night the Caps won, captured Cups his first two years in the league, then never again. Marcel Dionne scored more than 1,700 points and never came close. Eric Lindros, Pavel Bure and Cam Neely, all superstars, never put their lips on it as players.

Alexander Mikhailovich Ovechkin has escaped that particular ignominy. Never, ever again will he be considered one of the greatest players to never win a Stanley Cup. And regardless of what happens for the rest of his career, Ovechkin will for the next 65 years be able to look at the Stanley Cup and run his finger just under where it will read "WASHINGTON CAPITALS 2017-18" and feel

the imprint of the letters of his name pounded into the nickel and silver alloy by the official Cup engraver, Louise St-Jacques.

That will take him to somewhere around his 98th birthday. For it will be then that this team will move to the bottom of the Cup and be removed forever, the same way anyone who won his last Cup between 1953-54 through '64-65 will go when the Cup loses one of the five rings on the base to make room for more names. That means Gordie Howe will disappear from the Cup forever. So will Ted Lindsay, Jacques Plante, Doug Harvey, Stan Mikita and Hull.

The most prominent name that will be gone will be that of Maurice 'Rocket' Richard, who won eight times as a

DAVE SANDFORD/NHL VIA GETTY IMAGES

GAME 1

**T-MOBILE
ARENA
MAY 28, 2018**



4-6



IF IT'S NOT A surprise, well, it's kind of a surprise. That's the theme of 2017-18, and Game 1 followed form. The Golden Knights' fourth line – Frenchman (Pierre-Edouard Bellemare), American (Ryan Reaves) and Czech (Tomas Nosek) – scored three third-period goals and outduelled

Washington's cast of superstars in a 6-4 win. Reaves scored the tying goal early in the third, and Nosek sealed it with the winner and an empty-netter.

But the fabulous fourth's contributions weren't without controversy. Reaves benefitted from a glaring non-call, getting away with a cross-check on John Carlson just before scoring. Still, it counted, and Reaves – known more for his knuckles than hands – continued to play a critical (and entertaining) post-season role for the team of misfits. "I told everybody I was saving them for the playoffs," he quipped about his surprising offense. "I don't think they're going to be having meetings about our fourth line. I don't think that's their problem."

The Capitals were more worried about blowing leads, twice giving up goals shortly after they'd gone ahead. Braden Holtby didn't have his 'A' game, and Alex Ovechkin was limited to two shots.

Caps villain Tom Wilson lived up to his reputation with a late, blindside hit on Jonathan Marchessault in the third. The Knights were incensed it only merited a minor penalty. "When you watch it on replay and see how hard he hits Marchessault, it should've been a major," said Vegas coach Gerard Gallant. "He hit him real late and real hard and he really went after him."

In the end, it was an ugly play in a game that was sloppy but also compelling. "I'm not too happy with that game," Gallant said, "but the bottom line is we won, so we're going to be a lot happier than they are."



player with the Montreal Canadiens and once as a team executive. So it's only fitting that in a year when Richard's etching will be put into storage with the other rings of the Stanley Cup, the player who has won the award that bears his name seven times will be the first to occupy the blank slate that replaces it. Because in many ways, Ovechkin is a modern-day Rocket Richard. Like Richard, he was placed on earth to score goals. Like Richard, he is dynamic, fearless when he goes to the net and lethal when the puck is

on his stick. Like Richard, he's a little misunderstood, and his impact on the game has been immeasurable.

It's easy to forget that when Ovechkin broke into the NHL in 2005-06, the league was coming off what could have been a crippling labor dispute. Along with an array of young stars that included Crosby, Ovechkin transformed the Capitals from afterthought to contender and major player in the marketplace. And with his ridiculous goals and even more outlandish celebrations, he was injecting a

ALEX OVECHKIN



whole lot of life into a game that had been dragged into the mud by the Dead Puck Era. And all he has done is score goals prodigiously since then, 607 in the regular season and another 61 in the playoffs. "Alex has been one of the greatest players who ever lived," said Capitals coach Barry Trotz. "He's inspired people. And he maybe saved the game after the lockout."

The seeds for the Capitals' championship season started with a conversation. It wasn't long after Ovechkin and the former Anastasia Shubskaya, a model and daughter of a shipping magnate, threw a lavish wedding party last summer to celebrate their 2016 nuptials. Trotz decided to travel to Russia between Ovechkin's wedding and honeymoon to let him know what would be expected of him with a Capitals team that seemed to be in transition.

Trotz let Ovechkin know that more would be expected of him, that he'd have to train differently to keep pace with the young, fast players who were dominating the NHL. He'd need to accept more of the burden of carrying a team that had to fill in





ALEX OVECHKIN

a good part of its roster with inexpensive players, that the Caps were going to lean heavily on him and expect him to set the tone. “And what does he do?” Trotz said. “He comes into the season and gets seven goals in two games. There are guys that can’t even get seven in a year and he got seven in two games. He sort of set that bar personally because a lot of things were said about him. I think he’s very prideful and just said, ‘You know what? I’m going to prove you people wrong.’ And he did.”

That did not change during the season. For the first 13 years of Yzerman’s career, he put up incredible numbers and piled up personal accolades, but he only started winning championships when he added texture to his game. He started winning faceoffs, being an outstanding defensive player and exhibiting the traits that have made him one of the game’s all-time great leaders.

Ovechkin has long been known for setting up in the high slot on the left-hand side and ripping one-timers past goaltenders, but we are now seeing an evolved Ovechkin. In these playoffs, he backchecked, blocked shots, sacrificed his body and played with the same reckless physical abandon he did when he was a teenager. “It’s almost like we’re a fourth line out there,” said linemate Tom Wilson, “the way we throw our bodies around.” In the Capitals’ must-win victory in Game 6 of the Eastern Conference final against the Tampa Bay Lightning, Ovechkin was the best player on the ice and didn’t score a single point.

By the time he opened the scoring in Game 3 to help the Capitals to their first-ever Cup final win on home ice in team history, Ovechkin was in full-on beast mode. Playing on the power play, Ovechkin absorbed two cross-checks to the back

GAME 2

T-MOBILE
ARENA
MAY 30, 2018



WHEN THE CAPITALS’

Nicklas Backstrom came out to meet with the media after Game 2, he was sporting Lars Eller’s hoodie with the No. 20 emblazoned on the left shoulder. “He was so hot today, so I wanted some power from him,” Backstrom joked.

Eller, filling in on Washington’s second line after Evgeny Kuznetsov left the ice in the first period with an injury, was the best player on either team, scoring the tying goal and setting up the other two in a 3-2 win. It was the second time this post-season that Eller excelled in the crunch. He was stellar in Game 7 of the second-round win over Pittsburgh, stepping in for an injured Backstrom on the top line. “The more I’m out there, the better I feel with the puck,” Eller said. “In the Stanley Cup final you want to be on the ice, not on the bench.”

While Eller was dynamic in an understudy role, goalie Braden Holtby fulfilled his star billing by making the save of a lifetime to preserve the victory and perhaps turn the momentum in the series. With two minutes remaining in the third period and the Capitals clinging to a one-goal lead, Holtby desperately sprawled coast-to-coast to get his paddle on a shot from Alex Tuch that looked like a sure goal.

Coach Barry Trotz gave some credit for the save to the hockey gods, who apparently owed the Capitals a break.

He sensed its magnitude immediately. “You could see the emotion on our bench,” Trotz said. “Once he made that save, I knew we were going to win the game.”

Holtby tried not to get caught up, too deeply, in the moment. “It’s one of those things,” he said. “It helped us win a game. Now we move forward to the next game because we have a goal in mind that will be a lot bigger than some save on social media.”

from former teammate Nate Schmidt, then battled for position and reached over a mass of bodies while diving over Brayden McNabb to tap the puck over Golden Knights goalie Marc-Andre Fleury on his backhand. Earlier in the game, he came out and blocked a Schmidt slapshot from the blueline. And in the clinching game, with the Capitals on the power play and Ovechkin playing the point, the puck squirted loose to Pierre-Edouard Bellemare, who was sent in on a partial short-handed breakaway. Had he scored to make the game 4-2 at that point, the Knights may have found themselves back in the series. But instead, Ovechkin caught Bellemare on the backcheck before he could even get a shot off.



“It’s the Stanley Cup final. What do you want to do?” said Ovechkin, who has become something of an automaton compared to his younger self over the years. “It’s all-in for everybody.”

But one of the reasons why it was all-in for everybody on the Capitals was because of Ovechkin himself. First of all, throughout the playoffs, Ovechkin was a human highlight reel just with his emotional reactions. In fact, *The Washington Post* referred to them as “the

WHITE KNIGHT

Ovechkin carried the load for the Caps more than ever, adding grunt work to a highlight-reel profile.

DAVE SANDFORD/NHL VIA GETTY IMAGES

GAME 3

CAPITAL ONE
ARENA
JUNE 2, 2018



1-3



THE TREND WAS NOT

irreversible but, with a 3-1 victory in Game 3 to go up 2-1 in the series, the Washington Capitals were doing everything they'd never done in the playoffs before, while the Vegas Golden Knights were doing almost nothing of what made them the most successful expansion team in the history of professional sports and propelled them to the NHL final.

For the two days between Games 2 and 3, the Golden Knights talked about how they were uncharacteristically turning pucks over and how they had to stop. Then they went out in Game 3 and made the exact same mistakes.

The Capitals choked off the Golden Knights in the offensive zone, too. More bad news for the Golden Knights: Alex Ovechkin and Evgeny Kuznetsov elevated their games to otherworldly levels. Judging by the wrist shot he unleashed on his goal to put the Capitals up 2-0 in Game 3 and the fact he did his customary bird flap afterward, there wasn't a darn thing wrong with Kuznetsov's injured left wrist anymore. "Michael Jordan, when he played his best game, he was sore, right?" said Kuznetsov, referring to games such as the famous 'Flu Game' in which Jordan scored 38 points against the Utah Jazz in the 1997 NBA Finals despite suffering through dehydration and exhaustion, and his 63-point game on a sore foot against the Boston Celtics in the 1986 playoffs. "When you're hurt, you play a little better always. You have extra energy."

The Capitals were blocking shots, chasing down loose pucks, hitting, scoring at key times and suffocating their opponent, with their best players leading the way. It was the recipe they lacked in the past when all they did was disappoint in the playoffs. If they kept cooking that way, it wouldn't matter how well the Golden Knights played the rest of the series.

“IT'S THE STANLEY CUP FINAL. WHAT DO YOU WANT ME TO DO? IT'S ALL-IN FOR EVERYBODY

— Alex Ovechkin

GIF that keeps on giving.” In the last seconds of Game 7 in the Eastern Conference final, when Ovechkin finally realized he and his team would be playing for the Stanley Cup, he threw back his head, put his arms to his side and screamed with joy. (As Lightning coach Jon Cooper observed earlier in the series, it seemed Ovechkin was channeling the frustration of 13 years of playoff disappointment into one spring tournament.) Everyone will remember his hands-on-his head reaction to Braden Holtby's game-saving stop late in Game 2 almost as much as the save itself. “Just emotions,” he said of his reaction. “I'm an emotion guy.”



ALEX OVECHKIN



RED DAWN

Forty-four years after entering the NHL, the Capitals finally reached the promised land.

And the Capitals fed off that emotion, as well as the inspired play that accompanied it. That's not to say Ovechkin hasn't been an inspiring playoff player before. In fact, even though the Capitals had been playoff disappointments of biblical proportions until this spring – with the Pittsburgh Penguins and the second round of the playoffs both taking extreme glee in making their lives miserable – Ovechkin's post-season resume was solid. One example is blocked shots. Almost everyone was raving about how Ovechkin sacrificed his body in these playoffs. The truth of the matter is that according to the NHL's statistics, Ovechkin blocked 14 shots in 24 games, precisely the same number he blocked in just 14 games six years ago. The year after that, he blocked six in seven games. Those numbers will never put him in the same class as former Capitals' Hall of Famer Rod Langway, but the reality is that Ovechkin did not wake up on the eve of the 2018 playoffs and decide he was going to be a different player.

But there was something different about the feel of the Capitals this season. Perhaps it was the fact that almost nobody believed in them, with good reason.



ALEX OVECHKIN



Expectations were low for this team in the playoffs this year and losing the first two games of the tournament on home ice did nothing to raise anyone's spirits. But Trotz said after those losses to Columbus, he and Ovechkin met and agreed that they would win not only that series, but go on to win a Stanley Cup. The Capitals talked a lot about being a family during these playoffs, and you could tell that the bond they share is something special. But every strong family has a strong person leading it. "Anyone can see that when he's rolling, there's nobody who can stop him," said winger T.J. Oshie. "He leads the charge. I don't usually look at too much stuff on social media, but I saw something on Twitter about him blocking shots and getting hits. We get spoiled with his goals, but when we see him blocking shots and hitting guys and backchecking and doing all the little things, that's what really gets us going on the bench. When you see a guy of his talent level and his stature doing stuff like that, you might as well get on board or you might as



well not even go out there."

Leading into the Capitals' dressing room at their home arena, there is a large glass pane that has etched on it all the trophies Ovechkin has won. It's basically an homage to the greatest player in franchise history. But it's not as though the Capitals have been bereft of major trophy winners over the years without Ovechkin. Langway won back-to-back Norris Trophies. Doug Jarvis won a Selke. Bryan Murray, Bruce Boudreau and Trotz have all been named coach of the year, and Jim Carey, Olaf Kolzig and Braden Holtby are Vezina winners. The

Ovechkin wall is right there in the hallway the Capitals use every time they go out to and come off the ice and it's almost jarring.

It lists his three Hart Trophies, his single Art Ross Trophy as the league's scoring champion, his six (soon to be seven) Rocket Richard Trophies and his three Pearson (now Ted Lindsay) Awards. And that doesn't even include the Calder Trophy he won in 2006, which will now have to share space on his mantle with the Conn Smythe Trophy.

It is a dizzying array of individual awards and, until this spring, it was pretty

GAME 4

**CAPITAL ONE
ARENA
JUNE 4, 2018**



2-6



A GOOD QUESTION FOR

Washington coach Barry Trotz after Game 4 would've been, "Hey Barry, Alex Ovechkin, Evgeny Kuznetsov, T.J. Oshie, Braden Holtby and Nicklas Backstrom. If you had to vote for the Conn Smythe Trophy right now, how would you rank them?"

Trotz wouldn't have answered, of course. But the point would be to highlight that the Capitals' alpha males were taking over the Stanley Cup final. Game 4, a 6-2 victory that put Washington within one game of its first NHL championship, was a prime example.

Kuznetsov was a wizard with the puck and had four assists.

Oshie fought for every inch of the ice, opened the scoring and broke Colin Miller's nose on Washington's fifth goal. Backstrom had three assists.

Holtby was probably the game's least appreciated storyline. And even though Ovechkin had only one assist, he led all players on both teams with four shots.

Vegas actually carried the play early in Game 4, but, led by Holtby, the Capitals did not come even close to breaking.

"We knew they were going to come," Trotz said. "They talked about putting their game out, and they did. And they didn't get anything out of it, and we came out 3-0 in the first period. They had some opportunities, and they hit a post or two...but we converted on ours. And once we got past the first 10 minutes of that game, I thought we were fine. They had a pretty good level of urgency in their game...but when it mattered, we were able to get it done."

Holtby was outplaying the guy at the other end, full stop. Marc-Andre Fleury didn't deserve to be the fall guy, but he wasn't giving his team momentum-changing stops and stealing games the way he was while putting together a Conn Smythe Trophy portfolio in previous rounds.



COMING THROUGH

Ovechkin delivered big goals, blocked shots and hard hits throughout the playoffs and in the Cup final.



“ANYONE CAN SEE THAT WHEN HE'S ROLLING, THERE'S NOBODY WHO CAN STOP HIM. HE LEADS THE CHARGE — T.J. Oshie

much all Ovechkin had in his arsenal. He had won a Russian League championship with Pavel Datsyuk during the lockout year with Moscow Dynamo, and he has a World Junior Championship to go with three gold medals and two silvers at the World Championships, which basically is a testament to the Capitals' lack of success in the playoffs. His three trips to the Olympics have been disastrous, none worse than 2014 when the Russians finished fifth on home ice. And this year, Ovechkin was robbed of the chance to win a gold medal with the 'Olympic Athletes from Russia' team because of the NHL's decision to not attend the Winter Games. Meanwhile, Crosby was busy winning

everything in sight, and as every year passed, the notion that Ovechkin could not win a major championship grew.

Many hockey observers had thought the championship window for the Capitals had slammed shut and there was a chance Ovechkin would end his career as the greatest, most individually decorated player never to win a Stanley Cup. When Ovechkin came out in camp and said, "We're not going to suck this year," city officials in the District of Columbia could have been forgiven if they didn't start working on a parade permit in June.

Which takes us to Ovechkin's legacy. Even without a Stanley Cup, he was a slam-dunk Hall of Famer. He has more than 600 goals in an era during which scoring has not been terribly easy. No player has led the league in goals more times than Ovechkin has. Tampa Bay's Steven Stamkos, considered a premier sniper, has led the NHL in goals just once and tied for first another year. Ovechkin had more goal-scoring titles than that by his fourth season in the league. Think about that for a minute. The man for whom the goal-scoring tro-

phy is named led the league five times, as did Wayne Gretzky and Gordie Howe, the two greatest goal-scorers the game has ever seen when it comes to numbers. Phil Esposito did it six times, a mark that was passed this season when Ovechkin led the NHL with 49 goals.

But Richard, Howe, Gretzky and Esposito all have multiple Stanley Cups. Debate amongst yourselves whether or not it's fair, but one of the measures of a great player is whether or not he won a championship. What's the first thing you think about when Dionne's name comes up — that he was one of the greatest individual talents the game has ever seen or that he failed to win a Stanley Cup? Even early in his



career when Ovechkin was interviewed by this publication, in his broken English he acknowledged the need to win when he said, "Cups is Cups."

Denis Savard is in the Hall of Fame and was one of the most dynamic players of his generation. He won a Stanley Cup as a bit player with an overachieving Montreal Canadiens team in 1993. He celebrated with his teammates in street clothes because he was a healthy scratch in the clinching game. But he has his Cup. These things matter when you look back on the body of work of a player's career. You might not know or remember that a little-known defenseman by the name of Bob Turner was part of the Montreal Canadiens' five straight Stanley Cup teams

ons in life. And when I got that clarity, things started getting really calm and these guys started getting it. All the other stuff is superficial. What really matters is how you live your life."

But when you've already celebrated your 30th birthday and you're in the back end of a contract that is going to pay you a total of \$124 million, there are certain expectations. The Capitals spent much of the first 43 years of their existence in hockey's hinterland. Ovechkin changed all that the moment he set foot in Washington. The Capitals suddenly became one of the most popular teams in the NHL, they sold out every game with a sea of red sweaters with No. 8 on the back. The patience and hope that was there the first couple of years began

really listen to what people say about him. He's not oblivious to all the negativity that was directed toward him or the team, but I think a lot of guys would have caved a lot earlier. He didn't really care about that stuff. He just cared what the guys in the locker room thought about him."

Orpik has an interesting perspective on Ovechkin. He played against him in some of those epic battles when he was with the Penguins and before reaching the summit with him in Washington, lived with him through the trying times when the Capitals failed to meet expectations. "Because I played in Pittsburgh, there are guys there who say, 'There's no way this guy is a good guy,'" Orpik said. "And I'm like, 'No, no, I'm telling

“ I LOVE ALEX OVECHKIN AND HE DESERVED THIS. NO ONE WORKED HARDER AND WAS MORE LOYAL. HE'S A REALLY BEAUTIFUL PERSON – Ted Leonsis

in the 1950s, but you sure do when the player has a zero in the Stanley Cup column beside his name. With a championship, Ovechkin no longer has to worry about how his career will be seen. Without it, he would have been Ted Williams, Karl Malone or Dan Marino. "I would never define Alex Ovechkin or any player on awards because they're not what you really are," Trotz said. "They give you a label that you're a champion. I can tell you I've met a lot of people who are absolute champions and they don't have a Stanley Cup, an award, but they're champi-

to fade and the questions began to surface. Then the grumblings became louder. Perhaps it was even time for the Capitals to cut ties with their greatest player. "And I think that's exactly where the problem is," said defenseman Brooks Orpik. "All we're talking about is Ovie. We're not talking about Nicky (Backstrom) or (Braden) Holtby or (John) Carlson or whoever else was here because Alex is the highest-paid player and there's more attention paid to him. Maybe some of it was warranted, but the majority of it was unfair. Unless he's completely lying, he doesn't

you he's a great guy.' It's usually those guys you have battles with that you want to think they're bad guys. But then you're teammates with them and they're usually the guys you hang out with the most. There aren't a lot of secrets with him. What you see is what you get with 'O.' "

The man who signed Ovechkin to that contract has had many heart-to-heart conversations with his superstar. On the way back from the 2008 NHL Awards, when Ovechkin weighted down Leonsis' private jet with the Hart, Pearson, Art Ross and Rocket Richard Trophies, Leonsis talked to



FOR SO MANY YEARS, the Washington Capitals were supposed to win the Stanley Cup, but 2018 was not one of them. Yet there they stood after professional sports' most gruelling battle of attrition with 34.5 pounds of beautiful nickel and silver alloy above their heads. Caps coach Barry Trotz joked that defenseman Christian Djoos is so slight that the team had concerns he wouldn't be able to lift it.

With their 4-3 victory in Game 5, the Loveable Losers finally got it done. This team was not the best of the Alex Ovechkin era, but it was the best collection of personalities, the one most equipped to succeed where all the others had failed.

Since 1967-68, only two teams have won the Cup after trailing in each series: the 1991 Pittsburgh Penguins and the 2018 Capitals, who went from being focused on results in past years to actually caring about the process that led to them. "I just think our guys got pissed off," Trotz said. "They said, 'You know what? We don't care what anybody thinks or what everybody says,' and there were some nasty and ugly things said to some pretty exceptional people in our room, and we took it to heart. We said, 'We're going to dust ourselves off and stick it up everybody's rear end.' And we did."

The Golden Knights, the greatest expansion team in NHL history, who dominated the regular season and first three rounds of the playoffs, ran into a juggernaut that choked off their creativity and forced them to play a game to which they weren't accustomed. There is no shame in that. But even though very good days lay ahead for the Golden Knights, they'll be shaking their heads about this missed opportunity. There seems to be a notion that a team must lose before it can win – as the Capitals can attest.



Ovechkin about how all the individual accolades were wonderful, but they weren't going to get No. 41 checked off on his bucket list, which was to win a Stanley Cup. Seriously. Leonsis had a brush with death as a young man and staring down his mortality prompted him to make a list of 101 things he wanted to accomplish in life. Now that No. 41 is taken care of, Leonsis can start working on No. 84, which is to go into outer space. "What I'm so proud of with him is that, while on occasion he would get down in the dumps, his loyalty, his integrity, his fortitude and his real desire to do it with this team never waned," Leonsis said. "I love Alex Ovechkin, and he deserved this. No one worked harder and was more loyal. He's a really high-character, beautiful person. No one deserves it more."

The times that he didn't have his steely grip on the Cup, Alex Ovechkin was hugging people. His family, Back-

SILVER LINING

In the end, Ovechkin and the Caps embraced the challenge – and were rewarded with ultimate glory.

strom's parents, teammates. When Ovechkin's wife finally made her way to the ice, the two shared a passionate embrace and kiss. He talked about his brother, Sergei, who was killed in a car accident when Alex was just 10 and tears rolled down his face. "All the people in my family who passed away, they're watching me and they're supporting me from up above," he said. "I'm sure they're happy and they're smiling and they're very excited, too."

So exactly how great is it to be Alex Ovechkin these days? His wife is expecting the couple's first child, which means there will soon be a little one to whom Ovechkin can direct his passion. He's a genuine hero in both Washington and Russia, two places where he has always walked a fine line. Earlier this season, he came under fire when he announced his support for Russian president Vladimir Putin by establishing a social movement called PutinTeam. The predictable firestorm resulted and Ovechkin pulled back, saying he doesn't keep up with what's going on back home and is not terribly interested in politics. When asked before the final how big the Capitals' success was in Russia, he said with a smile, "Yeah, Vladimir Putin called me and wished me luck, you know. No, I'm just joking."

That was pretty much the only hiccup in this unpredictable season for Ovechkin. None of this was supposed to happen. None of it. Nobody predicted the Golden Knights would become one of the most surprising

stories in the history of professional sports.

Burned by years of under-achieving, few were picking the Capitals to do much of anything special this season. Or as Trotz put it, "This is one of the least likely teams to have success. And he's led it."

Whether or not you cheer for the Capitals or Ovechkin, it had to tug at your heart to see him so happy and so successful. A couple hours after the game, as Ovechkin walked through the lobby of the famed MGM Grand hotel, dressed in a pink shirt and khaki shorts with the Stanley Cup firmly in his grasp, it was clear the joy of the moment had not subsided. And it won't for a very long time. Not when you've waited this long to experience it.

Come to think of it, this might be habit-forming for Ovechkin and the Capitals. In the hours after winning the Stanley Cup, it certainly didn't look as though he was going to loosen his hold on it anytime soon. **H**

CUP IN PHOTOS

GAME 1

1. Marc-Andre Fleury walks the walk preparing to do what no one expected Vegas to do: host a Cup final game.
2. Every last gray hair on Alex Ovechkin's head reminds us how long he's waited to play for a championship.
3. Sin City doesn't do quiet. Pre-game festivities include a performance by rapper and Golden Knights nut Lil Jon.
4. Colin Miller feels like gettin' down after scoring Vegas' first Stanley Cup goal, one of many in a wild opener.
5. It's a near-KO for T.J., as the Capitals' Oshie explodes into the Golden Knights' Tomas Nosek.
6. Behemoth Tom Wilson takes the Caps on his back - and winds up on his back - after scoring in Game 1.
7. Game 1 gets so zany that tough guy Ryan Reaves scores. Elated linemate Pierre-Edouard Bellemare piles on.
8. A yawning cage stares at Nosek, who stares back after one-timing Game 1's winning goal past Braden Holtby.



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1: JEFF BOTTAR/NHLI VIA GETTY IMAGES; 2: PATRICK MCDERMOTT/NHLI VIA GETTY IMAGES; 3: ETHAN MILLER/GETTY IMAGES; 4: DAVE SANDFORD/NHLI VIA GETTY IMAGES



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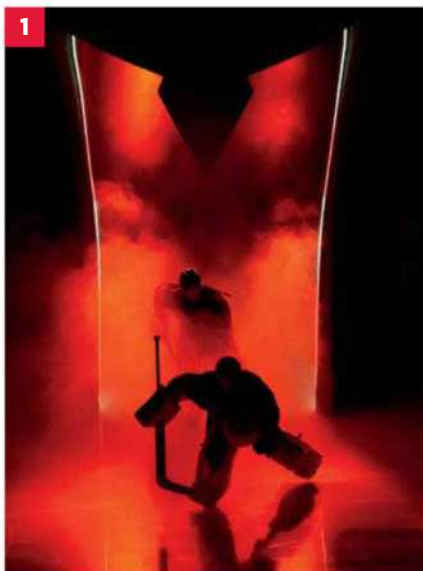


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5: DAVID BECKER/NHLI VIA GETTY IMAGES; 6: PATRICK MCDERMOTT/NHLI VIA GETTY IMAGES; 7: BRUCE BENNETT/GETTY IMAGES; 8: HARRY HOW/GETTY IMAGES



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CUP IN PHOTOS

GAME 2

1. Fleury casts a noble silhouette leading Vegas through a knight's mouth onto a frozen battlefield for Game 2 of the final.
2. A zebra tries to restrain two lions as Oshie trades face washes with the Golden Knights' Deryk Engelland.
3. No pain, no gain. Washington's Evgeny Kuznetsov wears the sacrifice on his face after absorbing a punishing hit in Game 2.
4. With Fleury way out of position, the Caps' Lars Eller enjoys a rare first-period "empty-netter" to tie the score 1-1.
5. Not even Brooks Orpik, middle, saw a Brooks Orpik goal coming, and his shocked teammates share the joy.
6. Cody Eakin literally can't save face, eating a mouthful of Chandler Stephenson as Vegas drops Game 2.
7. Desperate Holtby dives to rob Alex Tuch of the equalizer late in the third period. "The Save" is born, coming soon to postage stamps everywhere.

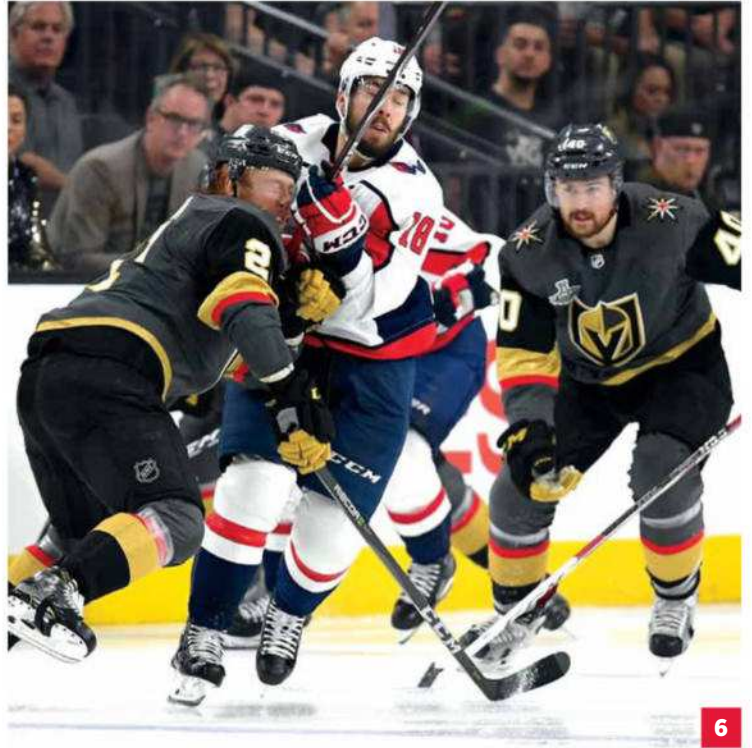
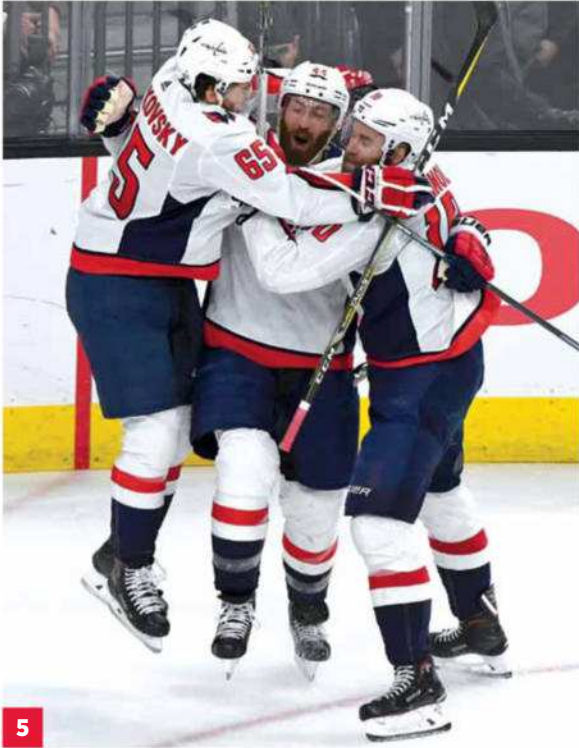
1: ETHAN MILLER/GETTY IMAGES; 2: PATRICK MODERMOTT/NHLI VIA GETTY IMAGES; 3: HARRY HOW/GETTY IMAGES; 4: DAVID BECKER/NHLI VIA GETTY IMAGES



STANLEY CUP® FINAL



2018



5: ETHAN MILLER/GETTY IMAGES; 6: HARRY HOW/GETTY IMAGES; 7: DAVE SANDFORD/NHLI VIA GETTY IMAGES



1

CUP IN PHOTOS

GAME 3

- 1. Quick, find Ovechkin. The Golden Knights can't in time, and he dives to roof Game 3's opening goal past Fleury.
- 2. In a season with a strange and unexpected Cup-final pairing, Sting and Shaggy onstage together feels right.
- 3. The only player to beat Holtby in Game 3: Holtby, whose giveaway hands Nosek an open net and free goal.
- 4. Vegas' Nosek backpedals while the Caps' Stephenson imposes brute force. In other words, a microcosm of Game 3.
- 5. Nightmare fuel for the Golden Knights: the too-frequent image of Kuznetsov's bird-wing celebration.
- 6. Vegas has no answer for the Caps' consistent crease-crashing, and Fleury winds up battered as a result.
- 7. The Capitals' bench and fans erupt with the realization they're leading a Cup final series for the first time ever.
- 8. Devante Smith-Pelly soaks in the pleasure of delivering Game 3's third-period dagger for a two-goal lead.



2



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1-3+4: GREGORY SHAMUS/GETTY IMAGES; 2: DAVE SANDFORD/NHL VIA GETTY IMAGES



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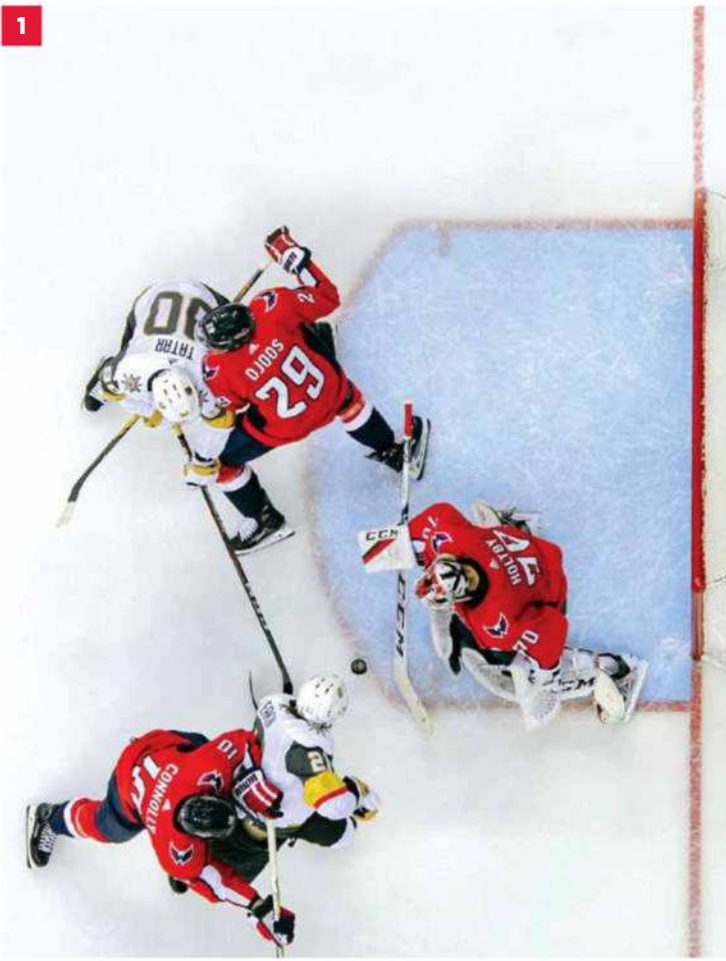


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1: MARK GOLDMAN/ICON SPORTSWIRE VIA GETTY IMAGES; 2+3: DAVE SANDFORD/NHLI VIA GETTY IMAGES



4



5



6

CUP IN PHOTOS

GAME 4

1. Eakin drives the net as his Golden Knights gallop into Game 4 with urgency, but if Holtby can see it, he stops it.
2. Bellemare doesn't have the luxury of picking on someone his own size, so the Vegas fourth-liner instead takes a run at mighty Wilson.
3. You have to be good to be lucky and lucky to be good. Holtby's desperate stretch is too late, but this puck clangs off the post.
4. After unloading a bomb of a slapshot from the point, Capitals defenseman John Carlson doesn't even have to look...
5. ...while Fleury wishes he could've seen the rocket. Instead, a little black blur ends up buried in his net.
6. Insult to injury: a collision with Oshie breaks Miller's nose, and the play ends with a Washington goal.
7. Wilson gets a good sniff of Reaves' glove, but the smell of the Cup is stronger as the Capitals win Game 4.



7

4: JEFF BOTTARI/NHLI VIA GETTY IMAGES; 5+7: DAVE SANDFORD/NHLI VIA GETTY IMAGES; 6: BRUCE BENNETT/GETTY IMAGES

CUP IN PHOTOS

GAME 5

1. Jakub Vrana turns up the torque on his stick before unloading a wrister for Game 5's opening goal. Ready...aim...

2. Walls. People. You name it and Brett Connolly's Caps will run through it. The target: who else? Poor Miller.

3. Bellemare is the stapler, Dmitry Orlov the staple. Five games into the series, the net-front battles ooze hatred.

4. How do you leave Ovechkin alone at the left post, a.k.a. his zip code? He makes Vegas pay on the power play.

5. A work of art? No. But a tying goal, in which David Perron piles into the Caps' net, is beautiful to Tomas Tatar.

6. The camera lens reaches a diving Smith-Pelly in time. Fleury doesn't. The Caps tie the game 3-3 in the third.



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1-3: HARRY HOW/GETTY IMAGES; 4: DAVE SANDFORD/NHLI VIA GETTY IMAGES

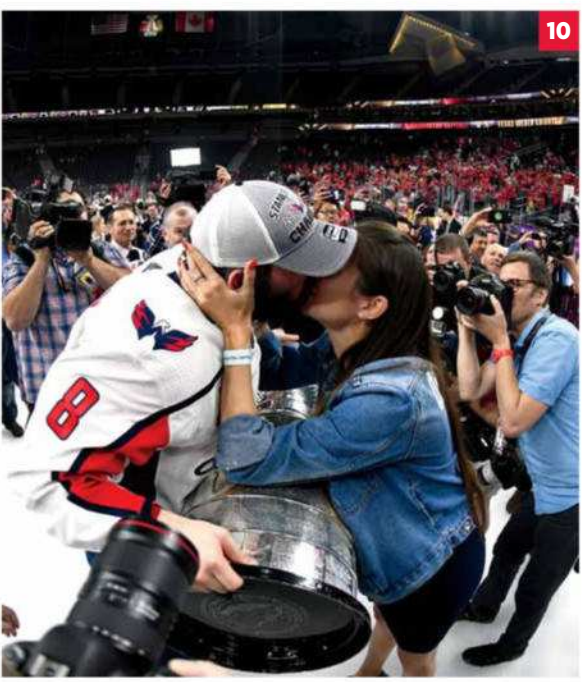
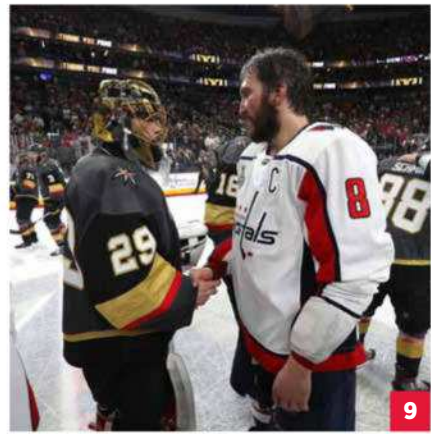


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5: PATRICK MCDERMOTT/NHLI VIA GETTY IMAGES; 6: HARRY HOW/GETTY IMAGES

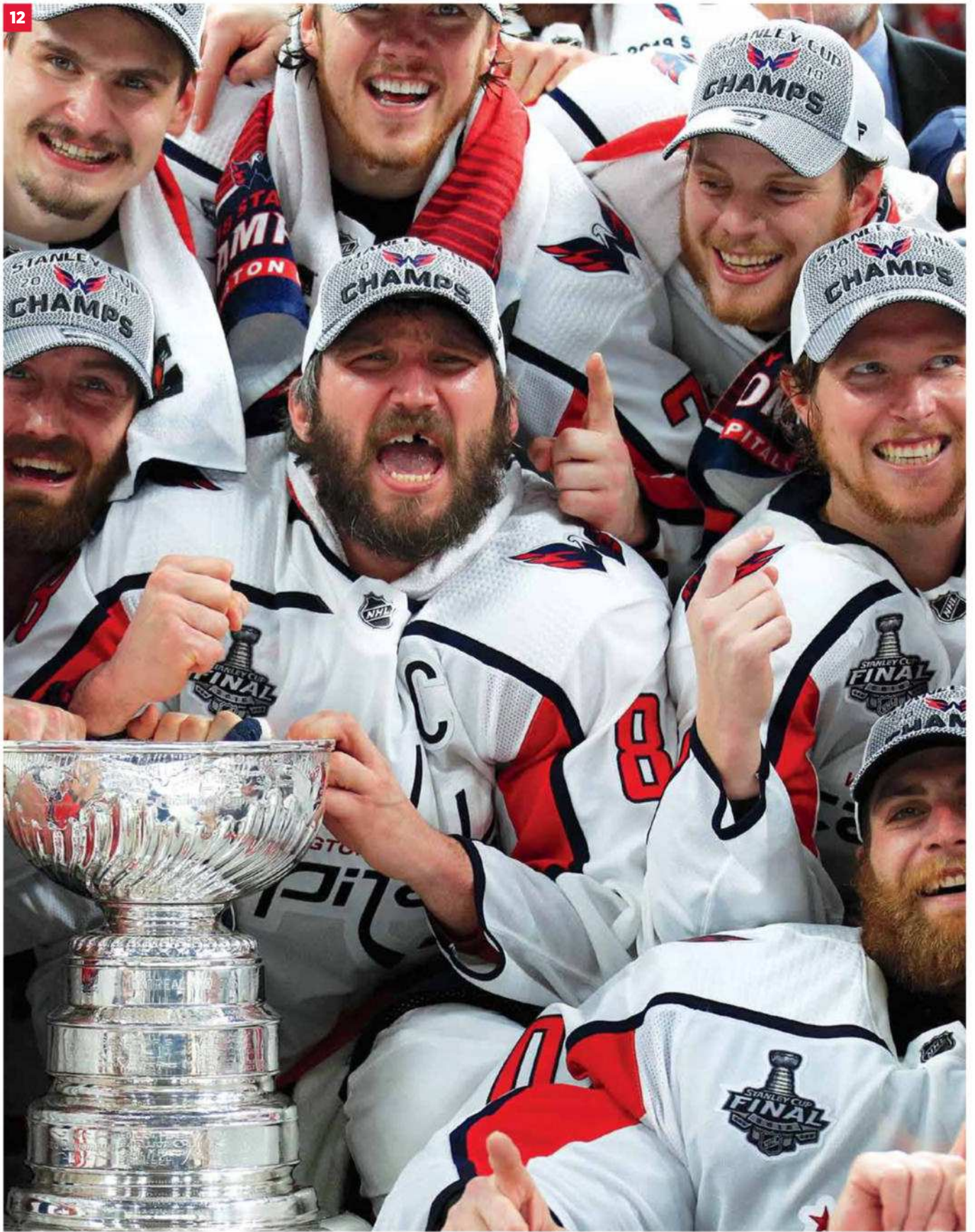


CUP IN PHOTOS

GAME 5

- 7.** The ecstatic Caps barely know what to do with themselves after Eller's go-ahead goal. Is this real life?
- 8.** Ovechkin and coach Barry Trotz: from two of hockey's best without a Cup to two of hockey's best, period.
- 9.** A heartfelt handshake between Fleury, the would-be playoff MVP, and Ovechkin, the official playoff MVP.
- 10.** The Stanley Cup. A baby on the way. A kiss. Ovie and wife Anastasia have everything they ever dreamed of.
- 11.** Capitals players, executives and staff share the dizzying high of lifting the Cup. It was a true team effort.
- 12.** It's a sea of grizzled smiles as the Capitals learn the longer you wait, the sweeter a championship tastes.

7: PATRICK MCDERMOTT/NHLI VIA GETTY IMAGES; 8: DAVE SANDFORD/NHLI VIA GETTY IMAGES; 9-11: HARRY HOW/GETTY IMAGES



DAVE SANDFORD/NHL VIA GETTY IMAGES



Top 10 MOMENTS

of 2017-18

BY RYAN KENNEDY

Nothing impacted the hockey world this season, or perhaps any other season, more than the Humboldt Broncos bus crash. It touched lives in communities across North America and spawned an outpouring of emotion from coast-to-coast, from novice hockey to the NHL. In terms of magnitude it's undeniably the hockey story of the year.

In the NHL, it was a remarkable season for surprises. The Stanley Cup final pitted the best expansion team of all-time, in any sport, against a club and a superstar most had written off after so many years of playoff disappointment. Our top 10 NHL moments are dotted with tears, some from pain, some from joy. All are from the heart.





NO. 1 > VEGAS GOLDEN KNIGHTS

Nothing went according to script in Vegas for the Golden Knights' inaugural season, and with one tragic exception, that was good news. Due to one of the worst mass shootings in American history, the Vegas home opener was a somber affair, with a tribute to those affected and Las Vegas resident/defenseman Deryk Engelland taking the mic before the game to deliver thoughtful words to the crowd.

The Golden Knights won that game and many more in their shocking run. After taking eight of their first 10 games and using three different goalies to do it, Vegas became one of the most intimidating places to have a road game in the NHL, with the 'Vegas Flu' becoming a thing for opponents not used to the city's 24-hour charms.



A roster that raised zero eyebrows during the expansion draft turned out to be fine-tuned for today's NHL, with GM George McPhee assembling a speedy, responsible and talented bunch of castoffs that would end up winning the Pacific Division and ran roughshod through the West in the playoffs.



NO. 2 > WASHINGTON

In the same season Alex Ovechkin notched career goal No. 600, the Washington Capitals accomplished several things they had never done during the 'Great 8' era. First and most importantly, they brought home the Stanley Cup for the first time in franchise history, beating the Golden Knights in an "upset" in the final (Vegas was the odds-on favorite heading in).

And the fact the Caps knocked off archrival Pittsburgh in the second round made the victory all the more meaningful.



Ovechkin led the charge from the regular season on, doing some of his finest work while wearing the captain's 'C.' He bounced back from a so-so 2016-17 campaign by putting up 49 goals to earn his fifth Rocket Richard Trophy in six years (and seventh of his career). Though the Penguins were obviously fatigued after two straight title runs, the Capitals get full marks for dispatching Sidney Crosby's crew in six games, banishing the notion that Washington would always choke against their rival.



NO. 3 > SEDINS ANNOUNCE RETIREMENT



APRIL 2, 2018 – Ever since GM Brian Burke traded for the right to pick second and third in the 1999 draft, twins Henrik and Daniel Sedin have been an integral part of the Canucks. The superb Swedes helped the team get to the Stanley Cup final in 2011, and with their immaculate vision and beguiling chemistry, the linemates set nearly every offensive record in franchise history over the course of 18 years in Vancouver.

When it was time to announce their retirements, the Sedins did so with class – the same way they did everything else in their careers. Citing a need to spend more time with their families, the Sedins decided to step away from the game, but gave fans a few more opportunities to see them live before all was said and done. In the most fitting ending to a career marked by excellence, Daniel scored the OT-winner in the twins' final home game, with Henrik naturally getting an assist. It was Daniel's second goal of the contest against Arizona, and it blew the roof off the joint.

Both players finished their careers with more than 1,000 points, an Olympic gold medal and an Art Ross Trophy, while Henrik also had a Hart Trophy and Daniel nabbed a Ted Lindsay Award. Next stop is the Hall of Fame.

NO. 5 > ANDREW COGLIANO

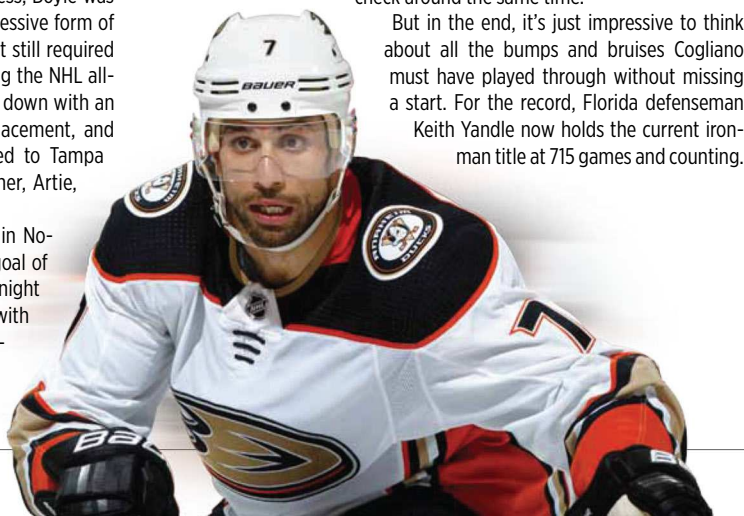


JANUARY 14, 2018 – Of all the ways Andrew Cogliano's ironman streak was going the end, a suspension was the least likely. The Anaheim Ducks veteran had never accrued more than 45 penalty minutes in any given NHL season, but a late and questionable hit that involved head contact on Los Angeles' Adrian Kempe saw Cogliano draw a two-game ban from the league.

The suspension snapped Cogliano's consecutive games streak at 830, ranking him fourth all-time behind Steve Larmer (884), Garry Unger (914) and Doug Jarvis, the champ at 964 games. (Jarvis' streak, interestingly enough, ended on a healthy scratch.) Cogliano was understandably emotional in the wake of the suspension, and the two games served were the first he had missed in his entire NHL career. The versatile left winger broke into the league with the Edmonton Oilers in 2007-08 and had never missed a game until the suspension.

Making the situation all the more sticky was the fact the man behind the ban, NHL department of player safety head George Parros, is a former teammate from Anaheim. Parros was forced to vigorously defend the suspension to both the Ducks and the public, particularly since Dustin Brown of the Kings was not suspended for a dodgy cross-check around the same time.

But in the end, it's just impressive to think about all the bumps and bruises Cogliano must have played through without missing a start. For the record, Florida defenseman Keith Yandle now holds the current ironman title at 715 games and counting.

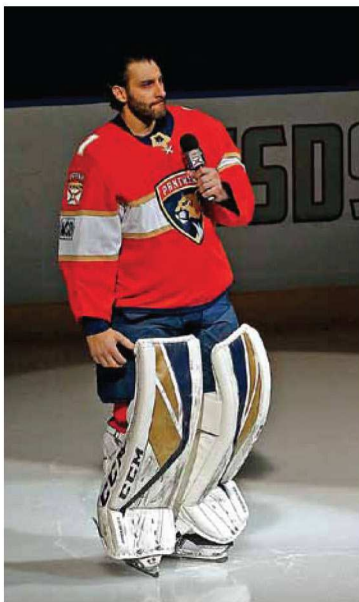


NO. 4 > LUONGO'S STIRRING SPEECH



FEBRUARY 22, 2018 – In the wake of one of the most publicized school shootings in American history, Florida Panthers goaltender Roberto Luongo stepped up to the microphone and spoke from the heart before the team hosted Washington.

Luongo talked about living in Parkland for the past 12 years. He praised the teachers of Marjory Stoneman Douglas and lauded the students for their bravery. It was an emotional address, but a fitting one that represented how many were feeling at the time. The Panthers and other members of the hockey world (such as Philadelphia's Shayne Gostisbehere, who attended that high school) embraced the school in the aftermath, with members of the Eagles hockey team representing the school as a whole. In what became a bittersweet coda to the tragedy, that hockey team ended up winning the Florida state title just 10 days after the mass shooting.



NO. 6 > BRIAN BOYLE



NOVEMBER 1, 2017 – For New Jersey, it was a season of triumph. A pre-season afterthought in the Metro Division, the Devils rode an MVP performance by Taylor Hall to an unlikely playoff berth, with help from an unlikely cast that included Brian Gibbons and Keith Kinkaid.

But when it comes to feel-good stories, it was hard to beat Brian Boyle, the giant shutdown center who not only had one of his best offensive seasons, but did so after missing the first 10 games of the season due to leukemia. To compound the stress, Boyle was told a few days later that his two-year-old son, Declan, might have an aggressive form of cancer. He was later diagnosed with a different non-cancerous malady that still required treatment, but Boyle was all set to spend time with his son in Boston during the NHL all-star break when teammate Hall went down with an injury. Boyle was chosen as his replacement, and with his family's blessing, he headed to Tampa Bay. Joining him on the trip? His father, Artie, himself a cancer survivor.

Boyle also had a special moment in November, when he scored his second goal of the season, on Hockey Fights Cancer night versus Vancouver. After celebrating with his teammates, the religious Boyle poignantly looked up to the skies.



NO. 7 > COLORADO CLINCHES

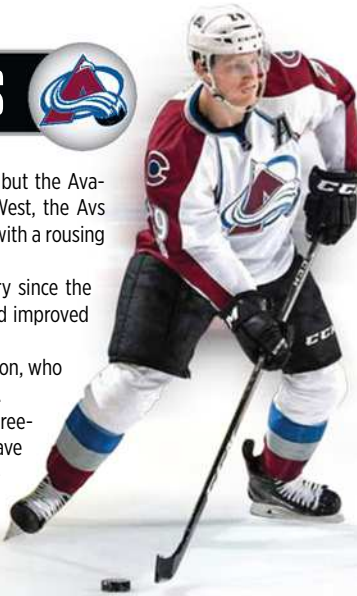


APRIL 7, 2018 – It took until the very last game of the season, but the Avalanche got there. Deadlocked for the final playoff spot in the West, the Avs faced St. Louis in a winner-gets-in scenario and came out on top with a rousing 5-2 victory. And this was no ordinary wild-card win.

Last year's edition of the Avalanche was the worst NHL entry since the 2004-05 lockout. Season over season, this year's Colorado squad improved a mind-boggling 47 points from 2016-17's total of 48.

At the helm of the turnaround was star center Nathan MacKinnon, who evolved his speed game and put up a Hart Trophy-worthy season.

GM Joe Sakic pulled off a coup in his biggest trade to date, a three-way affair with Nashville and Ottawa that saw Matt Duchene leave Denver in return for a king's ransom of picks and prospects. Losing a talented center could have stalled the Avs, but they kept on chugging behind MacKinnon and linemates Mikko Rantanen and Gabriel Landeskog, helping erase the ugly memories of the season before and even winning two playoff games against Nashville in the first round.



NO. 9 > SCOTT FOSTER

MARCH 29, 2018 – It's the stuff of Disney movies and the reason pro sports can still surprise. The Chicago Blackhawks were already without starter Corey Crawford for a game against Winnipeg when backup Anton Forsberg got hurt during a pre-game ritual. Third-stringer Collin Dellia (making his NHL debut) played most of the game – until he got hurt, too. That paved the way for Foster, the arena's emergency goalie, to jump in. An accountant by day, the beer-leaguer did play for Western Michigan University, but that was a decade ago. Foster stopped all seven shots he faced to preserve a Chicago win, while his beer-league buddies watched in awe from a local rink.

In the end, the 26-year-old Foster saw a little more than 14 minutes of action, stopping shots from Tyler Myers, Paul Stastny and Dustin Byfuglien, among others. Needless to say, Foster was mobbed by the Hawks when the final buzzer sounded in the 3-1 victory, while coach Joel Quenneville, in his post-game availability, could only chuckle about the kismet surrounding the accountant.



NO. 8 > CONNOR McDAVID

OCTOBER 4, 2017 – There was a lot of anticipation and excitement surrounding the Edmonton Oilers heading into the season and their boy captain was the main reason. In the season-opener against the archrival Calgary Flames, Connor McDavid lived up to those expectations by dousing the competition for a hat trick in a 3-0 win on home ice.

The second marker was the gem of the bunch, as No. 97 caused a turnover in his own zone, then blew past three Flames en route to a breakaway goal on netminder Mike Smith. The idea of McDavid doing almost everything for the Oilers that night became an unfortunate harbinger, as Edmonton underperformed all season, missing the playoffs and not even really coming close. Outside of McDavid, the team was slow and goalie Cam Talbot couldn't handle the load. McDavid was excellent throughout, however, finishing the season with a league-best 108 points and winning his second straight Art Ross Trophy.

Alas, the woefulness of his teammates undermined McDavid's chances at a second consecutive Hart Trophy, which in itself opened up a huge debate in hockey circles: does a player's team need to make the playoffs in order for him to win the Hart? Can a year without a post-season berth have any true value in the NHL? Voters made their opinions heard, and McDavid was not a finalist for MVP honors. But watch out next season...the kid doesn't settle for losing.

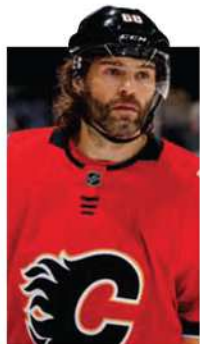


NO. 10 > JAROMIR JAGR WAIVED BY CALGARY



JANUARY 29, 2018 – One of the most legendary careers in NHL history likely ended this season when the Calgary Flames waived 45-year-old Jaromir Jagr. The first-ballot Hall of Famer tallied one goal and seven points in 22 games for Calgary, where his lack of foot speed finally caught up to the sharp mind and big body that had dominated for so many years.

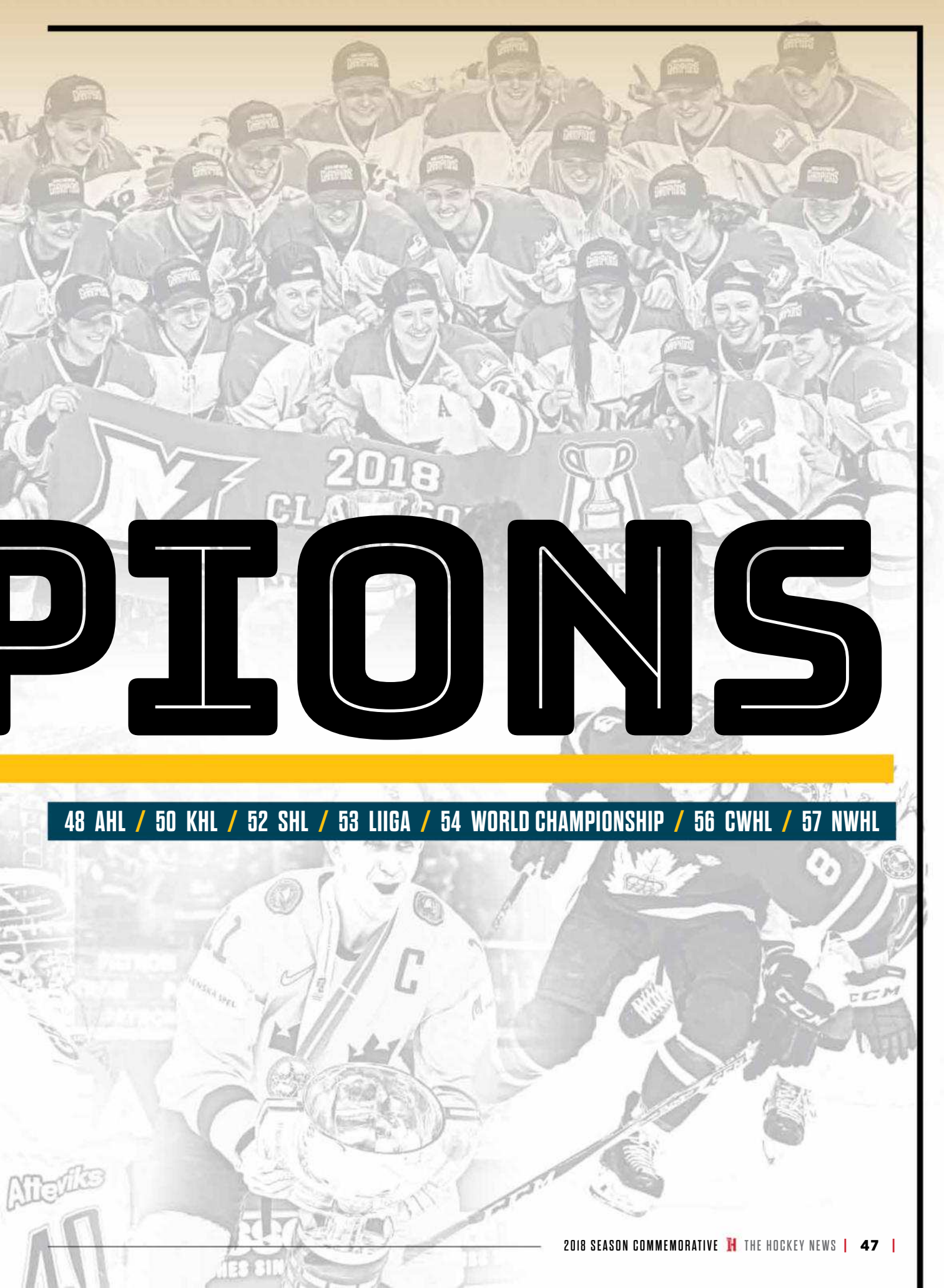
Of course, Jagr was not finished with hockey. He ended up going back home to finish out the season with Kladno, the team in which he also has an ownership stake. But after two Cups, an Olympic gold, five Art Ross Trophies and a Hart Trophy, Jagr's NHL ledger can probably be settled up. He was one of a kind and a model for younger players in his twilight, a tireless worker who famously got in extra practice whenever he could. He finished with 1,921 career points, second all-time, and just 34 games shy of all-time leader Gordie Howe (1,767).





THE CHAMP ISSUE

EVERY MISSING TOOTH, DROP OF BLOOD AND BEAD OF SWEAT GO TOWARD ONE COMMON GOAL: SMILING IN THE MIRROR AT THE END OF A LONG SEASON KNOWING YOU BEAT EVERYBODY ELSE. THESE ARE THE INSPIRING STORIES OF HOCKEY'S BEST TEAMS IN 2017-18



CHAMPIONS

48 AHL / 50 KHL / 52 SHL / 53 LIIGA / 54 WORLD CHAMPIONSHIP / 56 CWHL / 57 NWHL



CHAMPIONS

MORE FARM WORK

Dermott was full-time with the Leafs since January, but the experience of an AHL playoff run will only help.

back tips for these guys and help out as much as you can," Dermott said. "Our team was doing well enough without Johnny and I, but I felt we came back and got in the groove."

Johnsson already looks like the type of skilled and versatile winger who can play up and down an NHL lineup as needed, but if there's one glaring deficiency the Leafs need to address heading into next season, it's on defense. Dermott will have a regular role next year, but it will be interesting to see how soon his Marlies defense partner joins him. Timothy Liljegren, the Leafs' first-round pick (17th overall) last summer, made his North American debut this season and is still a teenager. But as a right-shot blueliner with mobility and skill, he's looking like a great future asset. "Stick skills, he's got me beat," Dermott said. "He's a young guy, so he's got some learning to do, but the way he has learned already, it's nothing to worry about. He's someone to be excited for. Soon enough he'll be up there for sure and making a great impact."

Fundamentally, it's the skating of Liljegren and Dermott that make them so intriguing right now. While neither put up a ton of points in the AHL post-season, they used their speed to nullify chances in their own zone – and given how potent the Marlies' forwards are, offense from the back end wasn't needed as much. Their defensive awareness also helped the team hold on to last-minute leads. "Backing off the gas pedal is the last thing you want to do," Dermott said. "Some teams back off and almost let the team get in the zone. With the skill we have, we don't have to do that. We can pressure them and force them to get the puck out of their zone instead of us getting it out of ours."

All this is great experience for youngsters such as Dermott and Liljegren, and a title would really validate the work new Maple Leafs GM Kyle Dubas has done with the team's AHL squad in recent years. The youngsters bubbling up from below could really help take the unit to the next level in the near future. Along with Dermott and Liljegren, there's the steady Justin Holl, who made quite the impression with the Leafs when he scored goals in both games of a call-up during the season. And while two games

is a small sample size, the late-bloomer was also a possession monster. Holl and Swedish free agent Calle Rosen were both solid on the Marlies' blueline in the playoffs, too.

No doubt the Maple Leafs will be in the hunt for more defense this summer, whether by free agency or trade. But the cupboard isn't looking as bare as it once did, and the Marlies' run through the post-season is proving that concept. **H**

CALDER CUP FINAL

THE DEEP BLUELINE

QUARTET OF BLUELINERS WILL GIVE THE LEAFS OPTIONS AND MAYBE EVEN TURN A WEAKNESS INTO A STRENGTH **BY RYAN KENNEDY**

A MIDST ALL THE FRONT-OFFICE moves in Toronto this spring, fans of the Maple Leafs at least got to watch some more hockey with an eye on the future. The AHL's Toronto Marlies stormed into the Calder Cup final against the Texas Stars, riding a nine-game playoff win streak into the series. (Editor's note: The AHL championship was still ongoing when this issue went to press.)

The Marlies were the best team in the league this year, pretty much post-to-post. Toronto won 16 of its first 20 games and finished first overall in the regular season. While the first round of the playoffs against Utica went the full distance, reinforcements in the form of defenseman Travis Dermott and left winger Andreas Johnsson got the team back on top, kicking off that undefeated run to the final. It's bittersweet, but the Maple Leafs' first-round playoff loss to the Boston Bruins was a boon for the Marlies. "Both 'Derms' and 'Johnny' were huge parts of our team when they were here before," said coach Sheldon Keefe. "They're a big reason why we are who we are as a team."

Johnsson and Dermott both showed great potential in their NHL call-ups this year, and getting time in The Show helped turbo-charge their AHL playoff run. "You get to experience the next level, and you try to bring



SLICK STICKWORK

Liljegren's abilities with the puck caught the attention of his teammates. "He's got me beat," Dermott said.

CALDER CUP FINAL

SLOW DOWN TO SPEED UP

WITH THE GOAL OF MAKING BAYREUTHER AN NHLER, COACHES DIALED BACK HIS GAME. IT PAID OFF IN SPADES **BY STEPHEN MESERVE**



GAVIN BAYREUTHER DIDN'T TAKE the traditional path to becoming an NHL prospect.

Never drafted, Bayreuther emerged as a top NCAA free agent defenseman last year after his senior season with St. Lawrence University came to a close. "I definitely took the longer route compared to other prospects," he said. "I was always the underdog. I was barely recruited to college and kind of just made my way up the ranks."

He signed with the Dallas Stars and emerged as a key player in Texas' unexpected run to the Calder Cup final. (Editor's note: The AHL championship was still ongoing when this issue went to press.) "It was an eye-opener," Bayreuther said. "But the more games you have, the more lessons you learn. Now that I'm a full year in, I feel like I'm hitting my stride and playing with some confidence."

Getting to that confidence level was a patient exercise in slowing down to ultimately speed up. Bayreuther played a strong offensive game in college, but the tools he had used needed tweaking at the pro level. "(Defending is) where I struggled, but I knew

TRUST EXERCISE

Bayreuther chose the Stars over several other NHL suitors. Why? He believed he'd be in good hands.

that coming here," he said. "Management and coaches knew that, and they've done a great job making me focus on that. They made sure I earned that respect and trust before I was given other opportunities."

Texas assistant coach Karl Taylor was a crucial piece of that puzzle. "(Gavin) started the year a little slow, trying to do too much," he said. "We were able to back him off a little bit and get him focused on how to defend properly, not worry about points and scoring."

Accepting that type of feedback can be hard for anyone, especially someone who was heavily recruited by multiple NHL teams out of college. Bayreuther took it in stride, knowing that everything Taylor was doing was toward the greater goal of making him an

NHL defenseman. In fact, it was Texas' approach to coaching that helped convince Bayreuther to sign with the Stars. His college coach, Mark Morris, had worked with Taylor when both were in the Los Angeles Kings' system and put in a good word. General manager Jim Nill and player development co-ordinator Rich Peverley took it from there. "It felt right here," Bayreuther said. "Everyone seemed like they were extra caring. St. Lawrence alum Rich Peverley and Jim Nill were compassionate and made it more personal. It made me realize that I'd be in good hands here and that I could trust this organization."

Texas put Bayreuther, 24, on the power play in his first game out of college when he was on an amateur tryout in the spring of 2017, and he potted his first professional goal that night. But early in the 2017-18 season, the Stars took the native of Canaan,

N.H., off the power play to concentrate more on his defensive game. That helped Bayreuther improve his game by stripping it down to its most essential elements and building it back up by degrees.

The players who have come through Texas before him paint a picture as well. Taylor noted that current NHL defensemen John Klingberg and Stephen Johns both had similar things to work on when they came through the AHL. "As long as (Gavin) knows the progression is still going where he wants to go, he'll buy in pretty quick," Taylor said.

After a strong rookie season (seven goals, 32 points in 71 games), Bayreuther showed the strides he's made on the biggest stage in the Calder Cup final. In hostile territory, his third-period power-play bomb in Game 2 was the game-winner, ending a home winning streak for the Marlies that stretched all the way back to March of the regular season. "I've learned that every shift is important," he said. "Focus and being prepared for games is beyond important. You make one lapse, and it can ruin the way you play, your mood, your swing. You've gotta hammer the nail, play harder and be focused all the time." **H**

GAGARIN CUP

PLAYING THE SPOILER

THE KHL CHAMPIONSHIP WAS SUPPOSED TO COME DOWN TO TWO TEAMS. AK BARS KAZAN WASN'T ONE OF THEM **BY MATT LARKIN**

I MAGINE IF THE NEW York Yankees or Golden State Warriors, on top of being ridiculously rich and stacked with superstar players, also had the backing of U.S. president Donald Trump and were accused of having the season fixed to hand them the championship. That's the magnitude of alleged craziness happening in the KHL right now. The juggernaut is SKA St. Petersburg, unofficially known



as Russian president Vladimir Putin's team, loaded with a monster payroll and accused by Russian reporter Slava Malamud of trying to "fix" the Gagarin Cup playoffs so the officials would call things in the team's favor. The closest competition is the almost-as-invincible CSKA Moscow, a.k.a the Red Army. Both teams opened the season bursting with

expensive, high-end talent, set up as the "feeder" squads for the 'Olympic Athlete from Russia' team in Pyeongchang. They combined to supply all but two members of the Winter Games team, which went on to win gold.

It would've been natural, then, for other KHL teams to feel like the Gagarin Cup was a foregone conclusion. It would go to St. Petersburg, armed with Ilya Kovalchuk and Pavel Datsyuk, or Red Army, boasting Mikhail Grigorenko and Kirill Kaprizov. But that's not how the members of Ak Bars Kazan saw things. They relished the chance to stick it to the league's privileged and powerful.

"It's always pretty big between teams like us, CSKA and St. Petersburg," said Ak Bars right winger Jiri Sekac, the team's top scorer in the regular season. "Those games are fun to watch and even fun for us. I don't think it's just me, but players around the league just want to show them that they're not the best, even if they have the best paycheques and put a lot of money in. You could say it makes us a little more motivated."

The playoff bracket did Ak Bars a favor by pitting the beastly St. Petersburg and Red Army head-to-head in the Western Conference final, with Red Army pulling off the upset and advancing to face Ak Bars



SURPRISE ENDING

Ak Bars upset CSKA Moscow in the KHL final, employing a rope-a-dope strategy and preying on mistakes.

for the Gagarin Cup. The Kazan squad was an underdog, 24 points behind CSKA in the regular season, but Ak Bars had an underrated group, including Sekac, a former NHLer, plus

freshly added blueliner Andrei Markov, Sekac's former teammate with the Montreal Canadiens. Markov, still a good puck-mover at 39, had a huge impact on his new team. He logged major minutes in the playoffs and was a calming influence, especially with the non-Russian import players. Sekac jokes that Markov is more Canadian than Russian nowadays, and Canadian Rob Klinkhammer confirms Markov even has a Canadian passport now.

Ak Bars still needed a slingshot to have any hope of bringing down Goliath, and they got it in the form of a specific strategy from coach Zinetula Bilyaletdinov. They would play the rope-a-dope game. "We would basically sit back the whole game and wait for mistakes, wait for one mistake, most likely," Sekac said. "Nobody was risking anything. We were just playing safe the whole time, and that's what brought us success."

Klinkhammer calls Ak Bars "the most structured team in the KHL" and felt a trapping, "mid-2000s NHL" approach architected by Bilyaletdinov was the deciding factor. The scores reflected the game plan. Ak Bars took the series in five games, winning 2-1, 2-1, 3-1 and 1-0. They averaged just two goals in those victories but gave up less than a goal against per game. The only contest in which both teams scored more than

ROMAN KRUCHIN/HOCKEY HALL OF FAME



twice, Game 3, was the only game Ak Bars lost, 3-2 in overtime. The lockdown approach worked best, and Ak Bars scored a monster-upset championship for their first Gagarin Cup title since 2010. Klinkhammer scored the only goal in the deciding game. Afterward, he felt a surge of emotion he didn't see coming. "It was amazing," he said. "I wasn't sure how I'd feel about winning the Cup. Obviously it would be a huge accomplishment. But I didn't realize I'd feel like it was such an accomplishment. I'm never going to win the Stanley Cup now, so this is my Stanley Cup. That goal, that night, that whole playoff run, I'll always remember."

Also burned into Klinkhammer's brain: the post-game celebration, which was distinctly "KHL" and differed from anything you'd see in North America. "There were break dancers and B-boys, and two guys straight out of the movie *Cocktail*, spinning bottles and doing flips and catches and stuff like that," he said. "There's karaoke. There's this light show where they're dressed up like characters from the movie *Tron*. The live entertainment is something we're not used to, but it was pretty interesting to see."

So what come next for Ak Bars? Klinkhammer, 31, isn't sure how much longer he'll play, and Sekac, 26, has just one year left on his KHL deal. But the allure of clutching the Gagarin Cup and trying to keep it away from fat cats St. Petersburg and Red Army as long as possible might be too much fun for anyone to walk away from. **H**

GAGARIN GLORY

Ak Bars' Gagarin Cup celebrations featured break dancers, karaoke and over-the-top entertainment.



SHL

SUPREME SWEDE

PETTERSSON'S MIND-BOGGLINGLY DOMINANT SEASON PROPELS VAXJO ON TITLE-RUN ROMP. GET EXCITED, CANUCKS FANS

BY UFFE BODIN

EXPECTATIONS WERE CERTAINLY HIGH for Vancouver Canucks prospect Elias Pettersson after he went fifth overall in last summer's NHL draft. But this season's results were still beyond anyone's wildest dreams. It was a Cinderella story in an unconventional sense.

After making the move from Timrå of the Allsvenskan, Sweden's second-tier league, to powerhouse Vaxjö of the Swedish League, Pettersson needed a little time to get going. He didn't score in the first month of the season, but after finally registering his first SHL goal against the Malmö Redhawks on Oct. 19, he went on a tear that pretty much lasted the rest of the campaign.

When the dust settled, Pettersson had not only won the scoring title, but he also broke Kent Nilsson's 42-year-old record for most points by a junior-aged player in the SHL. Pettersson, 19, ended up with 56 points in 44 games.

And he was far from done. After a disappointing loss to Team Canada in the gold-medal game at the World Junior Championship in Buffalo, he finally got to experience glory as he led Vaxjö to its second Swedish League championship. He racked up 10 goals and 19 points in 13 games as his dominant team only lost once throughout the playoffs and swept Skellefteå AIK in the final, outscoring them 20-1 in the process. "This is what I've dreamt and had chills about," said Pettersson as he raised the Le Mat Trophy. "It's just enormous joy. Happiness. This is what we worked for all year long, and now we're champions. It's incredible."

Goaltender Viktor Andren, 24, was the other big hero for Vaxjö. He posted three shutouts in the final while filling in for the team's injured starter, former NHLer Viktor Fasth. "This was something I could never have dreamt about when the season started," Andren said. "It's hard to comprehend what we managed to achieve."

Pettersson was awarded the Stefan Liv Memorial Trophy as playoff MVP. He then added more hardware as he was also voted the SHL's rookie of the year, forward of the year and league MVP at the SHL Awards following the season.



ALL THE TROPHIES!

Pettersson grabbed the SHL championship trophy, as well as playoff MVP, season MVP, top rookie and best forward.

His year ended on a bittersweet note, however, as he broke his thumb during the World Championship in Copenhagen. That meant he missed the end of the tournament as Sweden won gold for the second consecutive year. Consolation came soon afterward when he signed an entry-level contract with the Canucks, paving the way for an NHL debut next fall. **H**

ONE AND DONE

Andren shut out Skellefteå three times and gave up just a single goal in the other game during Vaxjö's sweep.



TOP: PETER ARVIDSON / BILDBYRÅN; BOTTOM: SIMON ELIASSON / BILDBYRÅN



GRITTY GOALIE

Vehvilainen has experienced the highest of highs – and lowest of lows – the past three seasons in Finland.

dealt a crushing blow at the end of the regular season when his father passed away suddenly.

The team rallied around him and, after the final buzzer in the championship game, captain Lasse Kukkonen invited Vehvilainen to hoist the trophy with him. “It’s been hard, naturally, but I hope Dad is proudly looking down on me,” said Vehvilainen to the Finnish media.

Added Karpas goalie coach Ari Hilli: “We’ve had long talks about life and there were moments where Veini told

me he simply didn’t have the energy to play. But I think being on the ice was still the best way for him to deal with his grief.”

Even before he lost his father, Vehvilainen’s past three seasons had been mentally exhausting. In 2015, he was voted to the under-18 World Championship all-star team but returned from the NHL draft without being selected. In 2016, he lost the World Junior Championship starting job to Kaapo Kahkonen when Finland – led by scoring forwards Patrik Laine, Sebastian Aho and Jesse Puljujarvi – won gold. In 2017, Vehvilainen, a native of Jyväskylä, posted the WJC’s best GAA (1.51) and SP (.931), but Finland ended up in the relegation group and fired its coach mid-tournament.

After two mediocre seasons on his hometown team in the Finnish league, he moved to Oulu in 2017 to back up former Toronto Maple Leafs prospect Jussi Rynnäs and to work with Hilli, who helped Niklas Backstrom and Pekka Rinne become NHL goaltenders. Vehvilainen came on from the bench in the second game of the 2018 playoffs and never looked back.

The breakout season wasn’t all just mental growth, according to Hilli. “He’s worked hard to get stronger and that shows in his game, he has better confidence,” Hilli said.

“I know I’ve done something right,” Vehvilainen said. “It’s also a reward for hard work.” **H**

LIIGA

THIS ONE’S FOR YOU, DAD

KARPAT GOALIE VEHVILAINEN LOST HIS FATHER PRIOR TO THE START OF THE FINNISH LEAGUE PLAYOFFS, BUT HE PLAYED THROUGH HIS GRIEF AND CARRIED HIS TEAM TO ANOTHER TITLE **BY RISTO PAKARINEN**

THE 2018 FINNISH LEAGUE final was a familiar affair, as Tappara Tampere and Karpas Oulu met for the third time in five years. And just like in 2014 and 2015, Karpas came out on top, claiming its seventh title since 2000. For Tappara, the final berth was its sixth in a row.

Karpas winger Julius Junntila, who led the post-season scoring race, received the Jari Kurri Award as the playoff MVP, but nobody would’ve been upset had it been handed to 21-year-old Karpas goaltender Veini Vehvilainen. He played in 17 of the team’s 18 playoff games, posting a .933 save percentage and league-best 1.53 goals-against average while also recording three shutouts, two of them in the final.

He won the Urpo Ylonen Award for best goalie during the regular season and was voted to the Liiga all-star team, too, so it was a banner year for accomplishments. It was Vehvilainen’s personal journey, however, that brought him new supporters this year as he was



LASSE KUKKONEN & VEINI VEHVILAINEN



WORLD CHAMPIONSHIP

FRESH SWEDISH FACES, SAME GOLDEN OUTCOME

WITH JUST THREE RETURNING PLAYERS, THE TRE KRONOR RODE WILD FAN SUPPORT AND GREAT GOALTENDING TO A REPEAT CHAMPIONSHIP

BY CAROL SCHRAM

A CASUAL VIEWER COULD BE forgiven for thinking that the gold-medal game of the 2018 World Championship was being held in a Swedish city like Stockholm or Malmö.

The stands were filled with chanting, cheering fans in Tre Kronor jerseys as Sweden beat Switzerland 3-2 in a shootout to claim world supremacy for a second straight year. But the win didn't come on Swedish soil – it happened at Royal Arena in nearby Copenhagen, Denmark. “Since we’re only 20 minutes away from

Sweden, yeah, it’s been awesome,” said coach Rikard Grönberg, who’s now two-for-two as bench boss at the World Championship after moving up from the junior ranks. “It’s just tremendous to see all the yellows up in the stands, singing the national anthem after a game.”



Added Mika Zibanejad, whose sixth goal of the tournament sent the game to overtime: “You can’t stop smiling. You feel spoiled. The support we’ve been getting is unbelievable. The energy they give us and the motivation that they give us to play well in front of them...It’s a lot of friends and family as well, so it’s fun.”

With Denmark a first-time host in a nation where hockey is still a developing sport, Danish Ice Hockey Union head Henrik Bach Nielsen thought strategically



NO PLACE LIKE ROAD

Copenhagen is close to the Swedish border, so it was easy for fans to come cheer on the blue and yellow.

when assigning his home team to the smallest World Championship host city in modern history – Herning, population 50,000 – for the preliminary round. “It’s the first time that the host is not in the main arena,” he said, “but by doing that, we had a home team in Herning and Sweden as a home team in Copenhagen.”

The result: a total attendance of 520,481, seventh-highest of all-time.

The Swedes, in particular, enjoyed Denmark’s famous *hygge* hospitality, going unbeaten in the event. Sweden once again iced the tournament’s deepest team despite the fact only three players returned from 2017’s winning roster: defensemen John Klingberg and Oliver Ekman-Larsson and winger Dennis Everberg. “We’re a balanced team all the way throughout,” said Gustav Nyquist. “We can roll four lines and three ‘D’ pairs.”

In 2017, the Swedes were led by goaltender Henrik Lundqvist and his twin brother Joel, who served as team captain. William Nylander was named tournament MVP. This year, Mikael Backlund of the Calgary Flames took on the captain’s role, Rickard Rakell of the Anaheim Ducks led the way offensively with 14 points in 10 games, and Anders Nilsson played hero in goal after taking over the net from Magnus Hellberg. “Anders came in and had been on vacation for three weeks, so it was important for us to get him some games,” Gronborg said. “We didn’t start with him in the tournament. We wanted to make him feel comfortable.”

Said Nilsson: “It was an easy decision (to come over). I wanted to play more hockey.”

The Vancouver Canucks backup was at his best in the first period of Sweden’s semifinal game against a determined U.S. team led by Patrick Kane, the tournament’s leading scorer and MVP. Nilsson stopped all 16 shots he faced in the opening frame, allowing the Swedes to escape with a 1-0 lead on the way to a 6-0 shutout in a game where they were outshot 41-20. “He kept us in there at the start of the game,” Rakell said. “When he plays like that, he gives us a lot of confidence. It was a good feeling.”

The Swedish roster, which featured 21 NHL players, got a boost from a late-arriving group that was

bounced after the second round of the Stanley Cup playoffs. After playing through to the Cup final last year, Patric Hornqvist of the Pittsburgh Penguins and Filip Forsberg, Viktor Arvidsson and Mattias Ekholm of the Nashville Predators all said yes. Hornqvist chipped in two power-play goals in five games after fast-tracking a passport for his newborn daughter so his whole family could come along. “We couldn’t get the third Stanley Cup, but I’m standing here as a winner in the end,” he said.

For the Nashville trio, it was a group decision to make the trip. “We told each other that we’d come here to win,” said Forsberg. “You watch the World Championship as a kid growing up. I’ve seen a couple of golds, so now to be a part of it, it’s fantastic.”

In 2017, the Swedes dethroned the two-time defending champs from Canada. This time around, Sweden’s gold-medal opponent was an upstart group from Switzerland seeking its first world title after upsetting Canada 3-2 in the semifinal.



ANDERS NILSSON

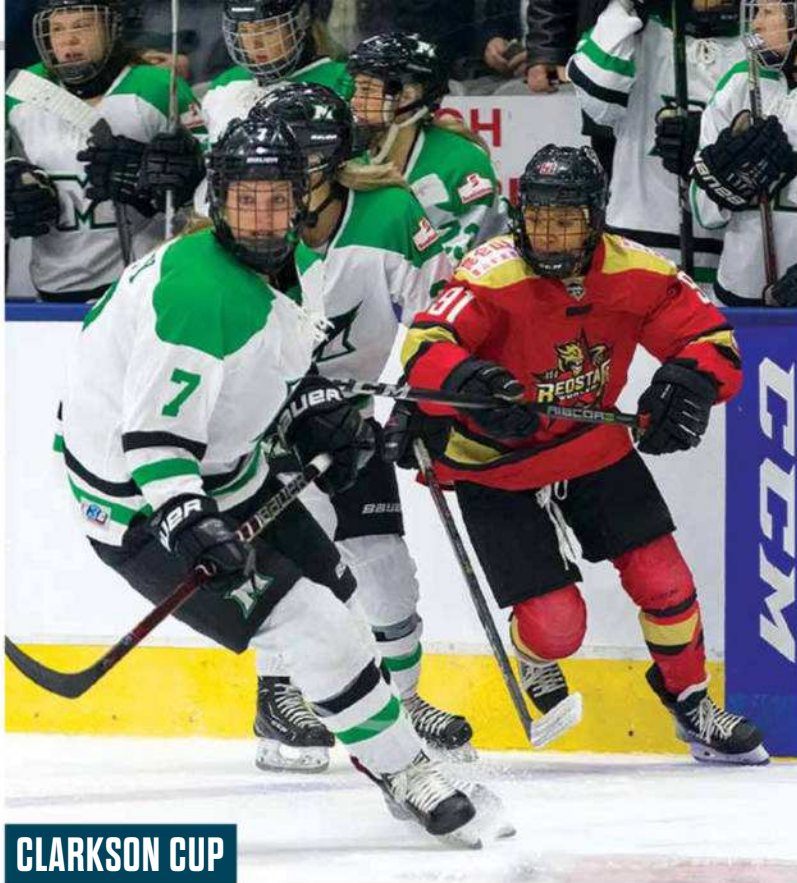


PALATE CLEANSER

Forsberg killed the aftertaste of his Predators’ playoff loss when he scored the winning shootout goal at the worlds.

Thanks to a strong performance from Swiss goalie Leonardo Genoni, the gold-medal game remained 2-2 after regulation and a 20-minute 4-on-4 overtime period. In the shootout, Sven Andrighetto was the only Swiss player to beat Nilsson. Ekman-Larsson evened things up for Sweden before Forsberg won it by firing a snap shot between Genoni’s legs. That winning goal

helps make up for the disappointment of a playoff run that fell short in Nashville. “We’ve got a gold medal,” Forsberg said. “I’ll get my chance at the Stanley Cup, hopefully.” **H**



CLARKSON CUP

TEARS AND A CROWN

STACEY OVERCOMES OLYMPIC DISAPPOINTMENT BY HELPING GUIDE HER MARKHAM THUNDER TEAM TO GLORY **BY JARED CLINTON**

THEY WEREN'T THE MOMENTS Laura Stacey wanted captured following the gold-medal game in Pyeongchang, but the first-time Olympian and great-granddaughter of the legendary King Clancy was featured prominently in two photos splashed across sports pages throughout Canada in late February.

In one, Stacey wipes her eyes with her jersey as she awaits presentation of her silver medal following Canada's crushing shootout defeat at the hands of rival Team USA. In the other, she's holding a visibly shaken Laura Fortino as Lauriane Rougeau and Rebecca Johnston look on. "We had the date in mind, we had a goal in mind, and we trained so hard all year long to get that gold medal and win the Olympics," Stacey said. "Obviously, when you don't achieve that goal, something that you've been working so hard towards, it's pretty devastating."

And it was the kind of devastation that could have prompted Stacey to hang up her skates for the season. The Olympics and its buildup had taken a toll. Stacey returned from Pyeongchang mentally and physically exhausted. As many of her teammates decided to end their seasons upon their arrival home, she considered the same. But shortly after returning, Stacey got the

THUNDER WARNING
It took some convincing, but Stacey decided to extend her season beyond a draining Olympic tournament.

hard sell from her former Markham (Ont.) Thunder teammates. It took her a while to crack, but seeking to overcome the silver sour note her season was set to end on, Stacey made the last-minute decision to return to her CWHL home. "I came back to kind of nothing, in a sense," Stacey said. "I didn't know what to do, I didn't know where my life was going, I didn't know what I wanted. There are so many questions, but I knew I could answer this."

So there was Stacey, back in a Thunder uniform by the final weekend of the regular season in Boston. Sure enough, five minutes into her first game post-Olympic disappointment, she was on the scoresheet, and by the



time the weekend wrapped up, Stacey had two goals and four points in two games, more than she had in her 19 games with the national program across all competitions. In a way, the response was typical for Stacey, who's had her share of dis-

appointment, including four straight cuts from Team Canada. "Getting up from those bumps and those setbacks every single time and pushing forward and not letting it knock you down further has been a big part of my life," Stacey said.

Her unwillingness to allow the Olympic setback to define her season didn't end there. With Stacey and fellow Olympians Fortino and Jocelyne Larocque in the lineup, Markham, the CWHL's lowest-seeded playoff entrant, swept the top-seeded Les Canadiennes de Montreal in a best-of-three to win their way into the Clarkson Cup final. And after Markham played the expansion Kunlun Red Star to a draw through regulation in the final, Stacey took center stage during overtime in the CWHL's championship game.

With two minutes remaining in the extra frame, Stacey took a centering pass from Nicole Kosta and one-timed it home. And in that moment, Stacey became the subject of another image that



PHOTO FINISH
Stacey scored the overtime-winner in dramatic fashion as Markham beat Kunlun in the Clarkson Cup final.

could last a lifetime: on her knees, arms in the air, crowd going wild as the overtime hero in the Clarkson Cup final. "It's hard to believe that it's actually me," Stacey said of the post-goal photo. "The whole year, in a sense, going to the Olympics, coming back to play for Markham, it really has been a whirlwind, crazy year, and it's hard to believe that it can happen. It's hard to put it into words." **H**

ISOBEL CUP

PITCH PERFECT

FITZGERALD POSTS BACK-TO-BACK SHUTOUTS TO LEAD RIVETERS TO 'GAME 7' VICTORY. HER SECRET? IT'S ALL BETWEEN THE EARS

BY JARED CLINTON

KATIE FITZGERALD IS A pragmatist. Having endured the highs and lows of being a professional puckstopper, the Metropolitan Riveters goaltender understands there's really no such thing as perfection in her vocation. There's constant need for improvement, always something to be honed, a tweak here or a fine-tune there.

But for two weeks in late March, Fitzgerald was as close to perfect as it comes. Matter of fact, statistically speaking, she was without a single fault. Throughout the NWHL post-season, which consists of two single-knockout rounds, Fitzgerald went 34 for 34 in the Riveters' crease. After blanking the Connecticut Whale in a 5-0 rout, Fitzgerald out-duelled Buffalo Beauts netminder Amanda Leveille in a 1-0 nail-biter that saw Riveters forward Alexa Gruschow's first-period marker stand as the Isobel Cup-winning goal. "It's definitely not what I was expecting," Fitzgerald said. "You don't want to give up a goal. That's always the goal. But you have to be realistic and know that when you're playing against such talented players, it's going to happen. But bottom line as a goalie, your job is to give your team the opportunity to win."

Safe to say she did exactly that. And better yet, she did so in a season where she yearned for redemption. In 2016-17, her rookie campaign, Fitzgerald was named the NWHL's top goaltender, but her play-off performance in the opening round was one she wished she could forget. Against the Beauts, who have become the Riveters' top rival, Fitzgerald allowed four goals on 12 shots in her worst performance of the campaign. "I took it really hard," Fitzgerald said. "I wanted to bounce back and be able to be mentally strong and consistent for my team. I focused on that aspect of my game a lot in the off-season."

So, alongside goalie coach Rebecca Baker, Fitzgerald went to work on honing her on-ice game, giving priority to improving her dexterity through hand-eye drills. Off the ice, Fitzgerald took a mind-over-body approach. "I got into yoga and meditation and all that fun stuff," Fitzgerald said. "I really enjoy it, so I'm really happy that I did start to explore that. I also got to reading some books by the Goalie Guild. The one



that I read, specifically, is called *The Power Within*. It's about the mental side of goaltending."

Fitzgerald's summer efforts paid immediate dividends. Through to the all-star break, she was nearly unbeatable as the Riveters rocketed to the top of the standings. She had only one blemish on her record and sported an impressive .927 save percentage. As the campaign closed, though, Fitzgerald faltered, dropping three of her final five starts, with each defeat coming against the Beauts. The trio of losses set the stage for the Isobel Cup showdown. "We won the first three games (during the season) and they won the last three, so it was a true Game 7," Fitzgerald said. "It was the final we definitely wanted to have."

But earning redemption against the Beauts, winning the Isobel Cup and having the best statistical season of her career wasn't the only highlight. Fitzgerald, a native of Des Plaines, Ill., who has never represented her country on the international stage, caught the eye of USA Hockey with her performance and earned an invite to development camp. But, always level-headed and knowing the depth of the U.S. talent pool, Fitzgerald remains focused only on doing what she can to grow her game further. "I just want to learn what I can and take what I've learned so far, implement it and continue to work," she said. "Whatever happens, happens." **H**



RED REDEMPTION

After crashing when it counted in the 2017 playoffs, Fitzgerald saved her best for last this year.

TOP: MATTHEW RANNEY PHOTOGRAPHY; MIDDLE: MICHAEL HETZEL



VANCOUVER CANUCKS

GETTING TO KNOW BO

Thanks to a solid support system, the Canucks' future captain has a big heart on and off the ice **BY BEN KUZMA**

C WHEN THE DURABLE BO Horvat missed 18 games with an ankle fracture this season, his patience and persistency were challenged because there were reasonable concerns: How would the blossoming Vancouver Canucks center, who missed but one game the past two NHL seasons, maintain a level of enviable game-ready fitness

while injured? How would the projected future captain, who was on pace for a career-high 29 goals, rebound from a freaky accident against Carolina Dec. 5 when his skate got in a rut and his ankle exploded upon player contact?

Horvat endured four weeks in a walking boot and couldn't put any weight on his injured ankle, but he somehow trained

like a demon, and his fitness numbers matched or bettered those at training camp. And after skating six times on his own and just one practice and one game-day skate, he returned right on schedule, Jan. 21 in Winnipeg.

Horvat needed just three games to find his rhythm after being out six weeks. He scored in back-to-back games on five occasions to finish with 22 goals in 64 games – including 10 on the vastly improved power play as a net-front presence – and led the Canucks in faceoff efficiency at 53.8 percent.

Horvat also topped Canucks forwards with 19:21 of average ice time and was productive in games where he exceeded the average minutes. It meant more Bo was better Bo.

For most players, that would suffice as a satisfying season. Not for the 23-year-old Horvat.

“For me, it’s to keep working on my skating – you can never be too fast,” Horvat said. “That’s something I already know, and I know it’s something I have to keep working on all summer.”



“I just need to keep working on my two-way game. It’s being that complete player and a guy you can put out in key situations. That’s the player they want me to be, and that’s the player I’m hoping to turn into.”

One aspect of Horvat’s game that needs to grow is defensive awareness before getting into transition mode. That was evident during his 10 games on the larger international ice surface at the World Championship with Canada, where he was forced to retreat quickly defensively, find his check and then think offense. “Playing

JEFF VINNICK/NHL VIA GETTY IMAGES

with great players and just watching them on a day-to-day basis in what they do and what their tendencies are, it's just another step in the right direction for me," he said. "I just want to keep getting better and keep learning."

Horvat benefitted from a championship pressure-packed junior environment in London with the OHL Knights. He methodically climbed up from measured NHL minutes as a fourth-line defensive and faceoff specialist for former Canucks coach Willie Desjardins, turned a laboring stride into bull-like rushes and even overcame a 27-game scoring drought his second season.

Outwardly, Horvat tried to stay positive at that young stage of his closely monitored career. Internally, he was beating himself up until Henrik Sedin took him aside. "He said he had been through it and said to just go play," Horvat said. "It turned my season around, and it's something I'll never forget."

With the retired Sedins passing the torch to a younger transitioning roster, Horvat welcomes the challenge to take his game to another level because he has been schooled by two of the best to don a Canucks jersey. "To me, they could play in the league another three or four years, but I'm happy for them and their families," He said. "They're such great role models for my game and how I approach it on and off the ice. If I could leave half of what they left on the organization as a stamp, I would be happy."

In 2016-17, Horvat became the first Canucks player since 2005-06 not named Daniel or Henrik to lead the club in scoring after notching 20 goals and 52 points. His 44 points this season left him fourth on the team, but he raised his per-game average for the third straight year. In September, he was rewarded for his play, poise and potential with a six-year, \$33-million commitment that said everything about his promise.

Maybe it's small-town val-

A WORK IN PROGRESS

Horvat knows he still needs to polish his defensive game to become the 200-foot player he wants to be.

ues and a work ethic formed in the tiny community of Rodney, Ont., that allowed Horvat to reach big-city dreams. He was groomed for a bigger role. He became the poster boy for marketing campaigns and exudes everything the team wanted in the new face of a transitioning franchise. Horvat is respectful, humble and involved in the charitable community. That foundation is a vital building block toward being a true leader on a off the ice.

Canucks first-year coach Travis Green believes veterans, who have been through the ebbs and flows of rollercoaster seasons, bring an experience element that can't be manufactured by younger players. But he did say anybody can provide leadership. "You don't need a letter to lead," Green said. "For me, you lead in your own way – whether you're a rookie or 15-year veteran. You can't script leadership. Nor should you. It comes out in how you practise, how you train in the off-season, how you treat your teammates, and how you react in a game where you personally didn't play that well. With Bo, we agree he's still becoming a better player. We haven't seen the best, and it's not always about goals and assists. His game is still developing."

IF I COULD LEAVE HALF OF WHAT THE SEDINS LEFT ON THE ORGANIZATION AS A STAMP, I WOULD BE HAPPY – Bo Horvat

Though Horvat has already proved he can shoulder a first-line role. More importantly, he's shown he can be the first reason for optimism and the last reason for concern that he might not meet expectations as a player or a person – especially following the shocking 2013



draft-day trade for Cory Schneider. It landed the ninth-overall pick that turned into Horvat and turned a hockey-mad market upside down because the Canucks chose to part with a proven goaltender in order to draft a work in progress. To his credit, Horvat changed the narrative from, "That's all we got for Schneider?" to "That's our future captain."

"I've been here long enough that I've seen what it takes to be a leader, and how Hank and Danny have done it for many years," Horvat said. "I'm ready to make that next step. You still need the veteran presence in the room, and we've got that. But I have progressed on and

his sporting soul mate and sounding board for seven years.

Donaldson is also an accomplished athlete who excels in curling at the provincial level and at the International Arabian horse-show circuit. She knows the demands the pursuit of excellence places on routine and a relationship.

That's why she knows what we really don't know. She knows Bo. "I can get a little agitated, but she keeps me pretty even-keeled," Horvat said. "She cares a lot about me and the people around her. She always wants to make me better and wants people to succeed and is very unselfish that way."

Horvat can also lean on his father, Tim. An insulation salesman, he played Jr. B and 12 games for the Knights. He works long stretches to find a few days to see his son play. And when that's not possible, the phone is close at hand. "If he sees something that he doesn't like in my game, he's obviously going to talk to me about it and see what I think," Horvat said. "I always ask him for his advice, but he's good at respecting that I'm in the NHL and at the highest level."

And at that highest level, Horvat is ready to assume an even bigger role. **H**



PHILADELPHIA FLYERS

SETTING THE BAR HIGH IN PHILLY

The progression curve for Konecny has been steep. It hasn't been without its blips, but it landed him on the Flyers' top line

THE TURNING POINT IN Travis Konecny's young career may have occurred, strangely enough, during a game in which he scored two goals and still wound up on the bench.

The Philadelphia Flyers were playing Columbus on March 13, 2017, and Konecny was enjoying the best game of his rookie season with a pair of goals and some feisty play against the Blue Jackets. In fact, he was just a net dislodgement away from his first NHL hat trick. And then he made a play that one could chalk up to a 20-year-old's inexperience.

With the score tied 3-3, Konecny took an emotionally charged roughing penalty on Oliver Bjorkstrand at 7:20 of the third period. Shortly after, Brandon Dubinsky's

power-play goal snapped the tie and the Flyers went home losers.

That, in a microcosm, sums up the pros and cons of the young right winger's two-year NHL career.

IT'S TAKEN ME THESE TWO YEARS TO FINALLY REALIZE **WHEN TO TAKE A CHANCE AND WHEN TO DUMP THE PUCK IN** — Travis Konecny

He has tremendous upside, as his 24 goals this season will attest, and he has the ability to make high-risk plays as well as agitate opponents with Brad Marchand-like tactics. But it all comes down to picking his

CLIMBING THE CHARTS

Konecny ranks among the top 10 in games, goals and points among 2015 draftees — yet he lasted until pick No. 24.

spots, and Konecny, now 21, believes he finally understands that balance. “There are times when I feel like (the chippy stuff) gets me feeling like I’m into the game when I’m involved with that,” he said. “But sometimes it isn’t worth it.”

“I had that one game (in Columbus) that kind of set me back, and I realized there’s a fine line there. I had two goals and then I took that stupid penalty. It actually cost us the game.”

Flyers coach Dave Hakstol was so impressed with Konecny’s improvement this season that he put him on Philadelphia’s top line with center Sean Couturier and left winger Claude Giroux, both of whom enjoyed career years. That’s impressive progress for the 24th overall selection in the 2015 draft. And it followed up on Konecny making the team at 19 when he still had one season of junior eligibility remaining.

That unit stayed together for more than 30 games, and there’s no doubt Konecny improved — and matured — from the experience. “I have to make sure those high-risk plays...if you want to be a successful player, some of it depends on making those plays,” he said. “You just have to be aware of when is the right time. It’s something I take pride in learning. It’s just making sure your 200-foot game is always there.”

That Columbus game might still be in the back of his mind. “When you come out of junior, you expect to make a play every shift,” he said. “You want to be a difference-maker on the ice. It’s taken me these two years to finally realize when to take a chance and when to dump the puck in.”

Konecny’s development is critical to the Flyers’ future. With an aging nucleus of core forwards (Giroux, Jakub Voracek, Wayne Simmonds), the franchise is pinning its offensive hopes on younger players such as Konecny, Couturier and Nolan Patrick.

Konecny has the speed and hands to become an elite player, if he can keep his focus on the business at hand. The Flyers aren’t exactly a fast team, but he has the ability to beat defenders 1-on-1 or score off the rush.



EASTERN CONFERENCE

READY TO BREAK OUT

And make no mistake about it: Konecny's ability to rile up foes is an important asset. Despite his modest size – 5-foot-10, 175 pounds – he can be a huge distraction to opponents. "I thought I had a good year," he said. "I thought I came in a little uptight. Thinking about the sophomore slump, I was a little concerned about that."

"But I learned a lot this year. Playing with Giroux and Couturier gave me a good opportunity to grow as a player as well. It gave me the confidence to make plays, not be afraid to step up and maybe make a big play. Playing with those guys, I felt maybe I could make a risky pass that I wouldn't have made before. I had the confidence to make it when I was moved up to that line."



Konecny is one of the last players off the ice on practice days, and he's constantly working on his game. After many workouts, he'll walk into the room and plop down at his dressing-room stall looking totally exhausted.

Don't think for a second other players don't notice. Things like that can define a good teammate. If the Flyers are going to pay off on GM Ron Hextall's patient, build-from-within approach to serious contention for a Stanley Cup, it's going to start with players such as Konecny.

He's the son of a firefighter, as is defenseman Brandon Manning. Both men play with a certain swagger and aren't averse to getting in an opponent's grill. It's that type of attitude that makes Konecny popular both in the dressing room and up in the stands. If he continues to improve and mature, that endearment will only grow. – **WAYNE FISH**



After joining the Bruins following his junior year at Harvard, center **RYAN DONATO** made an immediate impression. He notched two goals and four points in his first two games and finished with four goals and nine points in just 12 games. He'll hit the ground running in the fall.



Fans had been clamoring for center **CASEY MITTELSTADT** to join the team since he dazzled at the WJC. That time finally came when he had a brief six-game apprenticeship at the end of the season and finished with five points. A serious run for the Calder is fully expected.



Big, fast and responsible, **WARREN FOEGELE** got a taste of NHL life this season. Next year, he'll come back for a meatier bite. A dangerous member of the AHL's Charlotte Checkers, the left winger can sting opponents on the penalty kill and has a ton of potential up front.



PIERRE-LUC DUBOIS' rookie season numbers – 20 goals, 48 points – look merely OK, but 19 of those points came in his final 21 games, in which he locked down the No. 1 center job. He's becoming the big, powerful front-line player the Jackets hoped he would when they drafted him.



There have been a number of stops and starts to **ANTHONY MANTHA'S** career, but he put it all together last season with 24 goals and 48 points. The next step for the right winger is to become that point-per-game power forward the Red Wings so desperately need.



Former NCAA Denver star pivot **HENRIK BORGSTROM** joined Florida for a late-season stint and scored his first NHL goal. GM Dale Tallon says he hopes Borgstrom and Owen Tippett are difference-makers, though the Panthers have a lot of talent on their top two lines already.



Nagging back issues hampered right winger **ARTTURI LEHKONEN** this season, one year after an impressive rookie campaign in which he scored 18 goals. But with a full off-season to rest, recover and train, Lehtonen is a good bet to make it over the 20-goal mark.



Injuries have been a concern for **PAVEL ZACHA** early in his career, but the big center is improving his offensive consistency and marrying it with better results on defense. The sixth overall pick from 2015 posted six points in his final nine games and can rise with the ascending Devils.



SEBASTIAN AHO was bit of a late-bloomer due to his size, but the offensively inclined blueliner took strides on the defensive side of things, and that allowed him to become a valuable AHLer in Bridgeport. With his puck-management talents, a full-time NHL gig is next.



There's no questioning the drive of **LIAS ANDERSSON**. Now it's just a matter of putting him in a place to succeed. The Rangers have the right new coach in David Quinn, and Andersson, a two-way center with great speed, is the kind of kid you build a winner around.



After starting in the AHL, **THOMAS CHABOT** spent most of the year with the struggling Senators. He was one goal away from double digits, and only Erik Karlsson averaged more power play ice time among defensemen than Chabot. He'll get even more responsibility in 2018-19.



There will be roster spots up for grabs in Philly, and **TRAVIS SANHEIM** is in position to secure a permanent one on the blueline. He made 49 appearances this season and got into his first NHL playoff games, too. He also looked good in the AHL playoffs, showing off his size and skating.



DOMINIK SIMON has already found chemistry with Sidney Crosby in Pittsburgh, where the Pens have shown a propensity for finding diamonds in the rough. The 23-year-old plays a skilled, two-way game and is learning to compete more. Figure that out, and the world's his oyster.



MIKHAIL SERGACHEV faded as young players often do and was in and out of the lineup at times. The Lightning deliberately shielded and limited his minutes – just more than 15 in the season and about 12 in the playoffs – but he'll play a bigger role on the blueline next season.



Defenseman **TRAVIS DERMOTT** spent half the season in the minors before coming up and impressing with his solid play with the varsity team. After the Leafs' first-round ouster, he went back to the AHL for the Marlies' run to the Calder Cup. That'll be the last he sees of the minors.



Skilled left winger **ANDRE BURAKOVSKY** has always been critical of himself and at times has lacked confidence. If he can get over that hump and put together consistent results (while also remaining injury-free), the pedigree is there for another deadly arrow in Washington's quiver.



ST. LOUIS BLUES

SPIRIT OF ST. LOUIS

Edmundson flies under the radar on the Blues' blueline, but his reliability and physicality make him an indispensable defender

THE 2018 WORLD CHAMPIONSHIP in Denmark had concluded, and some of the players from Team Canada and Team USA gathered for a few beers. That's when an American center told Canadian defenseman Joel Edmundson what a "pain in the ass" he was to play against. "It was (Dylan) Larkin, I remember him saying that," said Edmundson, a three-year member of the St. Louis Blues, referring to the young Detroit Red Wings center.

The compliments are starting to come for Edmundson, who is ready to break through with the Blues in 2018-19. He had been a physical presence on the blueline his first

two years in the league, but he showed this season he could play top-pair minutes alongside team captain Alex Pietrangelo – and even added more scoring. Now with

YOU CAN SEE HIM STARTING TO EMERGE AS A REAL LEADER WITH OUR GROUP, **HE HAS A REAL PRESENCE ABOUT HIM** – St. Louis coach Mike Yeo

Edmundson having 200-plus NHL games under his belt and set to turn 25 in late June, the Blues know they can count on that moving forward. "He's taken a lot of steps in his

MOVING UP IN THE WORLD

Edmundson has gone from being a depth defenseman to skating on the team's top pairing with captain Alex Pietrangelo.

game, which is normal for a young player, but you can see his confidence growing," said Blues coach Mike Yeo. "He's always been a defensive, physical presence, but he's starting to gain some confidence in the offensive part of his game. But as much as anything else, you can see him starting to emerge as a real leader with our group, he has a real presence about him. Obviously he leads by the way he plays the game, but he's taking more ownership of the culture of our team."

In 2017-18, Edmundson had seven goals and 17 points in 69 games and finished 28th in blocked shots in the NHL with 150. He would've played more games if not for a shot by Colorado's Nail Yakupov on Feb. 8, breaking the defenseman's arm and forcing him to miss 13 contests. His absence showed his importance, though, as the Blues went 4-7-2 without him and then went on a six-game winning streak shortly after his return. "I was happy with my season," Edmundson said. "We had a lot of injuries on the back end, and that really opened up some space for me to get some minutes and show management what I could do. Once I had the minutes, I just had to play my game, and playing with 'Petro' has made it pretty easy. He's a world-class player, so whenever I'm on the ice with him, he makes it easy on me, and hopefully I make it easy on him."

Edmundson spent roughly half his ice time (572 of 1,140 minutes) paired with Pietrangelo and had a Corsi For percentage a shade of over 50 percent. Edmundson's ability to climb up the depth chart saw his ice time jump from 17:46 per game in 2016-17 to 20:44 in '17-18, and with that came more dependency on the defenseman late in games. "You can definitely tell," Edmundson said. "I was never really getting tossed out there with a minute left in the game, but now I'm one of those guys the team is leaning on in the dying minutes. If you can

do that, game over game, I think the coaching staff and the management really look at that. That's when you realize that I can play in the league, I can keep up."



WESTERN CONFERENCE

READY TO BREAK OUT

When asked about the staff's trust in Edmundson, Yeo responded by saying the Blues are in the winning business. "We always say that players decide who goes out," Yeo said. "It was an easy decision for us. We want to win hockey games, the game is on the line, and he's a guy that we're confident can go out there. He can execute well enough to relieve pressure so he doesn't have to defend all the time, but when he defends, he defends hard and take a lot of pride in it. So in those moments, those are the guys that you want on the ice."

Edmundson is hoping with the foundation he's built the past few years that 2018-19 can be a special season for him. "For defensemen, it's not always stats-



related," he said. "Our job is to prevent goals, so we're looking at different stats and numbers. It's easy to tell if a forward has a breakout year, but for us defensemen, if the team trusts you and you get thrown into certain situations, add all that up, and that's when you can tell if the guy has had a breakout season."

In the meantime, now that he's back from the worlds, Edmundson is set to enjoy his off-season. "I was happy that I went, and overall it was a good experience," he said. "It was nice to meet guys from other teams."

Especially Larkin. — JEREMY RUTHERFORD



BRANDON MONTOUR has never seen open ice that he wouldn't love to use to rush the puck. The take-charge blueliner racked up 32 points and patrolled the power-play point in his first full NHL season. There's another level, though. He's been close to a point per game in other leagues.



MAX DOMI has been going in the wrong direction in his three NHL seasons. He scored nine goals in both his injury-plagued sophomore season and a snakebitten third season. As a rookie, he had eight goals in his first 16 games. His raw skill means you can't keep him down forever.



The main thing lacking in **MARK JANKOWSKI'S** game is a sense of urgency. The lanky center has the puck skills, shot and poise to evolve into a Jeff Carter-type pivot if he can up his tempo, bring it on a consistent basis and add 10 pounds to power his way through defenses.



ALEX DEBRINCAT shone in an otherwise dark season for Chicago. His 28 goals placed him third among NHL rookies, and he did his damage averaging just 14:48 of ice time. He ranked 38th in 5-on-5 goals per 60 minutes. He should be a 30-goal man next year as his ice time increases.



SAMUEL GIRARD showed promise as a rookie blueliner during the regular season and averaged more than 21 minutes in the playoffs. He's a smallish, new-school defender with great mobility, stickwork and smarts. He had 20 points as a rookie, and that number could double next year.



The Stars need scoring wingers and may get one with 2013 first-rounder **VALERI NICHUSHKIN** eager to rejoin the team. He scored 27 goals in 86 games in the KHL the past two seasons — respectable totals in a low-scoring league. He's still just 23 and brings great size (6-foot-4).



MIKKO KOSKINEN was 22 when he had a spotty four-game trial with the Isles in 2010-11. Seven seasons later, including a dominant one in the KHL, the towering Finn is giving the NHL another shot. Don't expect him to steal Cam Talbot's job, but 25 games of solid relief would be ideal.



If speed is going to continue being the prime requisite to L.A.'s game plan, **ALEX IAFALLO** is bound to improve on a nine-goal, 25-point rookie season. The free-agent signee from Minnesota-Duluth played on the Kings' top line at times and was lauded for his quickness and energy.



JORDAN GREENWAY, 6-foot-6 and 225 pounds, is a true throwback power forward who blends brute force with a deft touch around the net. He left Boston University to turn pro this spring and saw a handful of NHL games, even scoring a goal in the playoffs.



Don't fret over Nashville sitting **EELI TOLVANEN** in the playoffs. He parachuted from the KHL onto a deep, Presidents' Trophy-winning team as a teenager and had no chance to play on a scoring line. His ceiling as a big-time sniper remains sky-high; he's a 2018-19 Calder candidate.



KEVIN LABANC ranked just sixth among Sharks forwards in power-play ice time per game. But watch him control the puck on the second unit and you'd think he should part of the first. The undersized winger has off-the-chart poise and played better as his confidence grew.



Take your pick from the promising quartet of Tage Thompson, Jordan Kyrrou, **ROBERT THOMAS** and Klim Kostin. Thomas, a conscientious two-way center fresh off a Memorial Cup appearance, has the maturity to fast-track to the NHL ahead of his competition this fall.



With little to prove in the AHL and openings up front, **NIKOLAY GOLDOBIN** is set to realize the potential that made him a 2014 first-rounder. He should break into the middle six full time with his playmaking and finishing skills. He scored at a 40-point pace after a mid-February recall.



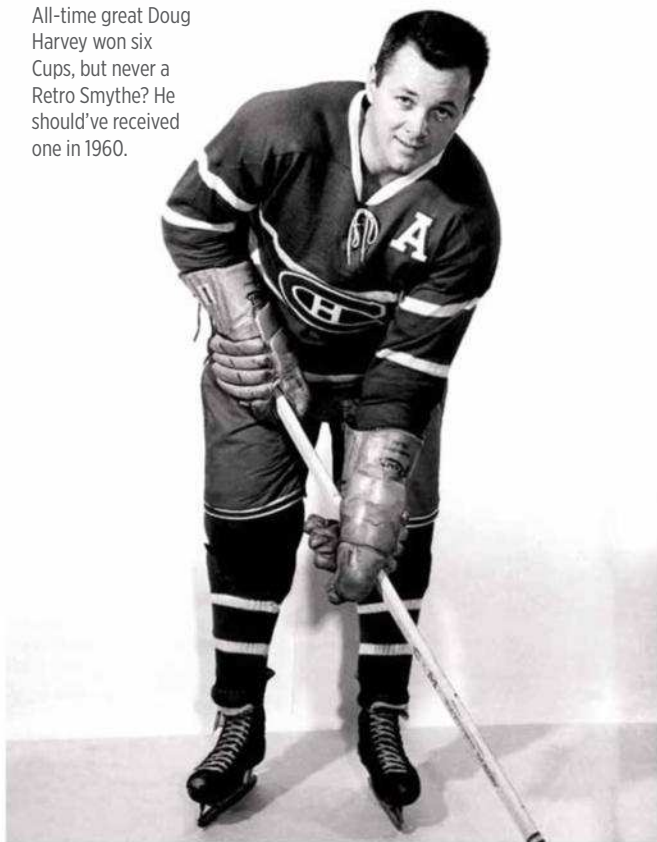
You mean there was a Golden Knights player who didn't break out this season? Hard to believe, but Vegas gave up first-, second- and third-round picks to get **TOMAS TATAR** from Detroit and he couldn't even make the lineup regularly. He'll get a keen opportunity next season.



You could make the case **JOSH MORRISSEY** has already broken out, but he has another gear. He was a high-end offensive defenseman in his junior days and, given his mobility, it wouldn't be a surprise if his scoring started catching up to his stellar defensive play.



All-time great Doug Harvey won six Cups, but never a Retro Smythe? He should've received one in 1960.



ALL QUIET ON THE HOME FRONT

The Retro Smythe committee did an excellent job. But there could have been more focus on the blueline **BY JAMES BENESH**

DEFFENSEMEN HAVE BEEN under-represented in the voting for major awards that are open to all positions – the Calder, Hart and Conn Smythe Trophies.

Depending on how you calculate it, one in three players are defensemen – they make up 33 percent of the players on the ice, and 30 percent of a 20-player roster – but they have only won 15 percent of Calder Trophies, 13 percent of Harts and 19 percent of Conn Smythes.

It's been hard enough for defensemen to win the Conn Smythe in the past 50 years, even after the voters just fin-

ished watching them dominate 25 to 30 minutes a game for 15-plus games. But it was apparently even harder for historical defenders to earn the award when the Society of International Hockey Research did exhaustive digging and handed out Retro Smythes.

The real Conn Smythe Trophy was created in 1964 to honor the playoff MVP. But who would've won the award in seasons previous to that? Only four blueliners were deemed worthy of the Retro Smythe in the 47 years between the start of the NHL in 1917-18 and the arrival of the Conn Smythe

Trophy in 1964-65: Lionel Conacher in 1934, Jack Stewart in 1943, Pierre Pilote in 1961 and, surprisingly, Nels Stewart (in his only stint as a D-man) in 1926. That's only 8.5-percent representation. Why is that?

Before expansion, it was rare that a defenseman would produce the kind of noteworthy offense that got award voters' attention. On the other hand, pre-expansion forwards were prone to the same offensive explosions we're used to today, and goalies frequently posted sub-2.00 goals-against averages in the playoffs like they do today. So it's easy to spot a dominant performance by a forward or goalie, but harder to identify a dominant performance by a blueliner. Here are three times when a defenseman could've easily earned the Retro Smythe:



1. EDDIE GERARD OTTAWA SENATORS, 1921

Right winger Jack Darragh, often the sixth-best player on the star-studded Senators, really rose to the occasion with a handful of big goals in the 1920 and 1921 post-seasons, earning Retro Smythe honors both years. But game reports from those playoffs indicate the real key to Ottawa's victories was their stellar defense, led by captain Eddie Gerard.

Quotes from Ottawa newspapers following Game 1 of the semis against Toronto in 1921 said Gerard "showed amazing speed in the dull going. He generalised his players well, and his puck-carrying was a revelation." And in Game 2: "He played one of the greatest games of his

career. He was up and down the ice and on two different occasions he staggered over to the Ottawa bench to rest. Each time, however, Ottawa drew a penalty and Gerard fought back his way out of (coach Pete) Green's arms and back upon the ice. He rushed and rushed until it looked as though he would fall exhausted, but he finally broke through and beat (Jake) Forbes with a shot that carried with it the National League Championship. Toronto said that they had never seen anything to exceed Gerard's performance."

Considering Ottawa won the semifinal 2-0, outscoring Toronto 7-0, Gerard must've dominated the possession game.

In the final, it was more of the same: "Gerard was constantly breaking away from his defense position where he intercepted the home club's rushes and showed he could attack as well as defend." In the next game, "Gerard was keeping his team on the attack by his brilliant work in breaking up attacks by the Vancouver squad and turning them the reverse." In Game 3, "Gerard played one of his cyclonic games." In Game 4, "Gerard, with a continual smile, played as much of a forward game as any of his team."

In the decisive game, won 2-1 by Ottawa, the papers read: "Gerard played a great game, had it not been for his unnecessarily strenuous tactics," also noting he received "a terrific panning from the (Vancouver) crowd, but the Ottawa captain took it with a smile and was one of the fastest men on the ice." The contributions of defensemen didn't often show up on the scoresheet in those days, but Gerard made his mark.

2. DOUG HARVEY MONTREAL CANADIENS, 1960

Imagine, it's 1960 and Doug Harvey, considered by most observers at the time to be the greatest defenseman ever, had won six Stanley Cups, but not once did he rate as the post-season MVP.

Harvey had a case to win the Retro Smythe in 1958, when he set a playoff record with 11



TIM HORTON & ALLAN STANLEY

points (10, nine and eight had only been achieved once apiece in the 40 years prior), and again in 1959, when he hit 12 points. Maurice Richard and Marcel Bonin, awarded Retro Smythes by SIHR for those seasons, had great point totals themselves, but not unprecedented like Harvey's stats.

But perhaps more impressively, in 1960, Harvey, whose calm and flawless possession and passing were the keys to his success, earned a plus-13 rating in just eight games as the Habs swept to the Cup. Game sheets recently released by the NHL show that at even strength, Harvey was on the ice for 16 of the Habs' 26 goals in the 1960 playoffs, and only three of their 10 goals against.

He also carried his merely serviceable partner, Al Langlois, to the same plus-13 rating that spring. This was not just a case of a dominant team running up high numbers: Tom Johnson and Jean-Guy Talbot, no slouches themselves, were only plus-3 and plus-2, demonstrating just how much of a higher level at which Harvey was playing.

This came after a regular season in which Harvey led the NHL in plus-minus and was described in January by coach Toe Blake as "the difference between winning and losing many times." Harvey and Langlois'

mark remained a playoff record until 1968, when J-C Tremblay topped it (but in 13 games).

The numbers show Harvey was truly the key to the Habs that year, and if that doesn't do it for you, then record-setting offensive numbers the two seasons before should. Harvey should have at least one, if not two or three, Retro Smythes.

3. TIM HORTON TORONTO MAPLE LEAFS, 1962

The Retro Smythe for this season was awarded to Stan Mikita, who broke Gordie Howe's seven-year-old single-season playoff points record with 21. Sounds fair, but Horton, in an uncharacteristic offensive explosion, also broke the record for points by a defenseman in a playoff set by Pierre Pilote the year before (Pilote was awarded the Retro Smythe for this).

With their offensive exploits equally impressive, how would one choose between them? Well, for starters, Horton's team won the Cup over Mikita's Hawks. Horton's reputation as a consummate defensive D-man is well-known. It's likely he was as solid as ever in this season, since it was his first as a Norris finalist. To be able to defend as efficiently as Horton did, while setting offensive records, is an MVP-caliber performance. **H**

RETRO CONN SMYTHES

The Society of International Hockey Research did exhaustive work in assembling probable playoff MVPs

1917-18 ALF SKINNER

Toronto Arenas
11 points; also exploded for 9 in '21 playoffs

1918-19 NEWSY LALONDE

Montreal Canadiens
Fiery center who led scoring before pandemic

1919-20 JACK DARRAGH

Ottawa Senators
5 goals in 5 games, including some big ones

1920-21 JACK DARRAGH

Ottawa Senators
Unlikely hero repeats with 5 more goals

1921-22 BABE DYE

Toronto St. Pats
12 points in 7 GP, none in 8 other playoff games

1922-23 PUNCH BROADBENT

Ottawa Senators
Retro Smythe followed scoring title in '22

1923-24 HOWIE MORENZ

Montreal Canadiens
Was voted best player of 1900-1950

1924-25 JACK WALKER

Victoria Cougars
Contained Morenz while scoring a bunch

1925-26 NELS STEWART

Montreal Maroons
'C' dropped back to 'D' and starred in final

1926-27 ALEC CONNELL

Ottawa Senators
Black-capped goalie allowed just 4 in 6 GP

1927-28 FRANK BOUCHER

New York Rangers
10 points, only one other player even had 5

1928-29 TINY THOMPSON

Boston Bruins
25-year-old rookie allowed just 3 goals in 5 GP

1929-30 GEORGE HAINSWORTH

Montreal Canadiens
Unbeaten with a 0.75 GAA in Dead Puck era

1930-31 JOHNNY GAGNON

Montreal Canadiens
Took over for Hart-winner Morenz in playoffs

1931-32 CHARLIE CONACHER

Toronto Maple Leafs
'Big Bomber' led playoffs in goals to take Cup

1932-33 CECIL DILLON

New York Rangers
10 points, while the next two had 6 and 5

1933-34 LIONEL CONACHER

Chicago Black Hawks
Multi-sport athlete also voted top 'D'

1934-35 BALDY NORTHCOTT

Montreal Maroons
5 points, but stifled Charlie Conacher in final

1935-36 NORMIE SMITH

Detroit Red Wings
Rode wave from '36 playoffs to '37 Vezina

1936-37 MARTY BARRY

Detroit Red Wings
11 points, next highest (his teammates) had 7

1937-38 GORDIE DRILLON

Toronto Maple Leafs
Led playoffs in goals, repeated feat in '39

1938-39 BILL COWLEY

Boston Bruins
Established new playoff record with 14 points

1939-40 PHIL WATSON

New York Rangers
The best of his handful of strong playoffs

1940-41 MILT SCHMIDT

Boston Bruins
Replaced regular-season star Cowley, shone

1941-42 SYL APPS

Toronto Maple Leafs
Classy captain led Leafs back from 3-0

1942-43 JACK STEWART

Detroit Red Wings
Throwback won with defense, toughness

1943-44 TOE BLAKE

Montreal Canadiens
All three on 'Punch Line' won award, Toe first

1944-45 TED KENNEDY

Toronto Maple Leafs
Everything you'd ever want in a player

1945-46 ELMER LACH

Montreal Canadiens
A two-way playmaker's turn to shine

1946-47 TED KENNEDY

Toronto Maple Leafs
Scored and set up so many key goals

1947-48 TED KENNEDY

Toronto Maple Leafs
Third Retro Smythe with dominant showing

1948-49 TURK BRODA

Toronto Maple Leafs
Fitting that a clutch goalie gets it as well

1949-50 CHUCK RAYNER

New York Rangers
Rare combo: Hart and Retro Smythe

1950-51 MAURICE RICHARD

Montreal Canadiens
First of two for legendary, intense sniper

1951-52 TERRY SAWCHUK

Detroit Red Wings
Swept Leafs and Habs on way to Cup

1952-53 ED SANDFORD

Boston Bruins
Burly winger scored at will in '53 playoffs

1953-54 TERRY SAWCHUK

Detroit Red Wings
Not as crazy numbers as in '52 but dominant

1954-55 GORDIE HOWE

Detroit Red Wings
Third of six times he'd lead playoffs in points

1955-56 JEAN BELIVEAU

Montreal Canadiens
Averaged point per game 11 times in playoffs

1956-57 BERNIE GEOFFRION

Montreal Canadiens
Carried offense, outscored Beliveau by 5

1957-58 MAURICE RICHARD

Montreal Canadiens
Breaking down, but broke out one last time

1958-59 MARCEL BONIN

Montreal Canadiens
Scored 91 percent of his playoff goals this year

1959-60 JACQUES PLANTE

Montreal Canadiens
One of eight playoffs he had sub-2.00 GAA

1960-61 PIERRE PILOTE

Chicago Black Hawks
Established new point record for D-men (15)

1961-62 STAN MIKITA

Chicago Black Hawks
Simply dominant offense in losing effort

1962-63 JOHNNY BOWER

Toronto Maple Leafs
Stats show a .949 save percentage in '63

1963-64 BOB PLUMFORD

Toronto Maple Leafs
Swiss army knife of a player did it all

Fischler was 19 when he posed with Stanley Cup champion Jimmy Thomson in this dandy of a photo from 1951.



65 REMARKABLE THINGS I'VE SEEN

'The Maven' Stan Fischler takes stock of his memorable career as a hockey journalist, spanning six-plus decades **BY STAN FISCHLER**

I'VE BEEN IN THE HOCKEY business for so long I can hardly remember whether I was rooting for the New York Americans or Rangers. The 65 years flew by faster than an Alex Ovechkin slapshot, but I will never forget my first step into The Hockey News office and the warm greeting from then-boss Ken McKenzie. I wear my The Hockey News jacket proudly to this day because THN has been a big part of my life. Here are some memories from six-plus decades in the biz:

1 My first hockey game in 1939 was remarkable because I was supposed to see *Snow White And The Seven Dwarfs*. But when my father and I got out of the subway station that Sunday afternoon, it was rain-

ing. We were right outside the old Madison Square Garden and my dad said, "We're going to a hockey game instead." I never stopped going after that.

2 Rangers games started at 8:30 at night – too late for a kid. My alternatives were Sunday afternoon hockey doubleheaders, a Met League game followed by the New York Rovers playing an Eastern League foe. Games were fast, furious and fun.

3 My friend Larry and I got in free with Police Athletic League tickets. We tried to be first in line. There were no elevators at old MSG, so we had to sprint, two stairs at a time, to get the front-row seats in the balcony.

4 For a Rovers' Eastern

League game, an experiment involved just a center red line and no bluelines. It was called "Rocket Hockey" and lasted just that one game before being discarded as impractical.

5 On my 10th birthday, March 31, 1942, my parents gave me a Philco radio and a scrapbook with an American Indian head on the cover. In it, I launched my hockey-writing career.

6 At 10, I was deemed old enough to see a Rangers game. My dad took me when the Blackhawks were in town. Chicago's Max and Doug Bentley helped beat the Blueshirts.

7 My first hockey autographs weren't NHLers. While I waited for MSG doors to open on 49th St., Met League players strolled by. My favorite was Bob Johnson, a Brooklyn Torpedoes D-man.

8 Nothing beat watching the U.S. Coast Guard Cutters team out of Baltimore. They featured ex-NHLers Johnny Mariucci, Art Coulter and Frank Brimsek. They brought along a 30-piece band that played the CG marching song "Semper Paratus."

9 In 1942, I was 10 and listened to Foster Hewitt on the radio call the Stanley Cup final between Toronto and Detroit. Ten years later, I was 20 when Hewitt was the first to broadcast a game on TV.

10 The forgotten New York team was the Crescents, a pro outfit in the Eastern League playing at the tiny Brooklyn Ice Palace. The Crescents lasted just 1943-44 with future Hall of Famer Fern Flaman and Rangers captain Don Raleigh.

11 I got my first published byline at age 11 in 1943 when I wrote a letter to *The New York Times* magazine on why hockey was my favorite sport.

12 Emile 'The Cat' Francis made his goaltending debut at the old MSG with the Philadelphia Falcons. He told me he carried his goalie pads and equipment 15 blocks along Eighth Avenue, from Penn Station.

13 U.S.-born skaters were rare, but the Rangers had one from Danvers, Mass. Bill Moe had a knack of hipchecking foes. He did it to Toronto's Gaye Stewart in 1946-47 in what became a prize-winning photo.

14 I never saw the biggest fight in NHL history, but I heard it on the radio: Rangers vs. Habs, March 16, 1947. Every player on each team participated, necessitating the New York Police Riot Squad to take to the ice. Broadcaster Bert Lee was screaming, "IT'S A RIOT, IT'S A RIOT, IT'S A RIOT!"

15 The biggest trade of my life involved the Leafs and Black Hawks. Chicago gave up Max Bentley for an entire forward line known as the 'Flying Forts' – Stewart, Gus Bodnar and Bud Poile – as well as defensemen Ernie Dickens and Bob Goldham. With Bentley, Toronto won three Cups in four years.

16 I was there for Lester Patrick Night at MSG in 1947. The Cup-winning line of Bill and

Bun Cook with Frank Boucher showed up at center ice along with the New York's hockey patriarch, Lester Patrick.

17 My favorite Toronto team to watch was the '47-48 Leafs. They featured Syl Apps, Howie Meeker and Max Bentley who had the nickname, 'The Dipsy-Doodle Dandy From Delisle.'

18 Every young fan should have a role model. Mine was Leafs captain Apps. He never cursed and was the perfect team captain.

19 Those Leafs were tough, led by 'Bashin' Bill Barilko and 'Wild' Bill Ezinicki. Barilko and Ezzie were two of the best bodycheckers I saw. For my money, Ezzie was the best bodychecking forward ever.

20 The Rangers missed the post-season for five straight years in the 1940s. New Yorkers like myself didn't know what a playoff game looked like. When they made it in 1948, it was a great event for me and my cousin Ira.

21 Organist Gladys Goodding was a fixture at the MSG console. She had a theme song for every team. "Chicago" for the Hawks, "Pretty Red Wing" for Detroit and "Saskatchewan" for the Leafs. Best of all was the original "Rangers Victory Song" by hit songwriter and Rangers fan, J. Fred Coots.

22 In 1948-49, the Eastern League played an interlocking schedule with the Quebec Senior League. The Sherbrooke Saints visited MSG featuring an all-black line led by brothers, Herbie and Ossie Carnegie, along with Manny McIntyre. A year later, Herbie was given a tryout by the Rangers.

23 The circus was MSG's top moneymaker. When the elephants arrived, the Rangers were homeless. The '49-50 Cup final had five games played in Detroit with two Rangers "home" games in Toronto. Detroit won Game 7 in double OT.

24 My radio could sometimes pick up station CBM-Montreal. What amazed me was the unique crowd roar that accompanied a goal by Maurice Richard. No player before or since stimulated fans the way 'The Rocket' did at the Forum.

25 At the start of 1950-51, publicist Herb Goren formed a Rangers Fan Club, which I joined. Soon, a "Rangers Review" monthly RFC paper was launched. Goren allowed us to interview players. My hockey-writing career had begun.

26 While a student at Brooklyn College, I got a second hockey-writing gig with the Eastern League weekly. I had entree to the MSG office and got to know people in the Rangers' hierarchy.

27 Being Jewish, I always hoped the Rangers would sign a Jewish player. Finally, in 1951, the Blueshirts signed D-man Hy Buller. He made the second all-star team in his rookie season. Unfortunately, Buller only lasted three years in the NHL.

28 The final game of the Rangers' season in 1951-52 was between last-place Chicago and fifth-place New York. The balcony was closed and we were allowed to sit in the expensive seats. The Rangers led 6-2 when Chicago's Bill Mosenko scored his iconic three goals past Lorne Anderson in 21 seconds.

29 My first visit to Toronto in 1952 had five guys in a new Pontiac for the 13-hour journey. Entering Maple Leaf Gardens for the first time was like walking into heaven. Detroit won, but I saw Max Bentley after the game signing autographs.

30 My first trip to a Habs game at the Forum took place in 1953 after a hazardous drive from Manhattan. My three buddies and I wanted to see Rocket Richard score, but Red Kelly of Detroit was the star.

31 The ugliest on-ice episode I ever saw was Bernie Geoffri-

on's baseball swing at Rangers Ron Murphy's head in 1953-54. 'Boom Boom' nailed Murphy full-force, dead-on. It looked like the Hab had killed the Ranger, but Murphy survived.

32 As VP of the Rangers Fan Club, I protested in writing to NHL president Clarence Campbell that the suspension against Murphy didn't fit his crime. Campbell wrote back a two-page typewritten letter in Rhodes Scholar-ese. Translated, he said: "You're wrong!"

33 One of my greatest thrills as assistant Rangers publicist was Nov. 24, 1954, when Allan Stanley and Nick Mickoski were traded to Chicago for Bill Gadsby and Pete Conacher. My job was to deliver the releases to all seven New York newspapers. It was one of the most exciting days of my hockey life.

34 My radio play-by-play career began and ended in 1954-55. The Armed Forces Radio guy was out with the flu. My boss Herb Goren asked me to pinch-hit. I did a Foster Hewitt "He shoots, he scores!" when Aldo Guidolin got the first goal. The experience persuaded me to not do it again.

35 I wasn't in Montreal for the Richard Riot on March 17, 1955. But I got there a day later to cover the event and saw the destruction along Ste-Catherine Street. I always felt Campbell's suspension was too severe. A decade later, Richard discussed it with me when I co-authored his book, *The Flying Frenchman*.

36 One of my saddest moments was at the end of 1954-55 when I learned that Rangers GM Frank Boucher had been fired. He was one of the sweetest of hockey people and a funny man. I was crushed.

37 When Ken McKenzie launched *The Hockey News* in 1947, I was one of the first subscribers and still have the first issue. In 1955, McKenzie hired me to cover the Rangers, and I continued until Rangers presi-

Dozens of interns have worked with Stan Fischler the past half-century. Included among them: two NHL VPs; several top executives, producers and writers at the likes of ESPN, The New York Times and MSG Networks; and, NHL team PR staff. Renowned play-by-play voice Marv Albert is part of this unique group. Interning for Fischler was a special opportunity, as Gary Frisch, now a PR rep, explains

I WAS ONE OF the privileged "Stan's Interns" during two years in college in the mid-1980s, and the experiences I had helped shape me into the hockey lover, indeed the person, I am today.

The gig entailed weekly visits to his Upper West Side Manhattan apartment, or more accurately, his Manhattan office with a bedroom and kitchen. Papers and hockey and subway memorabilia were everywhere; I'd never seen a more cluttered desk in my life. Bookshelves were lined with tomes about the sport – many of which he wrote (some with his wife Shirley). A desk nestled among the shelves became my workspace.

As a journalism major, I was tasked with everything from research to editing his columns to conducting interviews for his next story. Once, I called Chico Resch's better half for a column on hockey wives. Each week, I'd send his column out via an early fax machine that employed a spinning cylinder and phone line. Shirley was always at the ready with something baked for interns.

The real joy of interning came on NHL game days. Stan didn't keep a car in the city for practical reasons, so I'd pick him up and we'd drive out around 4 p.m. for an 8 p.m. start. We talked hockey much of the way, but Stan was interested in getting to know me personally.

I learned that for all his warm, Jewish uncle-ness, he was a dogged perfectionist in everything he did and wrote. He didn't abide laziness and kept us interns on our toes.

Once in the arena, no time was wasted. When he wasn't cramming for the game ahead in a workspace in the bowels of the building, Stan would put the finishing touches on one column or another, and he'd often dictate them, sucking down Diet Cokes, as I typed away on a portable typewriter.

During games, I'd keep stats. I'd rush these to the SportsChannel studio downstairs between periods for Stan to deliver at intermissions. After the final buzzer, we interns would split up to cover the home and visitor dressing rooms. It was heady stuff for a young intern. We'd wrangle players for interviews.

When semesters ended, I'd ask 'The Maven' to write a letter of evaluation for my advisor. Each time, he told me to write something for him to sign. The first time I did, he added a scribbled note: "Get me two more like him!" – **GARY FRISCH**

[REWIND]

dent Bill Jennings complained about my “negative” coverage and forced McKenzie to fire me.

38 My favorite Canadian was Dickie Moore, the most underrated Hall of Famer of all-time. He won the scoring title in 1958 while wearing a cast to protect a broken hand for half a season.

39 The first Cup I covered as a “newsman” with the *New York Journal-American* was 1958 at Boston Garden. The Habs beat the Bruins in six games. The winners’ dressing room was smaller than a closet. I didn’t see any champagne served.

40 I was sitting in the Garden press box Nov. 1, 1959, when Jacques Plante donned a mask for the first time, forever changing the goaltending position. Andy Bathgate had fired a backhand that struck Plante in the face. When he returned wearing a mask, onlookers thought it was a carryover from Halloween the previous night.

41 When *Hockey Pictorial* magazine was published by The Hockey News, I wrote an article about the Rangers’ irascible coach Phil Watson, “Is He Hockey’s Eddie Stanky?” Watson was so furious he had the magazine barred from MSG sales. I bought 100 copies and sold them outside the Garden.

42 The most unusual NHL ref-

eree of all-time was New Yorker Bill Chadwick. Amazingly, he only had one good eye. When fans screamed at him, “Chadwick, you’re blind!” Bill would say, “Well, they’re half-right.”

43 When the U.S. Olympians won gold at Squaw Valley in 1960, goalie Jack McCartan was the hero. Facing Detroit in his NHL debut as a Ranger, I saw McCartan stop Gordie Howe on a breakaway in the first minute. New York won 3-1, but McCartan was finished the next year.

44 Glenn Hall was in goal and I was in the press box at Olympia Stadium in Detroit on April 14, 1961, when the Hawks beat the Wings to win their first Cup since 1938. ‘Mr. Goalie’ simply said: “I’m enthused!”

45 I was talking to Carl Brewer in the Toronto dressing room at Chicago Stadium in 1962 when the Leafs won the first of three straight Cups. Toronto GM Punch Imlach was angry because his Leafs were taking too long getting dressed. I was stunned a guy could be that ornery at such a jubilant occasion.

46 One of the most vicious attacks ever occurred at MSG when Boston’s Ted Green speared Rangers’ Phil Goyette, rupturing his spleen. I broke the story in the *Journal-American* when Jennings called for a bounty on Green’s head.



47 Expansion from six to 12 teams occurred in 1967. Original Six fans like myself despised the move. The 1968 Cup final between Montreal and St. Louis was a bore and infuriated a traditionalist like me.

48 One of my favorite interviews was Frank Mahovlich when he was a young Maple Leaf. We had breakfast in the Hotel Commodore at Grand Central Terminal. We got along until I dug into a grapefruit and it squirted into The Big M’s eye.

49 Larry Zeidel’s wife, Marie, phoned me in 1967-68 in a rage, reporting some Bruins hurled anti-Semitic remarks at her husband during a game in Quebec City. Philly games were moved there after the roof blew off the Spectrum. Thanks to my story in *The Toronto Star*, the NHL launched a probe.

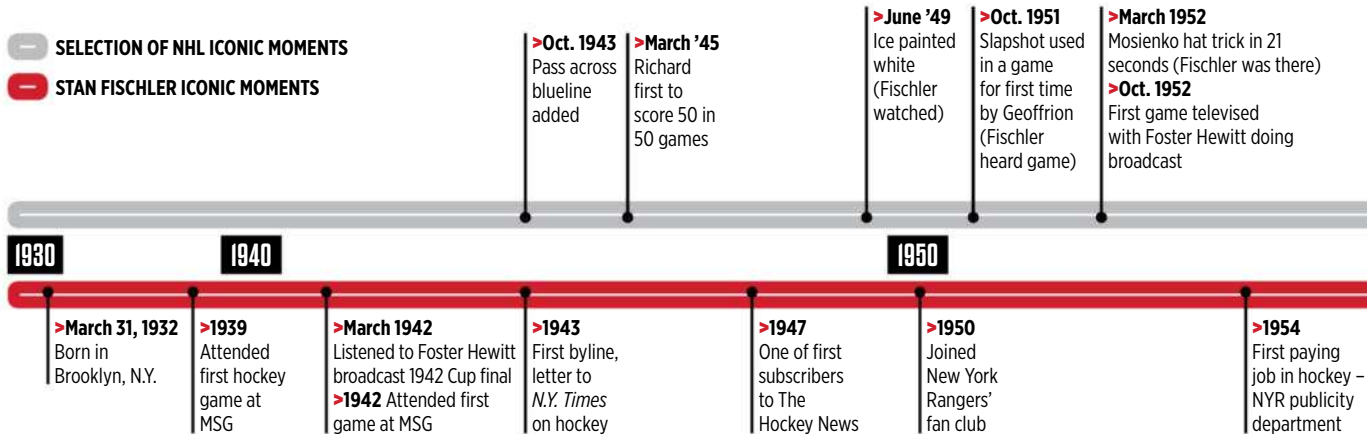
50 Willie O’Ree and I became pals long ago. On a visit to my Manhattan apartment, he told me something never publicized before then – that he played his entire career with sight in only one eye. That he was able to succeed for two decades as a pro is as amazing as his trail-blazing stint with the Bruins.

51 My longest-running feud started in 1970 after the publication of my Stan Mikita biography. Mikita and I had been pals since I wrote a magazine story on him. After that, I began gathering info about him. When the book came out, he was angry because I didn’t get permission from him, which I didn’t need. We haven’t talked since.

52 In 1971, my wife, Shirley, broke the gender barrier at MSG by becoming the first woman allowed in the press

BEARING WITNESS TO CHANGE

After 65 years in the business, Stan Fischler is stepping away from the broadcast side of the game. His streak of 80 years as a fan carries on.



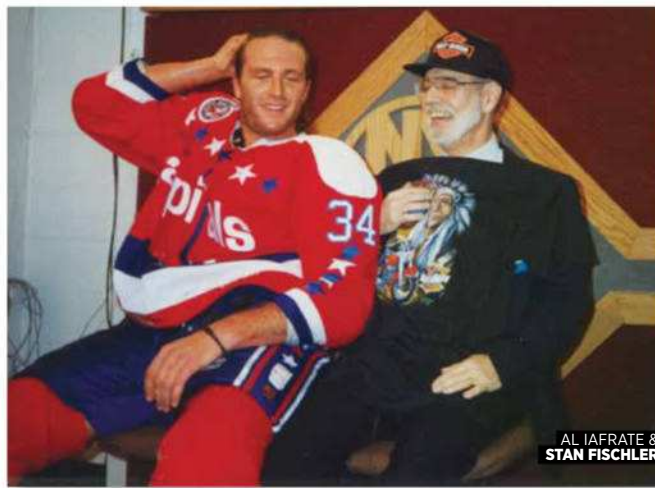
box. But she had to take MSG to the human rights commission to gain entry. All but one of the male writers fought against Shirley getting access. Only Neil Often, a young *New York Post* writer, supported Shirley.

53 Bobby Orr hosted me at his home in Parry Sound, Ont., and we went skinny-dipping at midnight in Georgian Bay. I'll never forget him picking me up at Maple Leaf Gardens and driving me in his convertible up Yonge Street into the Ontario countryside. I got plenty of material for a book about Orr that eventually would anger Bobby.

54 The most successful book, money-wise, I ever did was *Bobby Orr and the Big Bad Bruins*. Like Mikita, Orr refused to talk to me after that, and every Bruin followed suit, except Derek Sanderson. When Derek asked me to do his book, I tried to get into the Bruins' dressing room, and B's press agent Herb Ralby barred my entrance.

55 The Islanders arrived in 1972 and soon their boss, Bill Torrey, got mad at me. Torrey didn't like my criticism of his first draft choice, Billy Harris, who I said was one-dimensional. Torrey got over that by 1975 when I became part of the Islanders' TV broadcast team.

56 Shirley and I made history in 1974, when for the first and



only time a husband and wife called a major-league hockey game at MSG when the WHA's New York Raiders were playing the New England Whalers.

57 Bob Nystrom's Cup-winning goal in overtime against Philadelphia on May 24, 1980, was a thing of beauty. I can still picture it in my mind's eye and it was the first of four in a row, the NHL's last true dynasty.

58 MacMillan Publishers asked Shirley and I to produce a definitive hockey encyclopedia similar to its baseball classic. The assignment was done at the dawn of the computer age, and I'm no good with computers. Shirley did 95 percent of the work and saved the project.

59 Don Cherry was an easy subject for me, writing his autobiography, *Grapes*. He reeled off stories with ease. One problem: Don wouldn't reveal the extra Bruin (Stan Jonathan) on the

ice in the playoff game that cost Boston a goal and, eventually, the series to Montreal.

60 Fans and media were going nuts in the summer of 1983 when a five-minute overtime was added to resolve ties. But I was there in 1942 when OT was abolished because of wartime restrictions on train schedules. I always loved overtime and missed it those 41 years.

61 I covered "Yellow Sunday," the 1988 Devils-Bruins playoff game at Meadowlands. Off-ice guys Jim Sullivan, Paul McInnis and Vin Godleski officiated the game after NHL referees and linesmen went on strike. The Devils won while everyone wondered where NHL president John Ziegler was at the time.

62 When the Rangers won their first Cup in 54 years, June 14, 1994, I thought about all the Rangers from that 1939-40 team who must have hoped

they'd be winning another Cup soon enough, not a half-century later. Guys like Babe Pratt, Dutch Hiller, Alex Shibicky and captain Art Coulter.

63 Mark Messier's famed "We'll beat the Devils" guarantee in 1994 was less than it was blown up to be, but a journalistic coup for *The New York Post's* Mark Everson. Covering the third-round series, Everson virtually put the words in Messier's mouth, but credit the captain for cashing in on them.

64 One morning I interviewed Al Iafrate about his new tattoos. In order to show them to me, he asked if I would hold his cigarette and can of Coke. Photographer Bruce Bennett was walking by and took the picture. To this day, everyone thinks I was hanging out smoking and drinking Coke with Iafrate.

65 My final broadcast assignment was April 2018. It was a bittersweet walk away from the arena that last time and my thoughts gravitated to my first paid gig with the Rangers in September 1954. Then I couldn't help thinking about that Sunday afternoon in 1939 when my dad took me to old MSG to see my first hockey game. I still reflect on missing *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* that day. And wouldn't mind viewing a revival just for old times' sake. **H**

>March 1955
Zamboni used for first time at NHL game
>March 1955
Richard Riot (Fischler was there)
>June 1955
Glenn Hall first goalie to drop to ice to make saves (Fischler first to point it out in print)

>Jan. 1958
Color barrier broken (Fischler was there)

>March '59
Air travel happens for first time
>Nov. 1959
Jacques Plante uses goalie mask for first time (Fischler was there)

>Early 1960s
Curved stick invented

>Jan. 1968
Masterton dies

>April 1970
Goalie pulled for first time

>Jan. 1981
Bossy second to score 50 in 50 (Fischler there)

>June 1983
Overtime period added (after 41-year absence)

>June 1991
Video review added

1960

1970

1980

1990

2000

2010

2018

>Jan. 1955
Did radio play-by-play of NHL game
>Sept. 1955
Paid reporter, *New York Journal-American*
>1955
Hired by The Hockey News to cover Rangers

>April 1958
Covered first Stanley Cup in Boston (Montreal won)

>1967
Wrote first book about hockey entitled *Gordie Howe*

>April 2018
Worked last NHL game in a broadcast capacity

Goalie Evan Fitzpatrick and Noah Dobson, No. 53, both played huge roles in the Titan title.



CHL

LITTLE CITY COMES UP BIG

The CHL's smallest market grabbed its biggest prize thanks to unparalleled depth and a blue-chip blueliner **BY RYAN KENNEDY**

MAJOR JUNIOR IS BIG business, with large cities such as Vancouver, Quebec and Calgary all boasting teams. So it was nice to see the little guy take home the Memorial Cup this season, as the Acadie-Bathurst Titan defeated the host Regina Pats to win the 100th edition of the junior classic.

Bathurst, N.B., is literally the smallest market in the CHL, with a population of just

12,000. But there were 1,500 fans waiting at the airport for the victorious Titan, while the championship party had an even bigger turnout. "The parade was almost 5,000 people," said GM Sylvain Couturier. "When you put that into perspective, it's nearly half the town. They went through the tough times and stuck with us."

Indeed, only five years ago it looked as though the franchise was headed out of town, before

a local consortium of business folks bought the team. The fact the Titan could compete with larger markets is impressive. That they went all the way is an even greater testament to the team-building done by Couturier and his staff.

Players developed by the Titan, such as Anaheim Ducks pick Antoine Morand and top-10 2018 NHL draft prospect Noah Dobson, laid the foundation, while other key members were brought in via trade. Captain Jeffrey Truchon-Viel was drafted by Sherbrooke but spent most of his career with the Titan and was recently signed by the San Jose Sharks.

Philadelphia Flyers first-rounder German Rubtsov came over from Chicoutimi, while goalie and St. Louis Blues pick Evan Fitzpatrick was acquired from Sherbrooke before the trade deadline. "We were trying to find the right players for the right job," Couturier said.

"With German Rubtsov, people saw he was a point-per-game player, but he's also a 200-foot player, he does so much else.



We knew what we were buying."

The moves paid off. Acadie-Bathurst clinched the QMJHL title with a win over a top-end, veteran squad from Blainville-Boisbriand, then won three of four games to claim the Memorial Cup. "We had a lot of depth, especially on the back end," Dobson said. "Even the bottom two guys could be out on the ice against any other line. Up front we had almost three first lines, and then bringing in a guy like Evan Fitzpatrick at Christmas, he was a brick wall for the rest of the season and one of the MVPs of the playoffs."

But make no mistake: in terms of upside, no one touches Dobson, a 6-foot-3 defenseman who's an elite skater with great puckhandling skills.

KEITH HERSHILLER/HOCKEY HALL OF FAME

Born in P.E.I., Dobson took an interesting route to the top. Before he got to the 'Q,' he was recruited by former NHL coach Pierre Page to play for a new program in Austria called Red Bull Salzburg Academy. Retired NHLer Brian Savage was a skills coach there and the opportunity intrigued Dobson. "Looking back, I have so many memories that I'll have for the rest of my life," he said. "Living overseas in Austria at 15 on my own, not many kids get that opportunity. To see different parts of Europe, like Switzerland, Germany and the Czech Republic, while playing the game I love, was pretty special."

On top of the training, Dobson also got to skate with and against quality players. Fellow Academy alum Sampo Ranta is also a top-40 prospect for the 2018 draft, while Kristian Pospisil and Ryan Savage (Brian's son) are also possible draftees.

After watching him play in a pair of nearby tournaments, the Titan nabbed Dobson with the sixth overall pick in the 2016 QMJHL draft. "There was no other guy we were going to pick, in our mind," Couturier said. "He's a special player."

As a rookie with Acadie-Bathurst, Dobson didn't get a lot of offensive opportunities and barely got chances on the power play. This season, though, he was indispensable. He often played 30 minutes a game and finished the season with 69 points in 67 games. Next year, Couturier expects Dobson to take on more of a leadership role and believes that physical maturity is the only box left to tick. Scouts agree, they see a kid who will be scary-good with a few more pounds on his frame.

A growth spurt made Dobson awkward a couple years ago – he was only six-feet when Acadie-Bathurst drafted him – but he worked hard to get his stride back, and now it's one of his calling cards. That skating helped Dobson push the Titan's pace at the Memorial Cup, giving the smallest town in the CHL the ultimate trophy. And you better believe they're going to enjoy it. **H**

NCAA

PUPPIES PAY OFF

Bulldogs' freshman-filled blueline leads a dominating Frozen Four run **BY RYAN KENNEDY**

ON PAPER, MINNESOTA-Duluth's defense corps was ravaged in the summer of 2017. The Bulldogs' top four scoring D-men all turned pro (including Neal Pionk and Carson Soucy, who saw NHL action this season), while



a fifth finished his eligibility.

As it turned out, the new kids were more than OK. They carried Duluth to its second national championship in eight years under coach Scott Sandelin. "We knew it was a group with a lot of potential, even though they were inex-



SCOTT PERUNOVICH

perienced," Sandelin said. "We had to play those guys. They were going to play through their mistakes."

The new recruits had some pretty good resumes. Dylan Samberg was a Jets second-rounder, while Mikey Anderson was a Kings pick. But the kid who ended up making the biggest difference was unheralded Scott Perunovich, an undrafted and undersized Minnesota product who finished the season as the NCAA's rookie of the year after putting up 36 points in 42 games. "Offensively, he's always been a special player," Sandelin said.



"He sees the ice so well. I told him, 'I want you to be a fourth forward, I want you up the ice.' I didn't know he'd be our leading scorer."

But that's what happened, and now, in his final year of NHL draft eligibility, Perunovich is likely going to be snapped up among the top 50 selections. Perunovich helped Duluth push through the Frozen Four bracket with stingy precision, yielding just five goals in four games. They beat Notre Dame 2-1 to clinch the title. "We knew we're young, but we all took it in stride," Perunovich said. "We were willing to put in the work."

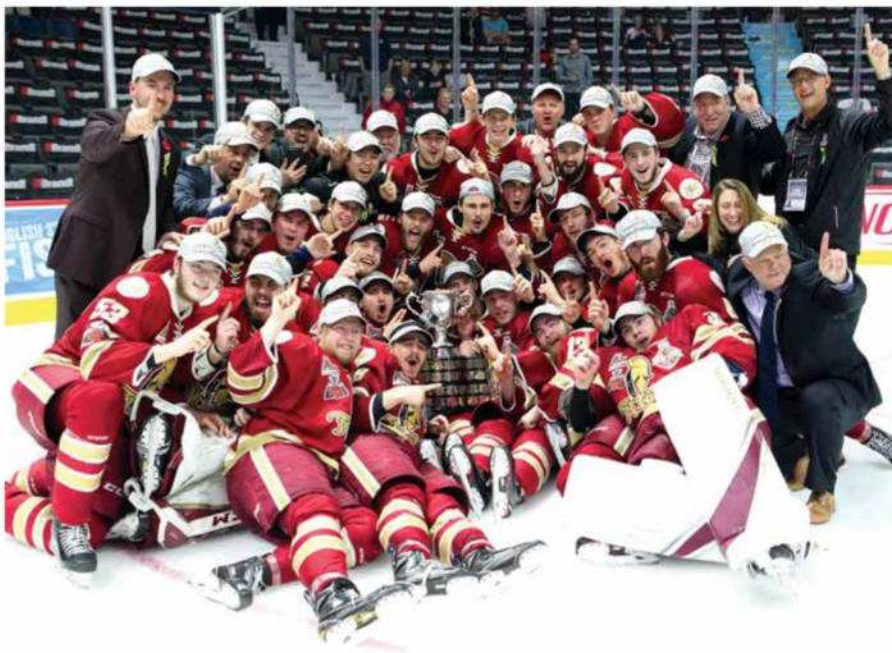
Work and battling through adversity is what got Perunovich to where he is today. He started off in the Minnesota high-school circuit with Hibbing-Chisholm and put up a ton of points, but the small-school Bluejackets weren't playing the state's best competition. The next stop was USHL Cedar Rapids for the 2016-17 campaign, which turned out to be an eye-opener. The RoughRiders were the worst team in the league by far, but he worked with three-time USHL coach of the year Mark Carlson, who helped Perunovich with his defensive acumen. As a smaller player, using his stick to defend was paramount, and since he already had the smarts and anticipation to make it work, the learning curve wasn't steep. So when he got to Duluth, he was more prepared than his minus-37 rating with Cedar Rapids indicated.

Sandelin believes his young team began to come together around Christmas. The Bulldogs played in a holiday tournament in New Hampshire, beating Yale and Dartmouth for the Ledyard Classic title, then swept Colorado College and North Dakota in their next four NCHC games. Perunovich credits the coaches and team leaders for not making the freshmen feel like rookies, and in the end, Duluth stood alone on top. As Sandelin just proved, sometimes you have to let your kids fly out there. **H**



[THE STRAIGHT EDGE]

WITH RYAN KENNEDY | @THNRYANKENNEDY



MEMORIAL MAKEOVER

The time is right to open the major junior classic to 16 teams in four cities. We'll call it May Madness, and it will be great

THE 100TH EDITION OF the Memorial Cup was typical of the tournament in recent years. There were highs and lows. Acadie-Bathurst winning its first title, while being the smallest market in the CHL? That was a high. Soft attendance and the host Regina Pats getting a month's rest because they had lost in the first round of the WHL playoffs? Not so good.

It feels like an annual exercise: how to fix the Memorial Cup? The glory is real for the champions, but the format of three league champions plus a host team that *should* be good needs a retool. It also doesn't help that the tourney is stretched over 10 days, with no more than one game per day.

So here's my proposal to kick-start the Memorial Cup: May Madness. Let's bracket this puppy up. Yes, I'm stealing from the NCAA, where the Frozen Four offers a perfect solution for major junior's needs. And yes, this is a radical re-imagining of what the Memorial Cup can be, but change is good.

We're going to tear up the current format and make it a 16-team field. Qualifiers will include the 12 teams that reached their league semifinals and four wild cards. The

wild cards will include at least one team from each league and be determined by standings and playoff finish – you have to get to the second round to be considered.

The three playoff champions will be No. 1 seeds, with a committee determining the fourth. That panel, made up of major junior muckety-mucks, picks the wild-card teams and do the rest of the seeding, with four

groups of four. All three leagues would be represented in each bracket and you can't play a team from your own circuit in the first round. Oh, and it's single elimination.

My May Madness is broken up into two weekends, with the top seeds hosting. That's right, four regionals. The first Saturday will be a doubleheader, with the regional final on Sunday. Then everyone gets

THE MORE, THE MERRIER

It's time to make the Memorial Cup bigger and better. How about a 16-team tournament for CHL supremacy?

a break to prepare for the next weekend, where the remaining four teams will go at it under the same format: doubleheader on Saturday, championship game on Sunday.

Attendance for regionals will be sturdy, since you're guaranteed a home team in each city for at least one game. For the title weekend, you go neutral site. OK, semi-neutral site. Quebec City would be one great option, since the Remparts have an NHL-caliber arena. Vancouver would work, too, assuming the Canucks aren't busy (but again, we're only talking about two days, so even a playoff run shouldn't hinder plans).

The benefit of this design is you don't get fan fatigue. Getting supporters to come out for one game a day for more than a week is a big ask, and the steep ticket prices added to the problem this year. Next season's host, the Halifax Mooseheads, recognize this, with ticket prices coming down. But again, a three-game package would be easier for the average family to take on.

What's more disturbing about the current set-up is hosting doesn't always have a benefit. The Regina Pats took a bath on the 2018 edition because they had to pay \$3.6 million to host the Memorial Cup. Shareholders of the team are on the hook for \$2 million. That doesn't sound like a sustainable plan. Halifax has a bigger rink, so the finances might work better next year, but then you have to ask how many cities can still afford to host under the current format.

I know change is scary in hockey, but it's worth exploring. Let's not forget the Memorial Cup began as a two-team tournament in the early days, expanding to three in 1972 and then four in 1983. Is 16 a big jump from four? Of course. But this new format would

IS 16 A BIG JUMP FROM FOUR? OF COURSE. BUT THIS FORMAT WOULD REDUCE THE WEAR AND TEAR ON KIDS AND KEEP FAN BASES INVESTED

reduce the wear and tear on the kids while keeping more fan bases invested in the tourney. The four host teams get extra home dates, and, most importantly, only franchises that earned the right to be there would be there: no more first-round flops as hosts.

The current model is OK, but cracks are showing. Let's get ahead of the curve and make May a mad one for major junior. **H**

KEITH HERSHILLER/HOCKEY HALL OF FAME



SO WHAT'S NEXT FOR VEGAS FANS?

The Golden Knights should step back, take a deep breath and soak in everything that was a magical, memorable joyride of a season. Because it won't happen again

OVERHEARD IN AN ELEVATOR at the T-Mobile Arena an hour before Game 2 of the Stanley Cup final: "It's the Cup, baby! I've been waiting seven months for this!" He says this to nobody in particular. Standing not far from him is a kid in a Marc-Andre Fleury sweater who can't be older than six. It strikes me that this youngster is experiencing something of which 50-year-old fans of the Toronto Maple Leafs and St. Louis Blues would have absolutely no conception.

In the atrium of the arena overlooking the Toshiba Plaza where thousands of fans are gathering to watch the game, Vegas Golden Knights owner Bill Foley, in a team-issued golf shirt and khakis, tries to make sense of what he is seeing. "It's mind-boggling that this town doesn't quite appreciate how significant this is," Foley said. But how could they? Most of the people assembled didn't know a year ago what the Stanley Cup was, let alone how difficult it is to win. Hockey people cringed a little when Foley predicted the Golden Knights would be in the playoffs within three years and win the Cup within five. Now he's over-delivered on his promise in Year 1. "Our whole schedule has advanced," Foley said. "No matter what happens in this series, we're advanced. We're a

different team than I thought we would be at the end of Year 1 or at the end of Year 2."

Three hours later, the Knights would lose Game 2, beginning the spiral that would establish them as the second-best team in the final. The regression that some predicted in Fleury's game had begun. A defense corps that looked so solid for so long suddenly looked leaky and nervous. They were turning over the puck in uncharacteristic ways. The folksy coach who won over his players and everyone else in hockey started to get testy over the increased scrutiny and some of the non-calls. The Cup final, more than any other round in the playoffs, has a unique way of injecting a dose of grim reality.

But the fans of this team have been spoiled, and a solid period of deprogramming must now begin. Foley and GM George McPhee have, in effect, bought their 16-year-old a Maserati and had it waiting in the driveway when the kid came home from passing his driver's test. They've handed their fans everything right away, and like all well-meaning parents, not even they intended for things to turn out this way.

History and stats tell us that the Golden Knights won't be in the final in 2019. Heck, the way things are in today's parity-driven NHL, they might not even be in the playoffs

in 2019. But this much we know, this lovable group of misfits won't sneak up on anyone next season. William Karlsson will not score on 23.4 percent of his shots. Fleury will be 34 and entering the last year of his contract. There will be injuries. Players will want to be paid. Others who had career seasons will regress to the mean.

That's not to say Vegas won't be a very good team for a long time. Aided by the most generous expansion-draft rules in history, McPhee was a master conductor of the process, leveraging teams with cap issues and mining them for players, picks and prospects that will keep the pipeline flush with talent. And they have money. That's why they were able to take on David Clarkson's contract. It's why they took Jason Garrison and played him only eight games before parking him in the minors and why they were able to part ways with Vadim Shipachyov after realizing they had blundered by signing him.

Yes, things look good, very good, for the Golden Knights. But that clean slate with which they started will not stay that way. The three draft picks McPhee gave up to get Tomas Tatar, a player who sat out most of the playoffs and has three years left on his deal at \$5.3 million per season, represent three fewer young players for their system.

And in a league where there is such a fine line between success and struggle, where teams such as Chicago and Los Angeles can find themselves transformed from Cup champions to non-playoff teams in the space of a couple of years, things can change awfully quickly.

And that's where Foley and McPhee face their biggest task. Managing expectations will be an enormous challenge. Anyone who has raised children knows how difficult it is to unspoil a kid who has had everything handed to him. It takes some work. Vegas fans, likely sooner rather than later, will have to come to the realization that every season doesn't unfold this way. Look at Denver.

That hockey fandom got the Quebec Nordiques in 1995-96 and won the Cup. It began a decade where the Avalanche were a dominant, free-spending team and won another Cup in 2001 and was the gold standard for the league. Now it's a budget team that has trouble filling the building and has had more bumps than smooth driving.

I'm not here to pour water over the best story in hockey in years, to rain on the parade of the best expansion team in the history of pro sports. But things turned quickly in the final. That's the reality. And now that the anomaly is over, the Golden Knights can get about finding their own way in the NHL. They're one of 31 now, and they'll have to deal with the reality that comes with the fact that only one of them wins the trophy at the end of every season. **H**

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