

*The Vegas Golden Knights were the most successful expansion team in the history of professional sports, making it to the Stanley Cup Finals in their first year. They also helped a city heal after a horrific mass murder at a concert before the season. Their success united the community and turned ordinary people into hockey fans.*

## **Vegas Born:**

### **The Remarkable Story of The Golden Knights**

by Steve Carp

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# ***VEGAS BORN***

The remarkable story of the **Golden Knights**

STEVE CARP

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ISBN: 978-1-64438-200-4

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Published by BookLocker.com, Inc., St. Petersburg, Florida.

Printed on acid-free paper.

BookLocker.com, Inc.

2018

First Edition

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## **2. Dreams To Reality**

At the 2015 Stanley Cup Finals, the talk of expansion was heating up. Bettman acknowledged that the NHL was considering expansion for the first time since 2000 but would not say how many teams or which cities.

Foley knew better. Las Vegas was very much on the NHL's radar and Foley was starting to put together a staff in the event the league granted him a franchise.

Costs were speculating on how much it would be. Some said \$200 million. Others thought \$300 million or \$350 million, any of which would have been a record amount to join the NHL.

The league's Board of Governors had an expansion committee which delved into the possibilities and would report back to the entire membership. The committee would do its due diligence on the viability of the groups that were interested, primarily Black Knight Sports and entertainment and Quebecor Corporation. Both would submit to background checks as to their financial health.

Back in the mid-1990s, the NHL got burned when John Spano bought the New York Islanders based on a bankroll of deceit and fraud. The NHL was embarrassed when news came out that Spano had virtually no means to own a hockey team

and he had swindled banks and other lending institutions to keep him financially liquid.

The NHL was determined that would never happen again. So Foley turned in reams of paperwork and submitted to numerous questions. An FBI background check was a piece of cake compared to what the NHL was putting him through.

But Foley understood it was part of doing business. And when the deadline to apply for a franchise came and went on July 20, 2015, Foley had sent the NHL ten million dollars. So had Quebec City. They would be the lone applicants.

As the due diligence process continued, Foley learned the meaning of patience.

"I'm not a very patient person by nature," he said. "But I know I'm going to have to learn to be as we go through this process."

The Board of Governors met in Pebble Beach, California, in December and there was speculation a decision might be at hand. But Bettman said at the meeting that no decision had been reached and the process would continue into 2016. He wouldn't comment on whether there were any issues with Foley's application but those in the know said Foley's role was no problem.

The league was more concerned about the arena and the legal gambling issue, more concerns about the former than the latter. The arena was progressing nicely and was looking at an April 2016 opening. Officials were finalizing a deal in which telephone provider T-Mobile would obtain the naming rights for the building, which would seat approximately 17,500 for hockey.

As for gambling, the NHL, like the other pro sports leagues, had a relationship with the Las Vegas sports books.

The books maintained a dialogue with the leagues and would keep them apprised of any suspicious betting activity.

Hockey had no betting scandals to speak of and the reality was that the NHL generated very little handle — less than five percent — in the overall amount of bets the books took in. The danger of tainting the game was minuscule at best.

As the 2016 season headed to the playoffs, the rumors began to heat up. Word was Las Vegas was in but the owners were not quite sure about Quebec City. There were reportedly concerns over the strength of the Canadian dollar and whether it was strong enough to make a Quebec NHL franchise profitable. The loonie had sunk to 68 cents compared to the American dollar, and with that kind of instability, the owners were worried that Quebec City would make it.

At the Stanley Cup Final in Pittsburgh, Bettman said no final decision had been reached. But on June 15, word was the Board of Governors executive committee had recommended the league expand to Las Vegas only.

That would leave the NHL with an odd number of teams — 31. It also meant the balance of the conferences would remain uneven, 16 in the East, 15 in the West. That imbalance also was a cause for concern about putting a team in Quebec. It couldn't realistically put Quebec in the West and if Quebec were put in the East where it belonged, it would have meant convincing another Eastern Conference owner (Detroit? Columbus?) to move their franchise to the West. And that would have been a tough sell.

The NHL had been holding its Awards Show in Las Vegas since 2007. So with everyone in town to see who picked up the various trophies and honors, it made sense for the league to hold its Board of Governors meeting in town.

On the morning of June 22, 2016, the owners met at the Encore Hotel to make the decision. The asking price to join? A record \$500 million. Foley, who pretty much knew what the verdict would be, stayed coy and optimistic.

“We have done everything we were asked to,” he said.

Before a packed ballroom, Bettman announced what Las Vegas fans had eagerly anticipated and Quebec fans had been dreading — the NHL was expanding to 31 teams and Las Vegas would be the 31st.

“Well, Las Vegas, we did it!” Foley said. “We want everyone to be a fan and we’re dedicated to it. My obligation is to hold the trust of this team for the community.”

And as Las Vegas celebrated the news, those in Quebec were left with an empty feeling. Rejection is always difficult and to be passed over for a city that had very little hockey history hurt deeply. The Quebecor group said all the right things. But the words rang hollow.

That evening a celebration was held at the team’s temporary offices in the Donald Reynolds Foundation building adjacent to the TPC Summerlin golf course. In the courtyard with hundreds of invited guests holding flutes of champagne, Clark County commissioner Steve Sisolak offered a toast to Foley and his NHL expansion team, one that still did not have a name, a logo, colors, players, a coach or a general manager.

But that was about to change quickly.

Bill Foley had his franchise. Now he had to build a team.

There would be no shortage of attractive candidates when it came to filling the general manager’s chair. There were plenty of smart, experienced hockey executives who would jump at the chance to build a team from scratch.



As the 2016 calendar quickly flipped from June to July, Foley knew he had to move quickly. He was going to need people to scout and assess the 30 NHL teams in preparation for the expansion draft scheduled for the following June. He also would need scouts to watch amateur hockey as well as the professional leagues in Europe.

Those hirings could not be made until he had a general manager. But who would be the right person? Foley wanted someone he felt comfortable with, someone he could trust to make the right decisions while spending his money wisely.

This would be arguably the biggest decision he would make and he couldn't afford to get it wrong. This couldn't just be a gut call where you think you have a feeling it will work out in the end. And unlike real estate or insurance or wine, Foley wasn't well versed in the business of hockey. Sure, he knew what the salary cap was. He was aware of analytics even though he couldn't tell you what Corsi was. He was not aware of all the rules regarding free agency, trades, draft picks and things like that.

And while Foley was making every attempt to gain knowledge of such matters, the reality was he was hardly going to qualify as an expert. So he had to hire someone who was.

But who would that someone be? Would it be someone who was already a general manager, someone who had built a team from the start, such as Nashville's David Poile? Would it be a GM who had experience, someone like Florida's Dale Tallon or Don Waddell in Carolina? Would he go for an assistant general manager who had paid his dues and was ready to move up, someone like Norm Maciver in Chicago, Paul Fenton in Nashville or Jason Botterill in Pittsburgh?

Foley picked the brains of his fellow owners. He also did his own homework. And when he began the process in early July at his ranch in Montana, far away from the prying eyes of the Las Vegas media, Foley quickly found his man.

George McPhee had built the Washington Capitals into one of the NHL's elite franchises. In his first season, 1998, the Capitals made it to the Stanley Cup Final, only to be swept by the Detroit Red Wings. McPhee always had a reputation for being smart, for having a keen eye for assessing talent, for hiring good people and allowing them to do their jobs and knowing how to work within the framework of the NHL rule book. He also understood the league's salary cap and hired people who really knew it. He had scouts all over the world looking for the next great star player.

In other words, George McPhee was exactly what Bill Foley was looking for. What's more, McPhee was highly motivated? Capitals owner Ted Leonsis opted not to renew McPhee's contract following the 2014-15 season, after the Caps flopped in the playoffs. McPhee had spent 17 years in the nation's capital and the fact he wouldn't be allowed to see his handiwork through to the end had to sting.

He was able to stay in the game thanks to Hockey Canada, which made him an assistant general manager for the 2016 World Championships, and the New York Islanders hired him as a special assistant to general manager Garth Snow.

But the big question was, would McPhee and Foley hit it off?

It didn't take Foley long to realize he had his man after sitting down with McPhee for the first time.

"We were on the same page," Foley said. "I felt George was someone I could trust to do the right thing and build our hockey club the right way."

On July 12, 2017, in a small conference room at T-Mobile Arena, McPhee was announced as the general manager of the Las Vegas NHL franchise. The team still didn't have a name or a logo, but Foley was working on that. The important thing was he had his general manager in place.

"I have complete faith in George," Foley said. "I knew right away after talking to him for the first time that he was the one I wanted to lead our franchise."

"I was looking for a guy who was going to be as focused, dedicated, have a take-no-prisoners attitude and who was as committed to winning. But more important, someone I could identify with, have a symbiotic relationship with, and that we could have a respectful relationship where we can talk freely and honestly. I found that person, and I'm really thrilled."

McPhee was equally thrilled to be back in the big chair, saying, "Every general manager dreams of having this kind of opportunity, to build a team from the very beginning. I'm grateful and excited to be here, and we will put a product on the ice that Las Vegas can be proud of and win a Stanley Cup."

Little did he know that day how prophetic his words would ultimately be.

McPhee had been a scrappy player. He was a star at Bowling Green University and in 1982, he won the Hobey Baker Award, which goes to college hockey's best player. He would play seven NHL seasons with the New York Rangers and New Jersey Devils, and he scored 21 goals and had 24 assists in 109 games. He also racked up 247 penalty minutes and at 5 feet, 9 inches and just 170 pounds, McPhee had to

show he would not back down from the game's bigger, rougher and tougher players.

After his playing career ended, he got his law degree and became a player agent. Eventually, he got into hockey management as an assistant to Vancouver Canucks General Manager Pat Quinn. During his time in Vancouver, the Canucks made four playoff appearances and reached the Stanley Cup Final in 1994, only to lose to McPhee's old team, the Rangers, in Game 7. The Rangers had ended a decades-long hex with their first championship since 1940.

McPhee moved on to Washington in 1997 as the Capitals' general manager and he made hockey relevant in the nation's capital. And while the Caps struggled for a bit after reaching the final in '98, McPhee drafted wisely and quickly rebuilt the team to where the Capitals were among the best in the league.

He drafted Alex Ovechkin, Nicklas Backstrom, John Carlson, Evgeny Kuznetsov and Braden Holtby, the core of the Caps' 2018 Stanley Cup championship team.

Now, he was starting anew. His first order of business in Las Vegas was to hire an assistant and build a hockey staff. For McPhee, one name jumped out.

Kelly McCrimmon had been a vanguard in junior hockey, one of the most respected individuals at that level of the game. McCrimmon had built a strong program with the Brandon Wheat Kings, having served as the team's coach, general manager and eventually, the owner. The Wheaties, as they're known in their hometown, had made three Memorial Cup appearances while McCrimmon was the team's GM and he was a hot commodity for NHL teams looking for a junior executive.

The Toronto Maple Leafs had pursued McCrimmon but he elected to stay in Brandon, which is about a two-hour drive from Winnipeg.

However, when McPhee called about coming to Las Vegas, McCrimmon was interested. He would have a bigger role with the expansion team, and he knew his advice would be critical when it came time to select players in both the NHL expansion draft and the league's amateur draft come 2017.

Foley met McCrimmon, and as with McPhee, they hit it off. It didn't hurt that Murray Craven, who at the time was serving as an adviser to Foley on all matters in hockey, had known McCrimmon and knew of his acumen.

As July was ending, McPhee was moving quickly. Almost daily there was news of another hire. Vaughn Karpan was brought in as the team's director of player personnel. Bob Lowes was brought on to be the assistant director of player personnel. Scott Luce was hired as the team's director of amateur scouting. David Conte was named special advisor for hockey operations. Wil Nichol was tabbed to be the team's director of player development. Misha Donskov was to oversee hockey operations.

Craven, who was already working on plans for the team's practice facility, was named senior vice president. Andrew Lugerner, who worked for McPhee in Washington, was brought on to handle salary cap questions as the team's director of legal affairs. Tom Poraszka, who had built a successful online venture for salary cap nerds with [GeneralFanger.com](http://GeneralFanger.com), was lured away to assist with cap issues.

McPhee also convinced Katy Boettinger, who was his right-hand person at the office in Washington, to leave a teaching job

in Florida to return to pro sports as the director of hockey administration in Las Vegas.

Just as quickly, scouts were being hired, both pro and amateur. Erin Ginnell, Bruno Campese, Raphael Pouliot, Peter Ward, Kent Hawley, Mark Workman and Mike Levine all began work as members of the team's amateur scouting staff. On the pro side, Vince Williams, Kelly Kisio, Jim McKenzie, Alex Godynyuk, Peter Ahola, Mike Rosati and Vaclav Nedomansky were brought in to scout in the NHL as well as Europe.

The first amateur tournament, the Ivan Hlinka Memorial Cup, was getting ready to start in mid-August in Bratislava, and Las Vegas would be well represented.

In addition, the training camps for junior teams, college teams and, of course, the NHL, were just weeks away. And for the next 10 months, McPhee and his hockey people would be all over the world watching, evaluating and taking copious notes in preparation for the two drafts that would come 48 hours apart in June 2017.

It was truly an exciting time. For McPhee, this is what he lived for.

"We built some terrific teams in Washington. Then they took the canvas and the paint brushes away," he said. "Now they're giving me something which is brand new, and I get the chance to start fresh."

## 6. A City Hurts

It was a normal Sunday the morning of October 1. The high temperature was expected to be 90 degrees. There had been a few passing clouds but nothing to get concerned over.

People went about their business in the usual fashion. Many opted for brunch at their favorite local establishment. The sports books were jammed as always with fans watching the National Football League. People walked their dogs, went jogging, sipped coffee or buried their faces in the screens of their cellphones, the new national pastime.

For the Golden Knights, the day meant the final preseason game. The San Jose Sharks were in town and the game had a 5 p.m. start, which would turn out to be a significant thing. The Sharks had already beaten the Knights in San Jose, but as any coach will tell you, preseason wins don't mean a thing.

Gerard Gallant was still juggling his lines and his defensive pairings, trying to hit on the right combinations. He thought he had the components of his first line established with Jonathan Marchessault and Reilly Smith. But he still needed the right person to center the trio. He was hoping Vadim Shipachyov would be that person but things didn't appear to be panning out. Oscar Lindberg, who had been a serviceable center with

the New York Rangers, appeared to be a better option at this point.

Meanwhile, Cody Eakin, who was looking to bounce back from an injury-plagued year with the Dallas Stars, was the second line center for the time being. Gallant had veteran winger David Perron with Eakin and the thinking was that when James Neal was ready, he would join the line.

Erik Hauula was the third line center and he had a variety of wingers skating with him. Brendan Leipsic skated with Hauula as did rookie Alex Tuch, who was trying to make the team.

The fourth line was Pierre-Edouard Bellemare skating with Tomas Nosek. Will Carrier would eventually become a permanent fixture on that line, but for the final preseason game, Carrier was scratched and William Karlsson was taking his place.

Karlsson was a natural center but he could also play on the wing. He was one of the smarter players on the roster and one of the most adaptable. He never seemed flustered or frustrated.

On defense, the separation was much clearer. Derek Engelland was going to be playing on opening night. So was Luca Sbisa, the veteran acquired from the Canucks in the expansion draft. Nate Schmidt and Colin Miller were also looking like they would be on the flight to Dallas in a few days. Both had the ability to skate and join the rush and were adept at supporting the attack. Miller possessed the hardest shot of anyone on the roster. He won the hardest shot competition at the AHL All-Star Game a few years before he made it to the Boston Bruins. And while he was sometimes a defensive liability, Miller was working with assistant coach Ryan McGill to shore up those deficiencies.



As the afternoon wore on, it was becoming a busy day on the Las Vegas Strip. Not only was T-Mobile Arena hosting hockey, a couple of blocks away across from the Mandalay Bay Hotel and Casino, the Route 91 Harvest Country Music Festival was cranking up for its third and final day in Las Vegas.

Las Vegas has always been a place for entertainers to perform. Elvis Presley became his own cottage industry during the 1960s and '70s with his regular appearances. Every major music act, from the Beatles to Bruce Springsteen had shown up to play Vegas.

Country music was no exception. And while Las Vegas wasn't Nashville, it was still a popular place for that genre of entertainers to play. And the Route 91 Festival was no exception. It had come to town in 2014 and this year's lineup included Eric Church, Sam Hunt, Jake Owen, Lee Brice and Jason Aldean.

A couple of the Golden Knights players and staff members had attended the Friday and Saturday performances. Some talked about going back for the Sunday show after the game. With a 5 p.m. puck drop, there would be enough time to get over to the concert site and catch Aldean, who was scheduled to close out the show.

There were 16,479 inside T-Mobile for the final preseason contest, a game which saw Haula score at 8:08 of the first period to give the Knights a 1-0 lead. The Sharks would answer with three goals against Marc-Andre Fleury before the Knights rallied with goals by Perron and Miller to tie it 3-3 going into the third period.

But Nick DeSimone scored midway through the third period for San Jose and an empty-net goal from Joel Ward with 28 seconds remaining sealed a 5-3 win for the Sharks and a 3-4

preseason record for the Knights. The game ended at 7:40 p.m. and the fans filed out somewhat disappointed that their team had lost but buoyed by the fact that there was some talent here and this might not be your typical expansion team.

Maybe they could win a few more games than the experts were predicting. Heck, maybe they might be able to sneak into the playoffs if everything broke right.

Some of the players headed down the street to The Cosmopolitan hotel for a post-game dinner. Over steaks, fish, wine and beer, they would talk about what had transpired to date and what Gallant might do to get his lines set for Friday's opener against Dallas.

Calvin Pickard thought about going back to the Route 91 Festival. After all, he didn't play against the Sharks and he had been there the first two nights. But Pickard decided at the last minute to grab something to eat and head home.

Meanwhile, down the street across from Mandalay Bay, the concert was well under way. Thousands were enjoying the music. Everyone appeared to be enjoying themselves. The sun had come down and the weather had cooled. It was a near-perfect evening.

For one person across the street, it was a little too perfect.

Stephen Paddock lived 90 miles away from the Strip in Mesquite, a town that bordered Nevada and Utah. He had done well for himself in real estate and he liked to gamble. He was 64 years old and he looked like he could have been your next-door neighbor.

Paddock had driven to Las Vegas and checked into Mandalay Bay a few days prior to the weekend. He had a room on the 32nd floor facing the Strip and the concert site across the street. Nothing seemed unusual about that.

But he made several trips from the garage to his room with several bags and items. But even that didn't set off any red flags.

It was now after 10 p.m. Jason Aldean had taken the stage and he was performing for the approximately 22,000 who had stuck around to watch him and his band. Paddock was also watching ... and waiting.

He had set up a mini-arsenal in his room with rifles that had been converted into automatic weapons with the use of a device called a bumpstock. He could fire off hundreds of rounds in seconds.

At 10:05 p.m., Paddock began to shoot. At first, no one was sure if it was something connected to the show. Perhaps fireworks? But it quickly became evident this had nothing to do with the concert. This was a deranged gunman turned loose on an unsuspecting, defenseless crowd.

As the bullets continued to rain down, people ran for cover. But for many, there was nowhere to hide. They were caught in a hailstorm of gunfire. Bodies were dropping everywhere.

Police and hotel security were attempting to get to the shooter. Meanwhile, Paddock continued his assault, emptying clip after clip. Ten minutes later, it was over. Paddock had taken his own life, and across the street, dozens were dead and hundreds more injured.

It was mass confusion, up and down the Strip. Most hotels and casinos went into lockdown. At T-Mobile Arena, a few journalists who were finishing up were also denied exiting the building.

There were rumors of a terrorist attack. On social media, erroneous information was being put out. Nobody was sure what to believe.

For the Golden Knights players who were dining at the Cosmopolitan Hotel, they would remain there for the next three hours. People were on their phones, trying to find out from others just what was going on.

Meanwhile, the team was quickly taking roll call. Every player, coach, staff member and team official was contacted, and they confirmed their whereabouts. Pickard had made the right decision not to go to the show.

Back at the concert site, the dead and the wounded were being attended to. There were countless acts of heroism as many risked their own lives to help others. Every hospital in the city was on red alert as sirens blared with ambulances, police and emergency vehicles racing to and fro.

A day, which began tranquil and peaceful, much like New York had on the morning of September 11, 2001, or Oklahoma City had on April 19, 1995, had ended in horror and tragedy.

The Golden Knights had a hockey game to play in five days.

Suddenly, that wasn't so important.

## 7. A City Heals

The images on television were undeniable. The carnage was unimaginable. They began counting the dead and trying to account for the wounded. Twelve. Then 20. Then 32. Eventually, the number of dead in the Route 91 Harvest Music Festival attack had reached 58. The number of wounded were over 500. How many exactly, no one was sure yet.

Las Vegas, as a city, was numb. How could one person cause all this? Why would Stephen Paddock do what he did? The people wanted answers, and Sheriff Joe Lombardo was doing his best to provide those answers.

Meanwhile, in Summerlin the Golden Knights were preparing to practice at City National Arena. Other than Deryk Engelland, none of them had lived in Las Vegas. This was still a new place for them. When the expansion draft had wrapped up, Engelland and his wife Melissa served as unofficial concierges for the defenseman's new teammates and their families. Need a place to go shopping? Call Melissa. Looking for a church? Deryk might know someone. From a restaurant for dinner or a park to take the kids to play, if you needed help or a recommendation, you called the Engellands.

Now their new city was one in mourning. The full impact of what had taken place still hadn't hit them. But they also

knew that they were now part of something big, whether they liked it or not.

Las Vegas' NHL team was going to play an important role in helping the city heal. There was no getting around it.

But how? How can a group of hockey players help?

When it was appropriate, the players would get out into the community. They would meet with the first responders who put their own lives on the line to save others. They would get to the hospitals, meet with the wounded and encourage them to get well. They would visit the local blood banks, where hundreds were lined up for hours waiting to donate.

Team officials quickly organized groups of players to make the requisite visits. By Tuesday they were out all over the city, posing for pictures, signing autographs, having a few private words with those who needed their support the most.

"Sports are a great thing. It can help take people's minds off of things," defenseman Nate Schmidt said. "As much as the city has embraced us, we're a part of Las Vegas."

For Engelland, trying to make sense of it all was an exercise in futility.

"My wife is still shaken up. She's almost scared to go to the games, to take the kids to the home opener," he said. "It hits hard and it hits in a lot of different ways. You see these things happen all over the world and no one ever thinks it's going to happen in their backyard. For it to happen here, it's horrific."

After meeting with the first responders, Jonathan Marchessault was left with a healthy dose of humility.

"We're nothing compared to those guys," Marchessault said. "What they've done and what they do for our community and our country, it's amazing. If you think about it we're just entertainers. That's it. They save lives. They make sure

everything goes properly around us. They're survivors. They're warriors."

And while this was going on, the team had to prepare for its opener on Friday. When they stepped onto the ice now, it was with a different sense of purpose. They were no longer just playing for themselves. They weren't just playing for their fans. They were playing for an entire city. Gallant's message of coming to the rink every day and having fun suddenly felt conflicted. Here was their city grieving, and yet they had a job to do, which was to entertain.

As the players prepared for the historic opener in Dallas, the marketing side had a dilemma on its hands. Elaborate plans had been in the works for a couple of months to celebrate the team's home opener on October 10 at T-Mobile Arena. It was to be a festive affair, one of fun and all sorts of surprises. NHL commissioner Gary Bettman planned to attend as did local officials.

Suddenly, that celebration did not seem appropriate. The team had a Fan Fest scheduled for October 3 downtown at the Fremont Street Experience, which was to kick off the season. That was put on hold indefinitely. The attack was still fresh in everyone's mind. No way could the hockey team expect its fans to show up and cheer the coming of the inaugural season.

That was the easy one. The pregame celebration for October 10 was far more problematic. The team had to do a 180-degree turn and make the celebration respectful, and with a somber tone to it.

Kim Frank, the team's vice president of marketing and her staff along with Brian Killingsworth, the team's chief marketing officer, met at City National Arena. Kerry Bubolz took part in

the meetings along with Jonny Greco, who was going to coordinate whatever pregame activities there were going to be.

While the front office sorted out the details for the home opener, the Knights boarded their plane for Dallas. McPhee had made some tough decisions following the final preseason game. He had to turn in his roster to the league and when he did, some noticeable names were missing.

Calvin Pickard was no longer with the team. His preseason struggles combined with picking up Malcolm Subban off waivers sealed his fate. Picard was traded to Toronto for forward Tobias Lindberg and a sixth-round draft pick in 2018. Subban, the younger brother of Nashville Predators all-star defenseman P.K. Subban, was considered a talented prospect. He was just 24 years old and had lots of upside. The feeling was that goaltending coach David Prior would be able to work with Subban and accelerate his development. Besides, Fleury was going to play the majority of the games and Subban wouldn't need to be rushed.

On defense, Shea Theodore was headed to the Chicago Wolves while Clayton Stoner was put on injured reserve. Theodore had shown some ability offensively during the preseason, but defensively he was still trying to find his way. Rather than make him a healthy scratch, better for him to play regular minutes in the AHL.

Clayton Stoner reportedly had sustained an abdominal injury similar to one that had limited him to just 14 games with Anaheim in 2016-17. He would never play a game for the Golden Knights.

Alex Tuch also was headed to the AHL. While his game was good, there was no spot for him, and like Theodore,



McPhee felt Tuch would be better served playing in Chicago than sitting in a press box with the Knights.

But the biggest, most shocking move was Vadim Shipachyov. The player the Knights hoped would center their first line had failed to deliver and he too was optioned to the Chicago Wolves. But unlike Tuch and Theodore who had accepted their reassignments gracefully and reported with no issues, Shipachyov balked at being sent to the minors. No way did he want to leave his family in Las Vegas to go work in yet another strange city. He and his wife were still struggling to deal with the October 1 shootings and how uncomfortable they were. So the last thing he wanted was to accept a demotion.

He was getting paid nine million dollars to play hockey and from McPhee's perspective, it was a case of "If we're paying you, you're playing where we tell you to."

Shipachyov reluctantly agreed to report to the Wolves, who, ironically, were also starting their season in Texas against the Texas Stars. However, he refused to suit up and play.

It was the kind of distraction the Golden Knights didn't need, particularly as they were trying to focus on their first-ever game. But the team's leadership group made sure it didn't impact the locker room. Everyone was excited about playing in the historic opener and coach Gerard Gallant's lineup for October 6, 2017, looked like this:

Forward lines:

Reilly Smith-Oscar Lindberg-Jonathan Marchessault  
David Perron-Cody Eakin-James Neal

Brendan Leipsic-Erik Haula-William Karlsson  
Tomas Nosek-Pierre-Edouard Bellemare-Will Carrier

Defense pairs:

Deryk Engelland-Jason Garrison

Colin Miller-Brayden McNabb

Nate Schmidt-Luca Sbisa

Goaltenders

Marc-Andre Fleury

Malcolm Subban

The Stars were aware of what had transpired in Las Vegas, and their organization was also dealing with the loss of a loved one. Team broadcaster Dave Strader had fought a brave battle against bile duct cancer and died on October 1. The team was going to honor Strader on the night of their opener. Now they would also honor the 58 shooting victims in Las Vegas.

As the Knights players stood on their blue line for the pregame ceremony, the Stars joined them, standing behind the visitors in a show of solidarity. A video tribute for Strader was shown inside American Airlines Center and was met with warm applause. Then a moment of silence for both Strader and the shooting victims was observed. It was a nice touch by the NHL and Stars management.

The game would be televised back to Las Vegas as an eleventh-hour deal had been struck between AT&T, which owned AT&T Sportsnet Rocky Mountain, and Cox Communications, the largest cable distributor in the area. And as the puck dropped at 7:42 p.m. in Dallas, the Golden Knights were officially playing hockey that would count in the NHL standings.

The Stars were coming in waves, outworking the Knights and putting pressure on Fleury. But despite 14 shots on goal and several missed quality chances, the game remained scoreless heading into the second period. But eventually Dallas

solved Fleury as Tyler Seguin scored the game's first goal with just under three minutes to play in the second period.

It was 1-0 with 20 minutes to play. Yet despite being outshot 35-18 over the first two periods, the Knights believed they were in good shape. Dallas starting goaltender Ben Bishop had to leave the game in the second period with an injury after he took a shot to the face and had to go to concussion protocol. Kari Lehtonen, his backup, had struggled mightily the year before and now Lehtonen was being asked to hold the fort.

The Knights picked up the pace in the third period and James Neal scored the franchise's first regular-season goal, a wrist shot as he had jumped on the ice as an extra attacker on a delayed penalty to the Stars.

Neal had missed the entire preseason as his surgically repaired right hand was still healing and he was a game-time decision for opening night. But he convinced Gallant he was good to go, and he delivered with 9:33 to play to tie the game at 1-1. The goal had given the Knights a lift and they continued to press forward, working hard on the forecheck and putting additional pressure on the Stars' defense and their vulnerable goalie.

With under three minutes to play and overtime looming, it was Neal again delivering. Garrison had gotten the puck out of the Knights' end to Eakin who skated down the middle. Neal, who was moving down the right side in support of the play, caught Eakin's eye. He slid the puck to Neal and while it wasn't a perfect pass, it was close enough. And as Neal lost his balance, he still was able to make a play, shooting from one knee from inside the right face-off circle. Lehtonen was slow to respond and the Knights suddenly were in front 2-1.

Fleury took over from there, repelling the Stars' attempts to tie it late, and when the game was over, the Knights swarmed their goaltender and hugged each other. The franchise had won its first game and there was excitement stemming from the victorious locker room.

"I expected to stop them all," Fleury said after stopping 45 of the 46 shots he faced. "But it's a great win for us. We're a new team and everyone kept working hard. It's exciting to win the first game."

Gallant said of the historic first win: "We worked hard all game. We stuck around, we got a couple of good opportunities and we capitalized on them."

But the Knights had little time to celebrate. They were flying to Phoenix to face the Arizona Coyotes the next night in Glendale, at Gila River Arena. The Coyotes were a struggling franchise and were trying to move on without their captain and spiritual leader, Shane Doan, who had retired after the 2016-17 season. They had changed coaches, replacing Dave Tippett with Rick Tocchet. They had also traded popular goalie Mike Smith to Calgary, and this was a team that was in transition.

Once again, the Knights found themselves trailing as Tobias Reider had scored 5:52 into the game. But unlike the opener where the home team carried the play, the visitors were the ones dominating. The Knights pressured Antti Raanta with 32 shots over the first two periods yet they still trailed 1-0 heading into the third period. Fleury was equally brilliant in the Vegas net, denying several quality chances by the Coyotes and also getting help from the goalpost and crossbar on a couple of occasions.

But the Knights were still unable to score and time was running out. With 1:12 to play, Nate Schmidt finally broke

through, tying the game with a shot from the slot. It went to overtime and once again Neal delivered, scoring the game-winner with 1:14 to play after David Perron had set him up on the right side.

"You have to play a patient, simple game and wait for your chances," Neal said. "I think that's what we did."

Though the season was only two games old, the Knights were showing a trait associated with winners — resiliency.

"Nobody was panicking on the bench," Schmidt said. "We were getting our chances. It was just a matter of getting one to go in."

They were undefeated and going home to what would be an emotional night, the kind of night none of them would ever forget.

## 14. Welcome Back Fleury

If you thought Marc-Andre Fleury was loved in Las Vegas, it paled in comparison to the devotion he was showered with in Pittsburgh. From 2003 to 2017, he was a huge part of the Penguins. He had three Stanley Cup championship rings, and he was one of the most popular athletes in the city. That's saying something when you consider the football Steelers and the baseball Pirates.

The Knights chose to wait until Monday to travel to the Steel City, having done some team bonding the night before while watching the Philadelphia Eagles defeat the New England Patriots for the team's first Super Bowl title. In Pittsburgh they weren't celebrating the Eagles' triumph. The Steelers had six Vince Lombardi Trophies to their credit. So as far as Pittsburghers were concerned, Philly had a long way to go before it could claim any sort of Keystone State bragging rights.

Vegas headed over to PPG Paints Arena for practice. They were met by a huge throng of media who wanted to talk to Fleury, and, to a lesser extent, James Neal, David Perron and Deryk Engelland, who also had played for the Penguins. Fleury, always gracious with his time, tried to accommodate everyone. He held court in front of his locker, and with the

throng nearly eight deep, he had to repeat himself more than he probably would have liked.

The team probably should have asked him if he would have preferred to have a room for himself, complete with a chair and a microphone where he could relax, be comfortable and enjoy the process. But it never happened.

Like virtually all athletes, Fleury is superstitious. One of those superstitions is that he doesn't do interviews on game days. Those who had covered him in Pittsburgh knew that, so this was their one shot to talk to him, to find out his thoughts about returning to the city where he had experienced his success in pro hockey.

"It's definitely weird," Fleury said as he held court with media. "I want to win the game, but I don't want to block everything out either. It's my first game back here. I want to enjoy the moment. It's the first time I've been through it and I don't think there's anything that prepares you for it.

"I have had such great support here over the years, through the good and through the bad. The people have always been very supportive of me, always cheering me on. So I think it will be fun. It was my home for so long, from the neighbors to the restaurants; it brings back memories over the years, fun times."

Gerard Gallant knew there was nothing he could say to sell the idea that for his team this was just another game.

"Marc's a true pro," Gallant said. "I'm sure it's going to be emotional for him, but he played here a long time. He's got three Stanley Cup championships. He's got a lot of friends here. So it'll be a lot of fun. It's another game for us, but for Marc it's a big game."

In the Penguins' locker room things were equally awkward heading into the much-anticipated meeting.

"I'm sure it'll be weird for him," Penguins captain Sidney Crosby said. "But he's going to get a great ovation, and once you get into the game you get competitive, and you have fun with it and try to put the puck past him.

"There's always motivation when you play against friends and former teammates, especially in the position we're in and what happened there (in Vegas). We want to make sure we find a way to win this one."

Fleury's impact on Pittsburgh reached far beyond his goal crease. Ed Graney, the Las Vegas Review-Journal's award-winning columnist, found that out first-hand as he visited the Sto-Ken-Rox Boys & Girls Club in McKees Rocks, one of the city's most economically depressed areas. It was the place Fleury chose to help when he could have gone anywhere else or written a check and hoped the problem would go away. Instead, he wanted to leave something that would have permanence and provide hope.

"We still can't believe what the Fleury family did for our community," Kevin Nicholson, executive director of the club, told Graney. "We have more kids now than we ever had — 120 to 130 a day — and all of what he gave allowed them to be more active. Marc did this for all the right reasons. It's something that will be here for a very long time. It's a tough place for a lot of these kids. Not a lot of money. Even the younger ones who might not know who No. 29 is. We teach them. All of this was very needed."

Graney wrote in his column: "At one point Tuesday, a minivan pulled up and a seven-year-old boy bounded from the front seat, heading for another day of hockey inside Rink 29."



"The kids needed something like this in the neighborhood," said his mother, Casey Bayer. "They deserve nice things to happen for them. Everyone loves Fleury here."

Graney's column continued: "In a town of 6,000 that never really recovered from the collapse of the steel industry, where the streets are narrow along the south banks of the Ohio River, they will share stories about the famous goalie who before leaving his adopted home, helped the most precious of things — its children."

"It's what is important, yes?" Fleury said. "To give something back that will last."

And while none of the Boys & Girls Club members or their parents could afford to welcome back Fleury in person, they were supportive from afar, some six miles away. But there was no shortage of people, some who paid over \$1,000, to come say "hello" and welcome Fleury back on a cold February night.

Long before the pregame warmups, the fans gathered, many holding signs expressing their love and admiration for Fleury. And as he led the Knights onto the ice, he couldn't help but notice the support. They chanted "Fleury, Fleury, Fleury" as he tried to focus on getting ready to play.

He had never experienced anything quite like it. And with his family, his agent and friends watching from a suite, Fleury prepared to settle in as the puck was dropped at 7:08 p.m.

Evgeni Malkin had taken a slashing penalty just 1:07 into the contest, and the Knights quickly took advantage with William Karlsson scoring on the power play to stake Fleury to a 1-0 lead. Neal made it 2-0 at the 6:34 mark, and it looked like Fleury's teammates were going to deliver and get him a big win on this emotional night.

During the first TV timeout in the first period the Penguins played a one-minute, 45-second video in tribute to Fleury. That was followed by a lengthy standing ovation. The cameras caught Fleury tearing up a little and as he said afterward, "I'm glad I had my mask on."

But the Penguins weren't about to roll over. Ryan Reaves scored to cut the deficit to 2-1 at 11:08 of the second period. Ironically, Reaves would become Fleury's teammate in 17 days. The goal seemed to energize the Penguins and their crowd. Ian Cole tied it 2-2 with 2:36 to go in the period and Jake Guentzel put the Pens in the lead, 3-2, 1:16 later.

Now in control, the Penguins stepped on the gas. Malkin and Kessel scored 3:11 apart in the third period as the lead grew to 5-2. Ryan Carpenter and Jonathan Marchessault made it interesting as their goals on Matt Murray cut it to 5-4 with 7:59 to play. But the Knights were unable to get even and come away with at least a point. Fleury played well, especially given the circumstances, finishing with 33 saves. But he had to settle for a season split with his former team.

As always, he took things in stride.

"I didn't know what to expect," he told reporters afterward. "In warmups I had goosebumps. Before the game, people had signs and kind words. It's a night I won't forget. Except maybe the score.

"It was just amazing; the support I've gotten over the years here is just incredible. I thank everybody for all these years and once again for showing up tonight with such great support."

As for the first-period video tribute, he appreciated the gesture.

"They always do a good job with these (videos)," he said. "A lot of good memories. A lot of good years. It just brought some fun memories."

He was glad to put it behind him and get on with trying to get his team into the playoffs.

"There was lots going on, lots of happiness, and emotions, and stress," Fleury said. "But it was worth it."

Murray said of the game: "It was what I think everybody expected it to be. It was an emotional, pretty free-flowing game. They're a really good team. They're tough to play against. We had to give it our best to get the two points."

"It's a tough loss," Gallant said. "We played a real good 30 minutes, and then we sort of backed off. That's why they're the Stanley Cup champs. They can create good plays. I thought the first 30 we played real well.

"We didn't skate, we didn't work hard enough and our gaps were bad. When you give the room to make plays in the neutral zone, with their speed, they're going to attack you. I thought we backed off too much and gave them too many odd-man rushes."

His teammates were disappointed they didn't get their goaltender the desired result.

"Obviously the city loves him, guys love him, we certainly love him here and we're happy to have him," said Neal. "I just wish we had a better effort for him."

Karlsson said: "There was a lot of emotion. I can't imagine how Fleury was feeling, especially during that tribute video. I'm not happy that we didn't win for him."

It was snowing as the Knights headed for the airport Wednesday morning and the long flight to San Jose. Their

flight would be delayed leaving Pittsburgh, and they didn't reach California until late in the afternoon. So far the team had encountered few if any difficulties in their travels, thanks to Rick Braunstein, the team's director of travel services who was an experienced hand at dealing with all sorts of potential pitfalls. He always had a Plan B and a Plan C if necessary, if Plan A didn't work. He was never without his laptop computer and if there were any issues, questions or problems, the answer or solution was usually just a click or two away.

As was the case with all division games, this one was important. Yes, the Knights still led the Pacific by a commanding 10 points and the Sharks were now in second place. However, Joe Thornton, their veteran star center, had injured his right knee two weeks ago and he wasn't playing Thursday at the SAP Center. In fact, nobody knew if "Jumbo Joe" would play again this season.

David Prior, the Golden Knights' goaltending coach, was probably thinking it might be a good idea to give Fleury the night off given the emotional experience he had 48 hours before. But Malcolm Subban hurt his hand during the morning skate and he would not be available. There was no time to recall one of the goalies from the AHL, so Fleury would get the start.

Subban, meanwhile, would dress but would not do anything other than skate around in the warmups. When the game started, his spot was not on the bench, given there is no room for the backup goalie to sit. Instead, he sat by the tunnel leading to the ice where he could watch with the fans in close proximity. Or he could choose to watch from a television monitor set up near the gate.

The Sharks had struggled to contain the Knights' overall speed in their first meeting, and it was the same case again as Haula, Karlsson and Neal all scored in what would be a 5-3 Vegas victory, ending the trip on a positive note. Fleury had 35 saves in the win and it helped take some of the sting out of losing to the Penguins two nights earlier.

The Knights went 4-2 on the trip, despite the fact they were without several regulars including Carrier, Sbisá, Nosek and now Subban. But the team's depth was proving to be productive, and Ryan Carpenter, Brad Hunt, Oscar Lindberg and Brendan Leipsic were finding ways to get the job done.

This was supposed to be one of the litmus tests for the first-year team and they had passed it.

"We had some struggles, but at the end we found a way to win, and that's awesome," said Marchessault. "Any win in the West is a big game, and teams are going to come ready to play us. To get four wins, especially on the road against good teams, that's big."

Having survived the longest and most arduous road trip of the year, the Golden Knights were going to get the opportunity to make more history and take a major step toward securing a postseason berth in their inaugural season.

They were 36-14-4. Twenty-eight games remained. The next seven were at T-Mobile Arena where they were a remarkable 19-4-1 so far. They were managing their injuries and the top players were producing with career seasons.

There was still a handful of teams the Knights had yet to meet and the Philadelphia Flyers were one of them. The Flyers were an interesting mix, with a bunch of youngsters thrown in with some young veterans. Their future appeared bright and

they were in a battle within the Metropolitan Division to make the playoffs. They weren't going to be pushovers.

Brayden McNabb got the Knights off to a good start by scoring the game's first goal midway through the first period. But the Flyers tied it late in the first period, then went ahead 2-1 late in the second as Andrew MacDonald scored only his third goal of the season. The Flyers had managed just 14 shots in 40 minutes against Fleury but had two of them go in.

Fleury figured to get the bulk of the work as Malcolm Subban tended to his injured hand. Maxine Lagace, who had been playing well in the AHL, was recalled from the Chicago Wolves to serve as Fleury's understudy. He saw it as a great opportunity to learn from a future Hall of Famer.

"He's amazing," Lagace said of Fleury. "He's a real pro. He has such a great attitude. He's working hard, but he's also having fun. I just want to take everything in and learn as much as I can."

The Knights thought they were in good shape, down just 2-1 entering the third period. But they couldn't get the puck by Michal Neuvirth in the Philadelphia net. Neuvirth made 38 saves and the Flyers went on to a 4-1 win. It seemed eerily reminiscent of the start of the December homestand when unheralded Carolina came into T-Mobile and left with a win. Not that the Flyers were a bad team, but this was a game the Knights expected to put in the left-hand column.

They would right the ship two nights later, beating Chicago 5-2. The Blackhawks were still without goaltender Corey Crawford, and they were still languishing at the bottom of the Central Division. Tomas Nosek had returned to the Knights' lineup after missing a month with an upper-body injury and he scored into an empty net with 1:16 to play for the final goal. It

was a nice way for Nosek to return as he found himself back with Pierre-Edouard Bellemare along with Ryan Carpenter, who was taking Will Carrier's place on the fourth line. Carpenter had also scored the team's first goal to tie the game 1-1 five minutes in.

The organization was unable to enjoy the win as it had received news that amateur scout Mark Workman had died after a brief battle with cancer. Workman took ill in October, was found to have liver cancer in late December and was dead by mid-February. He was just 47 years old.

"He had a keen eye for talent, a great sense of player evaluation and simply loved the game of hockey," General Manager George McPhee said of Workman, who had been hired in 2016 after spending 21 years coaching and working in college hockey. "We were all privileged to work with Mark and call him a friend."

On the ice, the Knights followed up the win over Chicago by beating Edmonton 4-1 for the first time in three tries and dominating the Oilers. Carpenter scored for the second straight game and it was his fourth of the season. William Karlsson also scored and it was a milestone goal, his 30th of the year, which was an unthinkable number given his status back in training camp when he played on the fourth line.

"It's pretty good," Karlsson said of his achievement. "Like I said, I didn't think I'd be here scoring that many goals before the season. But here I am, and I just want to continue doing that."

Coach Gerard Gallant wasn't impressed. Actually, he was, when he said kiddingly: "He better have 40 when it's all said and done."

It was a fun evening all the way around. A couple got married after Golden Knights fan Steve Poscente proposed to his girlfriend Cari Ivey during the first period. There was nothing unusual about that. You see marriage proposals all the time at sporting events.

But what made this one unique was Poscente and Ivey were going to be wed that night, in T-Mobile Arena, between the second and third periods. An Elvis impersonator performed the ceremony in front of 18,030 witnesses, and the couple danced their first dance to The King's "Can't Help Falling In Love" as the fans cheered.

After the game, Gallant was told of the wedding and was asked if he had a problem if one of his players tied the knot during a Golden Knights game.

"As long as they're not playing," he said with a chuckle.

The Knights were in a nice rhythm. Play one day, get the next one off, then play another game. They were facing Montreal next, and they weren't dealing with Charlie Lindgren this time, as had been the case back in November. Carey Price was back in goal but the Canadiens were still struggling. Yet they were hell-bent on making a statement on this Saturday. As is the case on any Saturday when the Canadiens were playing, the game was televised nationally on Hockey Night In Canada, and the Habs didn't want to be embarrassed on national TV.

But the Knights' momentum proved to be too much. They scored early and often and would go on to post a 6-3 win as Carpenter kept a hot hand with his third goal in as many games, while Reilly Smith scored twice to give him 19 goals for the season. Price gave way in the third period to Antti Niemi, and Fleury stopped 30 of the 33 shots he would face.



The one negative was Bellemare, who was injured in the first period and did not return. He had hurt his hand and would miss a couple of weeks, completing the trifecta of injuries to his line. Carrier was still out. Nosek had missed nearly a month. Now it was Bellemare's turn to sit out. And while one might say, "It's only the fourth line, what's the big deal?" The reality was that the fourth line had sustained the team all season and was an important part of Gallant's strategy. He liked rolling out four lines, not only for the sake of continuity but to save some legs and have his top lines ready to compete in the late stages of games.

With Bellemare out and James Neal suffering from an intestinal virus, the Knights called up Tomas Hyka and Stefan Matteau from Chicago. Hyka had played well in training camp but got caught in a numbers game and started the season in the minors. But he was fast, had a good shot and he could fit in anywhere. Matteau was strong and steady on his skates. His father, Stephane, was remembered for scoring a huge goal in the New York Rangers' Stanley Cup run in 1994 when he beat the New Jersey Devils in the second overtime in Game 7 of the Eastern Conference Finals. The two new Knights would be in the lineup when the team faced Anaheim on February 19.

It was a defensive battle, but Jakob Silfverberg's goal 13:32 in the first period would be all Anaheim would need. The Ducks did a great job clogging the neutral zone, taking away the Knights' speed and forcing them to the perimeter. They limited Vegas' quality scoring chances, and John Gibson and Ryan Miller combined on what would be a 2-0 shutout, the first combined shutout by the team since 2001. Gibson had injured his leg after a collision with Reilly Smith behind the Anaheim net late in the second period and gave way to Miller, who kept

the door shut the final 20 minutes, thanks to a stout defense. It was a big win for the Ducks, who were trying to solidify their own postseason fortunes.

The Knights still had a winning ledger for the seven-game homestead. They were 3-2 with two games remaining, one with Calgary, the other against Vancouver. Neal was still recovering from the flu as the Knights hosted the Flames. It wasn't until late in the second period when Alex Tuch scored that Vegas could wrest control of the contest against the feisty Flames, who were not rolling over despite playing backup David Rittich in goal.

But the Knights had too much firepower. Luca Sbisa was back after his hand injury and he delivered 3:17 into the third period to make it 5-3. The Knights finished off the Flames on goals from Haula and Cody Eakin for a 7-3 win.

Two nights later, they completed the seven-game homestead with a 6-3 win over the Canucks. Hyka scored his first NHL goal to open the scoring just 2:29 into the game, only to see Vancouver rally to take a 2-1 lead.

The Knights came back with a pair of goals from Karlsson followed by a power-play goal from Marchessault. Suddenly it was 4-2 and Nosek made it 5-2 late in the second period. They chased yet another opposing goaltender from the game as starter Anders Nilsson gave way to Jacob Markstrom at the beginning of the third period.

It was a great way to end the homestead as Vegas finished 5-2 and remained firmly entrenched at the top of the Pacific Division. But the NHL trade deadline was looming and McPhee was already making moves. He got the Knights involved in a complicated three-way deal with Pittsburgh and

Ottawa that brought the Knights rugged forward Ryan Reaves and a fourth-round draft pick for 2018.

With Carrier still out and no timetable for his return, the Knights needed some toughness up front. Reaves, an eight-year NHL veteran who had played with David Perron in St. Louis, and was well-liked in the locker room, was the answer.

Before the season, the speculation was that Perron and Neal, both of whom were going to be unrestricted free agents at the end of the year, would be moved by the trade deadline. Of course, no one was expecting the Knights to be a first-place team and on their way to the playoffs back then. And both Neal and Perron were critical elements to the team's success to date.

The question McPhee was pondering was whether this team was good enough, as constructed, to challenge for the Stanley Cup? Barring a collapse of epic proportions, the Knights appeared to be headed to the playoffs, even though six weeks remained on the regular-season schedule. Was he willing to make a major deal and possibly break up the chemistry in the locker room he had worked so hard to assemble and develop?

The Knights were in Los Angeles the morning of February 26 to face the Kings. The trade deadline was at noon Pacific time. McPhee was working the phones, listening to offers and deliberating whether or not to do anything.

Mid-morning he made one move, sending Brendan Leipsic to Vancouver for defenseman Philip Holm. But behind the scenes, a major move was developing.

Ottawa and its all-star defenseman Erik Karlsson were at loggerheads over his future. Karlsson was going to be a UFA in 2019 and the Senators wanted to sign him to an extension. But Karlsson, who was making \$6.5 million for the next two years,

would not accept a home-team discount. He was looking for big money that was befitting his status as one of the game's premier players.

Senators general manager Pierre Dorion was in a tough spot. He had an unhappy player on his hands who happened to be his best player. His fan base, already agitated by the way the season had unfolded, was demanding change. Owner Eugene Melnyk, who was trying to get a new arena built downtown and was meeting resistance from the local and provincial governments, was digging in his heels. He wasn't about to pay anyone eight figures, and it only added to the dysfunction of the franchise.

Erik Karlsson would be a major upgrade to the Golden Knights. He might be the one to put things over the top and make the team a legitimate Stanley Cup contender. After all, Karlsson had guided Ottawa to the conference finals the year before, all the while playing with a broken ankle. Imagine what a healthy Karlsson could do?

The Senators were willing to part with their captain. But they wanted a lot in return. In addition to Karlsson, Ottawa wanted McPhee to take Bobby Ryan, the high-priced forward who was making \$7.25 million and whose contract ran through 2022. They also wanted some draft picks and at least one prospect, preferably Cody Glass, who the Knights had selected last June with the No. 6 overall pick. They weren't interested in Neal or Perron. After all, Ottawa was looking to cut salary, not add to it.

The deadline was rapidly approaching. McPhee conferred with his hockey staff. He had always been successful building his teams through the draft, and while the Knights had space under the salary cap to accommodate both Karlsson and Ryan,

the long-term ramifications, particularly in Ryan's case, made it seem counter-productive. In addition, there was no guarantee Karlsson would agree to an extension, and McPhee didn't believe in rental players, even if they were elite.

As he was contemplating what to do, Ken Holland, the Detroit Red Wings' GM, was calling. Would the Knights be interested in doing something to acquire forward Tomas Tatar, who had been a 20-goal scorer through most of his career? Tatar was only 27, and despite making \$5.3 million, would be locked up for the next three-plus years.

The asking price from Detroit? Draft picks, something McPhee had a surplus of. One of the picks the Red Wings wanted was a first-rounder, and with the Knights' trending upward in the standings, their first-round pick for 2018 was falling lower and lower. Still, it was the only first-round pick the team had, and McPhee had to weigh that against acquiring a proven scorer. Tatar had 16 goals at the deadline and he was healthy. And yes, the Knights could use some additional scoring.

McPhee told Holland he'd get back to him. He got Dorion on the phone and asked him to go through the Karlsson-Ryan deal one more time. He listened and told Dorion, "No thanks." Perhaps down the road they could revisit a Karlsson trade. Meanwhile, he reached back to Holland. Could the Red Wings live without a first-round pick to get the deal done?

Holland insisted on a first-rounder. And with about 15 minutes to go before the deadline, McPhee agreed. The Knights would get Tatar. In return, Detroit would get Vegas' first-round draft pick for 2018, a second-round pick in 2019 and a third-rounder in 2021.

The backlash was swift. Fans decried the move and the media questioned McPhee's motive. Trade away a first-rounder for a guy with a minus-8 in the NHL's plus-minus rating who was underachieving?

People weren't too thrilled with the Reaves deal either, believing it would disrupt the chemistry in the locker room.

McPhee responded to the criticism by saying: "It's the one area where we're deep — we have a lot of picks. We spread it over four years. There are times when the decisions you make are all data driven and there are times when it's market driven. That was the price. We either get the player we thought we needed to have and give up those assets, or you don't. And I wanted to help the club."

It wouldn't take long to tell whether McPhee had helped or hurt the club.

## 18. Conference Champions

Stanley Cup fever had gripped Southern Nevada. With the Golden Knights having reached the Western Conference Finals, fans were jumping on the bandwagon. And even those who didn't know a red line from a blue line were now following the team's pursuit of the Cup.

At City National Arena, the team's practice facility, fans were lining up hours before practice to insure themselves of a spot. Another line formed daily outside the team's store to snatch up souvenirs, shirts and hats. The Knights were hot. Media representatives from all over the world were coming to Las Vegas to follow the story.

For coach Gerard Gallant and his players the added attention didn't faze them. Their "one day at a time" approach was monotonous but effective, and they weren't about to stray from the path at this point. Nobody in the dressing room was talking Stanley Cup. Instead, it was all about maintaining what they had been doing and finding a way to win Game 1.

The Winnipeg Jets had made a strong second-half run in the regular season to become one of the NHL's top teams. They were talented, young, well-coached and built to be contenders for the Stanley Cup. The team had relocated from Atlanta in 2011 after a second failed attempt to make hockey work in

Georgia. It was also Winnipeg's second go-round in the NHL, after the original Jets moved to Phoenix in 1996 and became the Coyotes.

The Jets had never been this far in the playoffs. But they looked good while dispatching Minnesota in five games during the first round, then battled Nashville and prevailed in a hard-fought, seven-game series to get to the conference finals.

They had their own hot goalie in Connor Hellebuyck, who was a finalist for the Vezina Trophy, which is awarded to the NHL's top goaltender. They also had one of the game's rising superstars in forward Patrik Laine, who was taken second overall in the 2016 draft and who possessed a hard, quick shot. Laine was a danger to score anywhere on the ice.

Winnipeg plays in the smallest building in the entire NHL, the MTS Bell Place which seats only 15,294. But every game sells out. The fan base was passionate and smart. They knew hockey and it can be an intimidating place for opposing teams to play.

It also is the home of the "Whiteout." The Jets encourage their fans to wear white to all home playoff games, a tradition that started back in 1987. Over the decades, teams in other sports have copied the Jets, providing T-shirts, rally towels and encouraging their fans to show up to games in a designated color.

It was also a far cry from the early 1960s, when the NHL was a six-team league and men came to games dressed in suits and ties, and women wore dresses, as if they were attending the opera or the theater instead of a sporting event.

The last time the Knights were in Winnipeg it was the beginning of February. The wind chill was 24 below zero, and there was snow everywhere. It was a different kind of



whiteout. Now, as they prepared to drop the puck for Game 1 on May 12, the temperature had warmed up considerably. It was 73 degrees and people had traded in their parkas and boots for shorts and flip-flops.

"We know what they bring. We know that they're good, that they maybe surprised a few teams, but not really," said Paul Stastny, who the Jets had acquired at the trade deadline from St. Louis back in February. He had fit in seamlessly with Winnipeg. "They had 109 points. In a sense they play like us. They have a lot of depth, they can roll four lines, and they have good, puck-moving D. So we're going to have our hands full for sure."

The Knights were expecting a battle.

"They're a fast team, and they have a lot of offense for sure," said forward Jonathan Marchessault. "They have unbelievable players on that roster, and it will definitely be a tough task for sure."

The Knights had been most successful when they scored first. But as the series got underway, it was Winnipeg which took the lead when defenseman Dustin Byfuglien ripped a slap shot past Marc-Andre Fleury off an odd-man rush, just 1:05 into Game 1. It quickly became a 2-0 game as Laine scored on a power play while Alex Tuch sat for hooking. Less than a minute later, Joel Armia, a member of Winnipeg's fourth line, made it 3-0 as he was left unattended in front of Fleury, who had no chance to make the save.

The Knights got one back 35 seconds later as Brayden McNabb scored his team's first goal of the series. Marchessault had set him up at the right face-off circle, and Hellebuyck never saw McNabb with the puck until it was too late. It was 3-1, and two and a half periods still remained. The Knights had come

back from two-goal deficits before. Nobody was panicking in the cramped visitors' locker room.

In the home team room, the Jets, obviously encouraged by their fast start, weren't about to take their foot off the gas pedal. They knew how teams can come back. They themselves had done it in the previous series against Nashville, rallying from 3-0 down to win 7-4 in Game 3. So the next goal would be big.

Midway through the second period, Mark Scheifele delivered. The Jets' talented veteran center scored on a power play to make it 4-1. Now the Knights were chasing the game, and a late-period goal from William Karlsson wouldn't be enough. Winnipeg clamped down defensively and with the approval of the 15,321 in the barn went on to win 4-2 and take a 1-0 lead in the best-of-seven series.

The Jets, who had a day's rest, still had momentum from beating the Predators, while the Knights, who had six days between games after defeating the Sharks, may have been a tad out of sync.

"We didn't have much of a rest, we're still in game mode," Byfuglien said. "It was just a matter of coming out, playing our game, keeping it simple. We got in moving our feet right away, ice opened up, so we got to move the puck easily, just do simple things."

Marchessault, who assisted on both Vegas goals, said his team needed to play better and that Game 2 would tell what the Knights were really made of.

"Not the start we wanted, and they just played two days ago, but they were game ready and we weren't," he said. "We're going to see what kind of team we are. Monday is definitely a must-win game."

Yes and no. Yes, the Knights would be in great shape if they could win Game 2. They would get the much-desired split on the road. They would get home-ice advantage, and they might swing the momentum in their direction.

No, it wouldn't be the end of the world if they lost. They would be down 0-2 in the series, but if they could hold serve in their rink, they would just have to find a way to eventually win a game in Winnipeg in order to advance to the Stanley Cup Final.

The team was upbeat the morning of May 14 as they skated prior to Game 2 later that evening. Nobody was talking about pressure. They had won here back on February 1. But there was going to be a different look to Gallant's lineup. David Perron was not feeling well, and he would not play. Tomas Tatar, who had been yanked for Perron back in the opening round and hadn't played since, was taking Perron's spot. Will Carrier was still out with his upper-body injury, and Ryan Reaves remained in the lineup.

Tatar was brought in to boost the team's offense, and thus far he had failed to deliver. Now he was being counted on to score, and just over 13 minutes into the first period he got the Knights on the board as he put home a rebound of his own shot after he had successfully kept the play alive in the Winnipeg zone.

"I wouldn't say frustrated," Tatar said of watching games from the press box. "It's more that you want to help the team any way you can, and it's just beating you up when you're in the stands and some stuff doesn't go our way.

"We're here all for one goal. We want to win the Cup and we're all doing everything we can to do it. If that's the choice (Gallant makes), you have to respect it and be a good teammate

and help motivate the guys as much as you can. It's not easy, but I've been working at practice to try to be ready for an opportunity like this."

The goal gave the Knights an emotional lift. The entire bench perked up, and when Marchessault scored four minutes later to make it 2-0, you could feel the air come out of the Bell MTS Place, not to mention the 22,000 or so who were clad in white and had gathered in a plaza outside the building to watch and be part of the festivities.

It was still 2-0 going into the third period. The Jets had been a bit unlucky, having hit the post and crossbar, and Fleury had bounced back with a strong effort over the first 40 minutes. But Winnipeg got within a goal as Kyle Connor scored just over seven minutes in on a power play while Luca Sbisa sat for tripping. The Jets were very much back in it, and so was their crowd.

But the Knights answered Connor's goal 88 seconds later as Marchessault backed up his words with a beautiful backhand goal to make it 3-1. Reilly Smith drew the Winnipeg defense to him, slipped the puck across to Marchessault on the right side, and Marchessault lifted it over Hellebuyck for his sixth of the playoffs. The Knights picked up their forecheck, the defense kept a clean line of sight in front of Fleury and they stayed out of the penalty box the rest of the way.

And as the final buzzer sounded, it was mission accomplished. A 3-1 win. The series was now tied at 1-1. Home-ice advantage and momentum had shifted to Vegas.

"Every time we (need) a big game out of our group, we show up, and tonight we definitely showed up," Marchessault said. "I think we showed the hockey world that we earned the right to be here, and we're able to play against a great team."

With the series now even and the Knights headed back to T-Mobile Arena for Games 3 and 4 there was renewed optimism among the Vegas fans. Their team was three wins away from playing for the Stanley Cup, and any opportunity to be part of it was not going to be squandered.

Practices became even more crowded in the stands, and the team decided it was going to have to limit capacity because the crowds were creating an unsafe environment. The fire marshal may have also had something to say about it. Wristbands were issued, and once the last wristband was distributed, that was it. The doors to the rink would be closed.

Meanwhile, Jonny Greco, the team's director of entertainment, and his staff were cooking up something special for Game 3. They had already successfully used images on the ice to create special effects, and this time the plan was to "destroy" a jet airplane with a catapult launched from the castle behind the Vegas goal. The opposing team's villain would also magically "disappear" as he was hooked up to a cable and "launched" to the rafters.

The fans loved it. So did NBC, which was televising the series and decided this was too cool not to show its audience. The pregame show, along with Carnell Johnson's rendition of the national anthems (remember, there were now two for him to sing), would be televised.

Country superstar Carrie Underwood, whose husband Mike Fisher played for the Predators, offered her services to the Knights to sing the anthem. A year ago, a bit of a firestorm was created in Music City when the team's regular anthem singer was replaced by a number of country music stars. Some Nashville fans thought it was bad luck to replace the regular

singer, and the Predators wound up losing in the Stanley Cup Final to Pittsburgh.

The Knights weren't quite at the Cup Final yet. But they also weren't about to jerk around with their karma. They politely declined Underwood's offer to come to Las Vegas. They had their singer. And when Johnson stepped onto the ice before Game 3 to sing both O Canada and The Star-Spangled Banner, he was given a huge ovation. He was obviously moved as he pounded his chest with his fist and acknowledge the love.

In Winnipeg, when the words "True North" are sung during O Canada, the fans yell out the lyrics, much the way Golden Knights fans yell "Night" during the portion "Gave proof through the night." Johnson paused when he came to the words to allow the Winnipeg fans to chant "True North", and he did the same for "Night" as he had been doing for months.

Game 3 was just 35 seconds old when Marchessault scored on a backhand shot as he was ending his shift. McNabb did a good job of getting to a loose puck in the neutral zone and quickly passed to Marchessault, who eluded a poke check from Hellebuyck and sent the 18,477 spectators into a frenzy, along with the several thousand others who had gathered in Toshiba Plaza to watch the game on a big screen.

To the Jets' credit, they didn't panic. Scheifele scored 5:28 into the second period to tie it 1-1, and Game 3 was very much up for grabs. But James Neal answered Scheifele's goal 12 seconds later, and that may have changed the entire series. For Winnipeg to give up a goal so quickly after it had scored to tie the game was demoralizing. Tuch scored less than five minutes later to make it 3-2. The goal was Tuch's fifth of the playoffs, and he had proved he could deliver when the pressure was on.

More important, Tuch, Neal and Erik Haula were coming through at the right time after being relatively quiet earlier in the series. Haula had made a heads-up play on Neal's goal, knocking down Hellebuyck's attempt to clear the puck from behind his own goal, then feeding Neal for the go-ahead score.

"It was good to get a couple, for sure," Tuch said. "We have a part to do as well, and we haven't gotten enough shots as a line, haven't gotten to the net enough. That's a big emphasis here for us. It's good to get on the board and good to get a win as well. Good to get the confidence going for our line."

The Jets got a second goal from Scheifele to cut it to 3-2 just 18 seconds into the third period. But as was the case in Game 2 when Winnipeg had pulled within a goal, the Knights tightened up defensively, and Fleury would make 14 saves in the final 20 minutes. That was capped off by Marchessault's empty-net goal with three seconds remaining as the Knights won 4-2 in Game 3.

Fleury made 15 saves during a third period that was dominated by the Jets.

"You get Flower as your goaltender, you're going to have chances to win games," Neal said.

Game 4 was two nights later, and with the Knights holding a 2-1 series lead, the plan was the same as Game 3: Get an early lead, feed off the energy of the crowd, let Fleury be Fleury, and don't give the Jets room to do what they do best, which is counterattack and get the puck to their big guns.

Scheifele had been a royal pain so far for Gallant. He would have defenseman Nate Schmidt on the ice whenever Scheifele was out there, but Scheifele had still managed to score in two of the first three games. Gallant still stuck with the plan, and having the last change when it came to personnel, he could put

Schmidt out there whenever Paul Maurice opted to play his star center.

The other concern for Gallant was the number of penalties. His team needed to stay out of the box. The Knights were averaging nearly four trips to the sin bin in the series, and Winnipeg already had three power-play goals.

Game 4 started the way Gallant hoped it would. Karlsson scored 2:25 into the game, thanks to an early power play as Tyler Myers had been called for interference, and the Knights were leading 1-0. But the Jets responded with a power-play goal of their own in the second period as Laine scored to tie it 1-1, while Tomas Nosek was sitting for tripping. The penalty was especially painful given it had occurred in the offensive zone. Normally, the offender might find himself sitting for a shift or two to think about how he hurt the team. Instead, Gallant sent Nosek right back out there, and 43 seconds after Laine tied it, Nosek scored to give his team a 2-1 lead. Linemate Pierre-Edouard Bellemare's wrist shot had been stopped by Hellebuyck, but Bellemare alertly followed up his shot and he beat the defense to the rebound. Meanwhile, Nosek parked himself in front of the net. Bellemare saw him unattended, got him the puck and Nosek atoned for his earlier miscue.

"Honestly, I felt relief," Nosek said. "My emotions were built up. I was happy."

The Jets were down but certainly not out. They tied it 5:34 into the third period as Tyler Myers beat Fleury to make it 2-2. Winnipeg now had momentum, and the Jets looked to get the lead. Fleury stayed strong in the Vegas net, and with less than seven minutes to play Smith became the hero as he took advantage of some bad luck on Byfuglien's part. The Jets' defenseman had gotten the puck at the right point and was



looking to unleash a slap shot toward Fleury. But he had fanned on the shot and Smith, who was looking to close in, chipped the puck past Byfuglien, easily skated around him and was on a breakaway. He crossed the left face-off circle and unleashed a rising wrist shot that sailed over Hellebuyck's right shoulder and into the net.

It was a fortuitous play to be sure. But it counted just the same, and now staked to a 3-2 lead with 6:58 remaining the Knights turned things over to their goaltender. The Jets were going to play desperate hockey and they attacked every shift. The Knights would try to counterattack and get that coveted insurance goal.

But neither team could score the rest of the way, and as the final buzzer sounded and their fans celebrated, the Knights headed back to their locker room with the knowledge they were one game away from playing for the Stanley Cup. They had taken Winnipeg's best shot. They had been lucky to be sure. But as Branch Rickey, the baseball executive, once said: "Luck is the residue of design."

Fleury had robbed Bryan Little in the second period and had stopped 36 of the 38 shots the Jets threw at him. He was the difference.

"Fleury had to be real good in the third period and he made some unbelievable saves," Gallant said. "We looked a little tired at times but we buckled down and didn't give them any chances. It's all about buckling down, battling hard and having the confidence in yourself to do the job."

The Knights now had control of the best-of-seven series. Game 5 would be Sunday afternoon, May 20, in Winnipeg. As was the case in round one against Los Angeles and round two versus San Jose, the players all said the right things about

closing out Winnipeg. Cliches like "The last one is the hardest to win" and, "We can't take our foot off the gas" came from virtually every player's lips. Even Schmidt, who is the most loquacious talker on the team, wasn't straying from the company line.

"Honestly, what's been awesome about our group is we've had much fun in the moment," Schmidt said. "I don't want to fast-forward anything. I don't want to look ahead. I want to be right here, where we are right now, and enjoy this for about five minutes, and then get ourselves ready to go into Winnipeg."

For the Jets and their rabid fans, reality had set in. It was either win three straight or go home for the summer. The franchise had never been this far, and nobody wanted the ride to come to an end. But they also knew there was a stern challenge confronting them, and like the Knights said the right things in their locker room after Game 4, the Jets' players were echoing predictable comments prior to Game 5, cliches like "We're not conceding anything" and, "It's not over until they win four."

The Knights had David Perron back for Game 4, and he was in the lineup for Game 5 as Tomas Tatar, one of the heroes of Game 2, sat in the press box. Will Carrier was still not ready to return, and Ryan Reaves, who had played well in his place, remained on the fourth line with Bellemare and Nosek. Reaves, who is from Winnipeg and who grew up rooting for the Jets as a kid, was now the enemy, and he accepted that. Same for Cody Eakin, who also was raised in the 'Peg.

It was 1-1 after the first period as Tuch had scored for Vegas 5:11 in, only to have Josh Morrissey answer for the Jets. You could feel the tension in the Bell MTS Place as each minute

ticked away. The Knights stayed patient, waiting for that big opportunity, while the Jets kept pushing, trying to get the lead and perhaps control of things. And as the game passed its midway point the chance the Knights were seeking had arrived, and it fell to the most unlikely of heroes.

The fourth line had performed consistently well throughout the season and into the playoffs, even though there were constant changes to it. Gallant had sent Bellemare, Nosek and Reaves over the boards with just under eight minutes to play in the second period, with the idea of maintaining the continuity and momentum. Don't take a penalty. Forecheck smartly and get off the ice. Nosek was pressuring the defense along the boards, won possession and got the puck to Sbisa at the left point. Reaves, meanwhile, skated toward the front of the Winnipeg goal, hoping to screen Hellebuyck and be ready in case Sbisa decided to shoot, and there might be a deflection opportunity or a rebound if Hellebuyck made the first save.

Sbisa doesn't have the velocity on his shot of a Colin Miller or even Brad Hunt. But he's a veteran player who knows how to put the puck on net. And as soon as Nosek got him the puck, he quickly settled it on to the blade of his stick and sent it goalward. Reaves, who was now in position, got his stick on Sbisa's shot and the puck suddenly went a different direction than Hellebuyck anticipated. Before he could react, it was past him and the red light was on.

Reaves skated to the glass at the half-boards and punched it in celebration as his teammates mobbed him. He had spent countless hours practicing tip-ins every day, and he had remained ready in the event Gallant needed him. He had stepped into the lineup for Game 6 against San Jose. Now here in Game 5 his goal had given the Knights a 2-1 lead.

"The whole mentality of this team is 'next man up,' " Reaves said. "We've got a deep team. We've got a lot of good players."

Gallant, who continued to push the right buttons throughout the postseason, said he never thought of not playing Reaves after Carrier was hurt against the Sharks.

"He makes people play quicker," Gallant said of how the 31-year-old Reaves can change the tempo of a game with his size and speed. "He worked hard and always stayed prepared. When we put him in against San Jose he played well for us and he gave me no reason to take him out (against Winnipeg)."

Not only was it Reaves' first goal as a member of the Golden Knights, after he had been traded from Pittsburgh in late February, it came in his hometown with family and friends among the 15,321 inside the arena.

"Hearing the boos after I scored was probably my favorite moment of this series," he said. "It's been a little weird. I have a couple of cousins that came in Jets jerseys; a best friend came in a white T-shirt, so they're going to hear about that after."

The Knights had a 2-1 lead. But Game 5 and the series was far from over. And between periods, Gallant reminded his players to be smart, be aggressive, stay out of the penalty box and keep playing the same game that put them in the lead. But Marchessault didn't get the memo about staying out of the box. He got called for a slashing penalty 45 seconds into the third period, and here was the opening the Jets were seeking. Their power play had shown it could be successful in the conference finals, and with Scheifele, Laine, Byfuglien and Blake Wheeler on the ice, the odds were this game and series could find itself shifting with one shot.

But the Knights' penalty killers were up to the task. They had killed three previous power plays, and now they were blocking shots, getting into passing lanes and Fleury was once again being the last line of defense, though coaches will tell you that goalies are a team's first line of defense when it comes to successfully killing off penalties.

It remained 2-1, because instead of laying back and absorbing Winnipeg's attack the way a boxer would lay on the ropes, the Knights used their speed and continued to forecheck strong in the Jets' end. Their defense supported the forecheck and dominated play in the neutral zone. And as the minutes quickly ticked away, it was Vegas, not Winnipeg, which had control of the action. Hellebuyck was pulled for a sixth attacker, but the Jets were unable to tie it.

The scoreboard read 0:00. It also read Knights 2, Jets 1. The expansion team had won the Western Conference, four games to one. And as NHL deputy commissioner Bill Daly came on to the ice to present the Clarence S. Campbell Bowl, which annually goes to the conference champion, two questions loomed.

One, who would accept the trophy? The Knights did not have a captain. For all intents and purposes, Fleury was the team's de facto captain even though he didn't wear a "C" on his sweater. But the team had talked about it the morning of the game, just in case they won they would have a plan. The decision was for Deryk Engelland, their 36-year-old defenseman and Las Vegas resident, to do the honors.

And as Engelland skated over to the corner to accept the Campbell Bowl, Daly said to him, "I'll bet you didn't expect to be doing this."

The other question was, would Engelland touch the trophy? One of the game's superstitions is you only touch the Stanley Cup. Secondary trophies are considered just that, much like in basketball, where college teams sometimes refrain from cutting down the nets after winning an NCAA regional tournament.

But Engelland gladly picked up the Campbell, displayed it for the photographers just like tennis players and golfers show off their trophies for having won a major tournament, and was quickly joined by his teammates.

However, they didn't linger on the ice with their bounty. They didn't want to be disrespectful to the Jets or their fans. They quickly exited the rink and celebrated in their cramped locker room as players, coaches and staff gathered around the Campbell Bowl for a group photo.

General Manager George McPhee and assistant GM Kelly McCrimmon shook hands and hugged the players and coaches in the hallway while a media hoard made its way into the room to get reaction and interviews.

It was truly a joyous moment for the franchise. But there was one person missing from the celebration. Team majority owner Bill Foley was back in Las Vegas, nursing a cold. He watched history being made from his living room.

Back in Winnipeg, the players credited the Jets for being a formidable opponent. But the enormity of the moment and what they had just accomplished had still not hit most of them.

"It's insane," said Engelland. "Your goal is always to make the playoffs. But if I were to guess I would be sitting here doing this right now, you would be a little skeptical at the time. But once we got rolling and got the season going, we saw that we have a team that can do some damage, and a phenomenal

goalie that's going to stop everything. It's been an amazing ride. We just want to keep it going now."

They all credited Fleury for helping them get to this point.

"He has been our best player all year," Eakin said. "You go up and down the lineup and guys have stepped up at different times, but he consistently has been our rock, the guy that has held us in games and made those key stops."

Fleury, in turn, complimented his teammates.

"I think you're only as good as your team," Fleury said. "The guys in front of me have been great and they've been helping me a lot. It's been a lot of fun."

The Jets, frustrated by the fact they could not build on their early 1-0 series lead — and having lost four in a row and their chance at playing for the big prize — could only tip their hats to their opponent.

"It was their time," Wheeler said. "They were the better team."

The Knights were now 12-3 through three rounds of the playoffs.

Next, they were going to play for the Stanley Cup.





## 19. Playing For The Cup

The Golden Knights' charter airplane touched down in Las Vegas' McCarran International Airport Sunday night. But there was no massive throng of fans to welcome the Western Conference champions home.

Because the team disembarks at the charter terminal, which is essentially off-limits to the general public, fans were not able to gather and cheer their heroes upon their triumphant return from Winnipeg. Any interaction with the players would have to wait awhile as coach Gerard Gallant gave the team a couple of well-deserved days off.

"It's been an awesome ride so far," Gallant said. "We won three series, and we're going to the Stanley Cup Final. But, again, this isn't what we want. We want to win. Every team has got a chance to win now in the NHL. The teams are so close. We're far from satisfied. We've got a big series to get ready for.

"Like I said, it's great to win and it's great to be the Western Conference champions, but that's not what we're here for."

The Knights didn't know yet who their opponent would be. The Eastern Conference Finals were a back-and-forth battle between the Tampa Bay Lightning and the Washington Capitals. And as Game 6 approached on Monday, May 21, in Washington, the Lightning held a 3-2 lead in the series. If Tampa prevailed, it would have home-ice in the Stanley Cup

Final. If the Capitals came back and won, the Knights would have home ice.

Both teams had superstars from Russia. The Lightning had Nikita Kucherov; the Capitals had Alex Ovechkin. Both teams also had strong supporting casts, and the Lightning, despite holding the lead in the best-of-seven series, was far from a lock to get to the Final.

The Capitals wound up winning Game 6, 3-0 as Braden Holtby played a sensational game in the Washington net. Holtby had sat on the bench for the first two games of the playoffs against Columbus. But coach Barry Trotz put him in after the Blue Jackets had taken a 2-0 lead in the opening-round series. Now, with the deciding Game 7 at Amalie Arena in Tampa, Holtby would be the key.

He turned aside all 29 shots he faced in Game 7, and Ovechkin's goal 1:02 into the contest stood up as the Capitals blanked the Lightning for the second straight game, this time 4-0. They would play for the Stanley Cup for only the second time in the club's 44-year history. This was a franchise that was the epitome of futility among expansion teams, having won a record-low eight games in 1974-75 while playing in suburban Landover, Maryland. They were the polar opposite of the Golden Knights.

The previous Capitals team that made it to the Cup Final was in 1998. George McPhee was in his first year as general manager of the franchise then, and he would know the feeling of coming close but not quite getting there. The Caps had been swept by the Detroit Red Wings in four games and they had not been back since.

McPhee rebuilt the franchise twice, and it was the handiwork of his second go-round that had Washington in the

2018 Cup Final. Twelve players on the roster were the result of either the draft, trades or free agent signings during his tenure, and McPhee was proud of what he had accomplished.

The Knights' GM is not one to bring the spotlight upon himself. He limits his time in front of the media and prefers to do his job privately. But on the eve of Game 1 he addressed his time in Washington and what he had done in Vegas.

"I'm certainly proud of the Washington team and the players," McPhee said. "Really happy for them — and really proud of this team we have in Vegas.

"It's funny how life goes. Two years ago I was walking around Ann Arbor kicking stones and couldn't get a job."

Brian McClellan, who was McPhee's assistant in Washington and is the Capitals' current general manager, said of the juxtaposition of going up against his longtime friend and former boss in the Final: "It's kind of a weird experience. It's a little awkward, but it's going to be a fun experience — I hope."

Gallant still didn't have Will Carrier for his fourth line. And he still didn't have Malcolm Subban as his backup goaltender. Subban had sprained his ankle during practice in the Western Conference Finals, and Maxime Lagace was once again called upon to serve as Fleury's understudy. Fleury had played every minute of every one of the team's 15 playoff games to date. He said he felt fine and there was no fatigue factor to deal with. Gallant gave him an extra day off between the conference finals and the Cup Final, and Fleury was ready to go when it began on Monday, May 28.

Memorial Day weekend was coming to a close, and that is always a busy time in Las Vegas as visitors, especially from California, flock to the city for fun.

But now there was an added element. The city was hosting the Stanley Cup Final, and as a result, NBC was in town. And if NBC was in town, it meant Mike “Doc” Emrick was behind the microphone, calling the play-by-play.

Emrick was one of sports’ pre-eminent announcers. He had a room full of Emmy Awards and was in several halls of fame, including the Hockey Hall of Fame. At the age of 71, Emrick was still very much on top of his game. But he had also never called a Golden Knights game. So he had a kid’s excitement and curiosity as he visited City National Arena for the team’s morning skate prior to Game 1.

He saw the stands packed with fans chanting “Go Knights Go!”. He saw fans with their dogs, including Bark-Andre Furry, the Jack Russell terrier who had gained a high level of celebrity during the season and had come face-to-face with the Knights’ goalie during the year.

“Nice dog,” Fleury said of Furry, who by now had been outfitted with a pair of mini goalie pads to go with his Golden Knights’ No. 29 “sweater”.

It was a small sample of what Emrick would encounter a few hours later, and he told the Las Vegas Review-Journal’s Ron Kantowski, “I’m just looking forward to listening to the crowd.”

Emrick was part of a special team. He was a cancer survivor going back to 1991. His broadcast partners, Ed Olczyk and Pierre McGuire, had also battled cancer, and both of them were back on the job. They would tell the story of the Golden Knights to those who were still unfamiliar.

Hockey — unlike football, basketball and baseball — still didn’t have the kind of audience that could reach beyond its own sport’s grasp. Yes, the numbers had increased. Ratings

were better and attendance was still excellent in the majority of the league's arenas. The Knights had played beyond their capacity at T-Mobile Arena and Commissioner Gary Bettman said it was a story for the ages.

"Nobody saw this coming," Bettman said. "George McPhee and (assistant GM) Kelly McCrimmon did an outstanding job. The bond is real between this city and its first-ever major league professional sports team. The connection is undeniable. This is the magic of sports. Anything can happen."

The same held true for the pregame entertainment. With the Golden Knights, you could never predict what Jonny Greco and his staff were capable of doing. And given this was the Stanley Cup Final, something cool was expected.

The NHL has to approve everything. And when it was suggested the Imagine Dragons, a Las Vegas-based rock band which had earned world-wide acclaim and had an international fan base, was chosen to provide some of the music, it was well received. The Dragons performed their big hit, "Whatever It Takes", and the moving performance by lead singer Dan Reynolds brought down the house.

For the starting lineups, the Knights called upon Michael Buffer, the hall of fame boxing ring announcer, to do the honors. Buffer, best known for his trademark phrase, "Let's Get Ready To Rumble", introduced both teams the way he would a world championship title fight. It was cool and humorous and the fans loved it.

Gallant and his players were looking to create some more magic. And when Collin Miller scored the first goal of the Final just 7:15 into the game, and T-Mobile Arena went berserk, it appeared that was going to be the case.

But the Capitals hadn't reached this point through luck alone. They had skill and talent, and they took a 2-1 lead with less than five minutes to go in the first period as Brett Connolly and Nicklas Backstrom scored. Backstrom was playing with a broken finger on his right hand, and some were curious as to how effective he could be. But he is one of the game's best passers and he's highly intelligent. He can make plays from anywhere on the ice, healthy or injured.

By now the Knights had dealt with coming back numerous times, and William Karlsson delivered with the game-tying goal with 1:41 left in the period. Reilly Smith managed to find him by using his great peripheral vision. Smith then broke the 2-2 tie 3:21 into the second period as he beat Braden Holtby, and Vegas again had the lead back 3-2.

But back came the Caps. John Carlson scored from the point on a shot Fleury admitted he should have stopped to tie the game 3-3. Then tough guy Tom Wilson put Washington back in front as he was left alone in front of the net 1:10 into the third period, and the Caps had a 4-3 lead.

As they had done against Winnipeg, the Knights immediately answered. Ryan Reaves, the hero of the series clincher against the Jets, was in the right place at the right time. Tomas Nosek's shot attempt came back to Reaves. And after a second swipe was unsuccessful, and defenseman Michal Kempny failed to clear the puck, Reaves pounced and beat Holtby to pull Vegas even 4-4. The goal had come 91 seconds after Wilson's.

Now the Knights had renewed energy, and once again the fourth line would deliver at the midway point of the final period. Shea Theodore had kept the play alive in the Washington zone, and Nosek had eluded John Carlson and

was all alone at the right post. Theodore saw Nosek and hit him with a perfect pass. Nosek one-timed it past Holtby, who never saw him.

The Knights were now back in front in what had turned into a wild, back-and-forth affair during which the lead changed four times. Fleury made sure there would not be a fifth change as he stopped the Capitals time and again. Nosek sealed Game 1 with an empty-net goal with three seconds remaining, and the Knights had held serve on home ice with a 6-4 victory.

"It's great when you see those guys get rewarded," Gallant said of Reaves and Nosek. "That fourth line went out there and battled hard and got pucks down below the goal line."

"We put fun ahead of everything, and you can tell," Reaves said. "Guys are having fun and they're smiling."

But there was also controversy to deal with in the aftermath. Wilson had leveled Marchessault with a blind-side check that forced the Knights' top scorer out of the game and to the locker room where he underwent concussion protocol. Wilson, a repeat offender when it came to crossing the line, claimed he didn't do anything illegal.

The play came less than six minutes into the third period. Marchessault didn't have the puck and Wilson could have chosen to avoid contact. But he leveled Marchessault and wound up going to the penalty box for interference. Marchessault would return to the game. But afterward, he still wasn't happy with the hit.

"I saw the hit. I remember everything," he said. "It was a late hit. I don't really need to talk more about it. I think the league will take care of it. We know what type of player he is

out there. You gotta keep your head up and try to make the play. I didn't make the play. It was a little late, but whatever."

More important, would Wilson get a call from George Parros, who headed up the NHL's Department of Player Safety? Wilson had already been suspended once during the playoffs for a hit on the Penguins' Zach Aston-Reese, which resulted in the Pittsburgh forward suffering a broken jaw. Wilson got four games for that incident. Gallant hoped the league would do something.

"I didn't like it," he said after the game. "It was a late hit."

Reaves, a tough guy in his own right, said: "That's Wilson being Wilson."

Caps coach Barry Trotz made a prediction regarding Wilson.

"I expect him to play in Game 2," he said.

Trotz would be right. The NHL took no further disciplinary action against Wilson and both teams moved on from the matter. But would there be payback and would Reaves be the one to deliver it?

There was one other issue heading into Game 2 on May 30. The ice at T-Mobile Arena, which had been consistently excellent throughout the season as well as during the first three rounds of the playoffs, appeared to present some problems in Game 1. Numerous times during stoppages of play members of the team's ice maintenance staff had to come out and patch up areas of the ice near both blue lines where the blue "Stanley Cup Final" logos had been painted in. Players from both teams complained about the quality of the ice, and after the game, Dan Craig, the NHL's ice guru, was seen conferring with George Salami, who is in charge of the ice in the building.



It had been hot all day, and with the doors to the arena constantly open to allow the entrance of equipment and other items, not to mention nearly 19,000 spectators emitting heat from their bodies, the ice may have deteriorated somewhat. The arena had hosted a concert Saturday featuring pop star Pink. And the ice, which had been redone to accommodate the new logos, was still somewhat fresh and not quite broken in by game-time Monday.

Salami defended his sheet, claiming there was nothing wrong with the ice. Nonetheless, there were going to be some adjustments made for Game 2.

As was the case in Game 1, the Knights jumped out to a 1-0 lead as James Neal took advantage of a miscue by defenseman Dmitry Orlov and scored on Holtby 7:58 into the first period. And as was the case in Game 1, here came Washington to retake the lead. Lars Eller, the Capitals' underrated third line center, beat Fleury from close range with 2:32 remaining and it was 1-1 going into the second period. Ovechkin then cashed in on a power play while Tuch was sitting in the box for cross-checking to give the Caps a 2-1 lead. Just over four minutes later, Brooks Orpik made it 3-1 as he beat Fleury from the point. Orpik hadn't scored a goal in more than two years, and he was the most unlikely of candidates to be a goal-scoring hero. Put it this way, no one was confusing Orpik with Ovechkin when it came to lighting the lamp.

The Knights managed to pull within a goal late in the second as Theodore scored on a power play with T.J. Oshie in the box for interference. And with the entire third period still to play and trailing only 3-2, there was no need to get overly concerned. A one-goal deficit was hardly insurmountable. Besides, the Knights had been great at home all year. Their fans

remained very much engaged and the Knights emerged from their locker room for the final 20 minutes with positive vibes and brimming with confidence.

But the Capitals were a confident bunch, too. They knew what this game meant. If they held on and won, they would get a split on the road, get home-ice advantage, and they would be putting themselves in a most advantageous position.

Still, it was Vegas and not Washington which played with desperation. The Knights continued to attack, forecheck hard and pressure Holtby, who was coming up big time after time, especially during a critical 5-on-3 Vegas advantage early in the third period.

Now, with just over two minutes to play and the his team clinging to the one-goal lead, Holtby would be called on at least one more time to bail out the Caps. The Knights had sent the puck into the Washington zone and it had taken a weird bounce off the side of the net. The puck came to Cody Eakin who was on the right side of the goal. Eakins had time to pass or shoot, and as he was deciding what to do, here came Tuch all alone headed toward the left post. Holtby was focusing on Eakin, who still had possession. Suddenly, Eakin put his pass to Tuch right on the tape and Tuch had nothing but an open net to shoot at. He was about to atone for his second-period penalty which Ovechkin scored during the power play.

Tuch elevated the puck slightly, and they were getting ready to hit the goal horn sound effect in the press box. But Holtby kept the horn silent. He dove to his right, extended the paddle of his goaltender's stick and got a piece of Tuch's shot.

It was an incredible save, one that would be etched into Stanley Cup lore. On NBC, Pierre McGuire proclaimed, "In Washington, that will forever be known as 'The Save'".

The Capitals still led 3-2. But there were still two minutes left and the Knights weren't dead yet. They pulled Fleury for a sixth attacker, and James Neal had two glorious chances. Colin Miller had a great chance as well. But none of their shots crossed the goal line. Washington held on for the 3-2 win, and the Caps left Las Vegas with home-ice advantage and a split in the first two games of the best-of-seven Final.

"It was a strange play because these boards have been really true," Holtby said in explaining "The Save" on Tuch. "It was kind of one of those things is we've been trying to get it up on the glass at our rims because usually goalies stay in their net. But Marc-Andre's been coming out a lot to get those because they've been so true, and one bounces weird at that time of the game. (Eakin) makes a great play to pass it over and I was just trying to get something there, trying to seal where I thought someone would shoot that. And luckily it hit me."

Trotz said a higher power was looking out for his goalie.

"To me, it was the hockey gods," he said. "They evened it up from last game. They (the Knights) could've tied it up but they didn't. I thought Braden was really good. I just think they played it the right way. Hockey gods always sort of even that out. I always talk about that. It was a great save, and honestly there was about 1:59 left. You could see the emotion on our bench. Once he made that save, I knew we were going to win the game."

Tuch was philosophical in describing his feelings, saying, "He made a great save."

It was also the understatement of the 21st Century.

While the Capitals were thrilled to be going home tied in the series, they were concerned about one of their stars. Evgeny Kuznetsov, their leading scorer, had injured his left arm after

being hit by Brayden McNabb in the first period and did not return. Game 3 was not until Saturday, June 2, so he'd have an extra day to heal up.

The Caps were no less pleased with the hit to Kuznetsov as the Knights were with Wilson's hit on Marchessault in Game 1. But like Wilson, McNabb faced no supplemental discipline for the Kuznetsov hit. And when the Caps skated in the warmups at Capital One Arena, No. 92 in red was on the ice.

After they dropped the puck to begin Game 3, No. 8 took over. Just 70 seconds into the contest, Ovechkin ripped a shot past Fleury for a 1-0 Washington lead. As had been the case at T-Mobile when Miller scored first in Game 1, Ovechkin's goal amped the home crowd even more.

And, in a bit of poetic justice, Kuznetsov scored past the midway point of the second period to give the Caps a 2-0 lead. It was still 2-0 heading into the third period, but the Capitals were doing a great job of limiting the high-scoring opportunities the Knights had so successfully created all season and during the playoffs. They had the speed to contain the Knights in the neutral zone and their defensemen and forwards were doing a great job of blocking shots. Even Ovechkin got in on the act.

The Knights managed to get back in it as Nosek scored his fourth of the playoffs to cut it to 2-1 at 3:29 of the third. Plenty of time remained and nobody was panicking on the Vegas bench. Gallant continued to roll his lines out, and he hoped one of them would find a way to get one past Holtby.

But it wasn't to be. The Caps were the ones who were opportunistic as Devante Smith-Pelly and Jay Beagle teamed up and Smith-Pelly scored the insurance goal with just over six minutes remaining to give the Caps a 3-1 lead. That would be

the final score as Washington took a 2-1 series lead. The Caps also had 26 blocked shots with 14 different players having blocked at least one Vegas shot.

More important, Trotz's adjustments forced the Knights to abandon their slick passing game and revert to a dump-and-chase mode. It wasn't the way they liked to play, but with Washington able to negate Vegas' overall team speed and use an effective forecheck, it changed the tenor of the game.

"I want us to play fast, play a quick game," Gallant said. "I think the biggest problem is we're in the offensive zone and turning pucks over down there. We're throwing pucks at the net and not getting pucks to the net. They're taking the puck from the offensive zone. Their D are joining the rush and they get a four-man attack. That's one of the biggest reasons. It's not turning the puck over in the neutral zone; it's turning it over in the offensive zone. We have to make sure we're strong on the puck, take it to the net more."

Game 4 was Monday, June 4, and Gallant was shuffling the deck again, trying to jump-start his team. Perron was a healthy scratch, and Tomas Tatar was back in. Perron had failed to score in the playoffs, and though Tatar had the one goal in Winnipeg, Gallant felt he might be a better option when it came to generating some offense.

As Game 4 got underway, it quickly became evident that Lady Luck was not with the Knights. Tuch hit the post early on, then Neal had an open net, and he hit the post instead. If either shot went in, the Knights might have been sitting pretty, or at least they might have been playing from in front.

"It probably changes the game," Neal said. "It's probably a different game after that. I had a wide-open net, and I just hit the post."

Instead, the Capitals scored three times over a 9:11 first-period span to lead 3-0. It became 4-0 late in the second period as Carlson scored on a Washington power play. Things were getting out of hand. Would Gallant consider yanking Fleury to rest him for what was now shaping up as an elimination Game 5?

Fleury stayed in the Vegas net and his teammates battled to make it respectable. Neal scored 5:43 into the third period and Reilly Smith added a goal less than seven minutes later to reduce the deficit to 4-2. But Kempny scored 1:13 after Smith to make it 5-2. Connolly closed it out with a power-play goal and a 6-2 Washington victory.

Things got a little chippy late in the game as Oshie broke Miller's nose after getting his stick up in his face, and a big scrum broke out in the Vegas zone as Oshie mixed it up with McNabb and Engelland. It didn't change the outcome, however. The Caps had held serve at home and had a 3-1 series lead. They were one win away from the franchise's first Stanley Cup.

"We obviously got some breaks at the start of the game," Holtby said. "Honestly, I thought (Neal's shot) was in, from my angle, and somehow it didn't go in."

The Knights were facing elimination for the first time, but they would try to stay alive at home. They still hadn't found a way to get more high-grade chances against Holtby. The Caps held a 24-8 edge in blocked shots, and it doesn't help when you can't hit an open net.

Vegas had not lost more than three straight games at any juncture in the franchise's brief history. Now, the Knights were faced with the harsh reality — if they lose a fourth straight, they won't get a chance to play again until October.

The talk was not to try and win three games, but one. And not trying to win one game, but win one period. “Shift by shift” was the mantra from the Knights’ locker room as they prepared to hit the ice for Game 5. The Capitals weren’t thinking too far ahead either. Yes, they had command of the series. Yes, they knew they were facing a challenge to close it out on the road. But it was going to be up to the home team to adjust and find a way. Trotz? He wasn’t about to change a thing.

The Caps were buoyed by the fact that several thousand of their fans had managed to find their way into the building. Apparently, many Golden Knights fans had decided to break their “Knights Vow” and not resell their tickets on the secondary online markets. For those Washington fans who made the trip to Las Vegas, it was a pricey proposition. Between airline tickets, hotels, food and drink, and game tickets, it was probably costing each of them a few thousand dollars. But what’s money when you have a chance to witness your team make history?

Gallant didn’t have many cards left to play at this point. But he made two moves. One was to sit Ryan Carpenter and get David Perron back on the ice. The other was that Will Carrier was ready to play. So he was in and Ryan Reaves was out. And as Game 5 got under way, the teams played somewhat cautious, trying not to make that fatal mistake.

It was still scoreless after the first period in which the two teams had combined for just 16 shots. That was fine with the Caps. They were playing with house money at this point, and should they fall behind and ultimately lose Game 5, they still had two more opportunities to win the Cup. The Knights did not enjoy such a luxury. They had to win. And when Jakob Vrana scored 6:24 into the second period to give Washington a

1-0 lead, everyone inside T-Mobile waited to see what the response would be.

Nate Schmidt, the former Capitals defenseman, said he and his teammates simply had to play better if they were to have any chance of coming back. And a little over three minutes after Vrana had scored, Schmidt tied it 1-1 as Smith set him up. He wristed a shot from inside the blue line which may have gone off a Caps player and past Holtby. Either way, he got credit for the goal, the game was tied 1-1 and the Knights had new life. At least momentarily.

Eleven seconds later, however, the Capitals were on a power play as McNabb was sent off for tripping. And with Ovechkin setting up in his office — at the left face-off circle half-boards — Backstrom got him the puck. Sure enough, Ovechkin fired it past Fleury to put Washington up 2-1. He was making a strong final push to win the Conn Smythe Trophy, which goes to the outstanding performer in the playoffs.

Once, there was talk that Fleury would be the recipient had the Knights won the Stanley Cup. But that talk had long since ceased.

Now the Stanley Cup was headed to T-Mobile Arena. Phil Pritchard and Mike Bolt, the Hockey Hall of Fame employees and longtime “Keepers of the Cup”, were in charge of delivering it to the arena in the event it was to be awarded. But the Knights weren’t ready for that eventuality. They tied the game a couple of minutes later when Perron was checked into Holtby and fell into the net as the puck hit him. The Caps challenged the goal, claiming interference. But the goal stood and the game was tied at 2-2. It was Perron’s first — and last — goal of the postseason.



With 29 seconds left in the period and the Knights on a 5-on-3 power play, Smith scored to give his team a 3-2 lead. And as they headed to their locker room, the Knights knew it would take more to keep the season going. It meant everyone getting involved at both ends of the ice and giving Fleury every opportunity to keep the puck out of his net.

In the Washington locker room, everything was calm. Trotz's message to his guys? Stay patient, play smart, keep working and wait for a break. The Knights were doing a better job of getting quality shots on Holtby as evidenced by the three goals, though Perron's was a bit of a fluke. Still, the Caps continued to block shots, clog the neutral zone and create good chances of their own.

And that persistence finally paid off as Smith-Pelly tied it at the midway point of the third period. He won a battle with Sbisà in the corner, got the puck to Orpik, then went to the front of the net. Miller tried to bat down Orpik's shot with his stick but he missed. Instead, Smith-Pelly had the puck hit his skate, and as he was falling, managed to get the blade of his stick on the puck and lift it over Fleury's glove.

The Capitals had tied it 3-3. Now the pressure was really on Vegas. Yes, there was still half the third period to play and there was always the possibility of sudden death overtime. But that was playing with fire. No, if the Knights were going to keep their season going, they needed to win Game 5 in regulation.

They looked to their top line of Karlsson, Marchessault and Smith to deliver. But the Capitals were hell-bent on not letting the trio beat them. On the flip side, Trotz was getting great play out of his bottom-six forwards because Gallant wasn't about to let Ovechkin, Kuznetsov, Backstrom and Oshie beat his team.

Andre Burakovsky, a member of the third line, had managed to get the puck after Sbisa had overskated it. He fed Connolly, who was cruising the slot, and Connolly's wrist shot was stopped by Fleury. But the puck was behind him and he couldn't locate it. Meanwhile, Sbisa was now in front of the net but not in a position to make a play on the puck and clear it out of the crease. Lars Eller was in position, however. The center of Washington's third line swooped in, and before anyone could react, deposited it into a now-empty cage to give the Capitals a 4-3 lead. The several thousand Caps' fans inside T-Mobile were celebrating along with tens of thousands back in D.C., where the team had opened the doors to Capital One Arena and had also set up a watch party outside nearby.

For both Smith-Pelly and Eller, it was their seventh goal of the playoffs, and both would be a part of history that was being written in Las Vegas. There was still 7:37 to go, and there was time for one last comeback by the home team.

The Capitals took the body, dove at every shot trying to block the puck. Holtby was staying strong in the Washington net, and with the Knights pushing forward as much as they could, trying to keep their season alive, the Capitals managed to maintain their poise and their narrow one-goal lead.

Fleury had been yanked for an extra attacker. But it didn't help. The final seconds ticked away, and as the horn sounded the Capitals raced to their goaltender and mobbed him as the celebration was underway.

After 44 years, the Washington Capitals were Stanley Cup champions. For the Vegas Golden Knights, their improbable, historic, record-setting run was over. They waited at the blue line and then lined up, led by Bellemare, to shake hands with

the victors. For the first time as a franchise, the Knights were on the wrong side of the handshake line.

And as they prepared to depart the ice, where they had been so successful, they raised their sticks to their fans, who had stuck around to give them one final standing ovation. Even the thousands of Capitals fans joined in to salute the home team which had provided the hockey world with so many thrills, mindful that the Knights had helped raise the sagging spirits of an entire city after it had endured a horrific tragedy prior to the start of the team's inaugural season.

Ovechkin, who had been drafted as the No. 1 overall pick by George McPhee in 2004, was voted the recipient of the Conn Smythe Trophy as the MVP of the playoffs.

Bettman walked out to make the presentation, and he was roundly booed. He said smart-alecky to the crowd, "Thank you Las Vegas, you truly are an NHL city." But nobody wanted to hear any wisecracks from the commissioner. He proceeded to award the Stanley Cup to Ovechkin, Washington's captain. And as Ovechkin and his Washington teammates celebrated on the T-Mobile ice, McPhee didn't stick around to watch what he had helped create. In his mind, it wasn't right. He retreated to the bowels of the arena and stayed there.



## 20. Reflections Of An Amazing Run

The Stanley Cup playoff scoreboard banner which hung inside the Golden Knights' offices at City National Arena had come up three X's short. The season was over. And for everyone, from owner Bill Foley to the secretaries and everyone else in the organization, it had been a long, hard journey.

For the players, the pain of having come up short was still fresh as they came to the rink the next morning to conduct their exit interviews, have any medical issues addressed and collect their belongings. Most teams usually take a day or two after the season ends for their exit day. But for the Knights, it had been a long enough year. No sense in delaying the inevitable.

There was talk of holding a parade or a celebration. But the team wasn't interested in any kind of parade. In fact, it tried to distance itself from such talk even before the Stanley Cup Final. City and county officials had begun preliminary planning earlier for such an eventuality. It was considered to be bad luck to talk about celebrating before you won anything, and the team had no interest in being a party to it.

The team would eventually agree to do a postseason celebration at the Fremont Street Experience in downtown Las Vegas a few days later. But it was more of a "Thank You" to the fans for their support. From the players' and coaches'

perspectives, there's nothing to celebrate when you're second-best.

To a man, everyone said it was a heck of a season, an amazing run and they were proud to have been part of it. They talked about coming together in training camp, bonding as a team, dealing with the myriad injuries, particularly when it came to the goaltenders.

"It's been an exceptional run, obviously," Gallant said on June 8. "From back in October to today, it's been unbelievable. For us to be playing until June 7th was an incredible story. We just took it one day at a time and one game at a time, all year long. We had an incredible run. We fell a little bit short of the big prize. But it was an unbelievable season. We got the best out of our team and that was really important for us."

Gallant said nobody had been talking Stanley Cup back in September.

"I didn't even think about it," he said. "I don't remember that question being asked at training camp. If they would have said playoffs, I would have laughed a little bit too, but to say the Stanley Cup? I wouldn't have even responded to that question."

"We had an incredible year. From day one there were no expectations about playoffs, there was no expectation about winning 20 games. It was about coming to play every night. I think I told you, and you are probably sick of me saying it, that it's about the next game. It's not about the game that happened, not the last one. So, we just take it one game at a time."

"We went through 82 games and finished first in our division, which was a great accomplishment for our players," Gallant continued. "They worked hard and they competed hard. You go into the playoffs thinking, you know what? It

would be incredible to win a couple of games here and try to win a first round series and it was a great experience for our players. We did an unbelievable job against LA, and to sweep the Kings, who are very good. It was an unbelievable series for our staff and our players. Then you go onto the next series and say, 'San Jose is a real good team' but you didn't fear them. You felt like if you played well you would win, and that's what happened.

"Then you play a team like Winnipeg, who to me was probably the best team in the NHL this season, and we go into that series, lose Game 1 and then everybody started to count us out.

"We peel out four games and win, to beat Winnipeg. It was an outstanding thing, but it wasn't like I was surprised by the way our team played the second half of the season and the confidence they built over the second half of the season. There wasn't a team that I was afraid of, and that's the way our players were. It didn't matter who we were going to play, if we played well we had a chance to win. That was the feeling with our group."

William Karlsson, who had a career year with 43 goals, said: "We made it almost all the way, and we are going to try to be better next year. That's our goal. I like the roster that we have, and we have the young prospects coming up too and it looks really good. So, the future is bright."

Nate Schmidt, who never kept his feelings inside, said: "It's a great group to be a part of. It makes you happy knowing that when you come back this is going to be the group that's going to be here. This is our guys that you started with, and hopefully have a chance to finish with.

"It's hard because in light of what just happened, but at the same time you look at everything that we have been through and if you look at the city, that's the best part. Even after the game you go and grab a drink, and people are just coming up to us and saying, 'We are proud to have you guys here.' It gives you the chills, and it's the reason why we play. It's not even just being a part of a hockey team, but a part of this community."

Back in training camp, the players looked around the room at each other and branded themselves with the "Golden Misfits" tag James Neal had bestowed upon the group. It was kind of funny, a bit cute and everyone seemed to embrace the concept. After all, they had all come to Las Vegas unwanted by their former teams. Even Gallant, who had been literally kicked to the curb by the Florida Panthers, was a Golden Misfit. Yet they had come together to have one of the most remarkable first seasons in sports history. It was truly one heck of a story and now it was over.

For some players, it was the last time they would step foot in the locker room. Free agency was looming and the Knights had four unrestricted free agents to deal with, including Neal and David Perron. Together, the duo had combined for 31 goals and 110 points, most of the time playing on the same line. Luca Sbisa and Ryan Reaves were also UFAs, and they also faced uncertain futures in Las Vegas.

George McPhee had to figure out how to handle Karlsson, who was a restricted free agent. The general manager could make Karlsson a qualifying offer at 105 percent of what he made in 2017-18. He also had similar situations with Colin Miller, Shea Theodore, Tomas Nosek and Will Carrier.



“Well, you have to be really smart on all of the deals that you do,” McPhee told the media on exit day. “It doesn’t matter where in the lineup you’re looking at, you have to be smart about what you do.

“We have all of these resources now and we’re in a cap world. You have to trust your instincts as a management group. You have to trust the reports from your pro scouting staff and you have to trust the data that you’re getting from your analytics group. That’s something that we didn’t have years ago and we have now. It tells you certain things and you have to pay attention. We put it all together and try to make the right decisions.

“Mistakes happen, and you don’t want to be a part of them,” McPhee continued. “They only get in the way of winning. There are different ways to make a team better. You look at all of the different resources and ways to do that, and figure out how we make this team better for next year.”

One of those ways is through the draft. The NHL Entry Draft was also rapidly approaching, and unlike a year ago, when the Knights had three picks in the first 15 selections, this year they would go to Dallas on June 22 without a first-round pick. Vegas had traded that pick to Detroit for Tomas Tatar, and as it turned out the Red Wings would pick 30th with the selection. From McPhee’s perspective it wasn’t that big a deal if the Knights didn’t have a first-round pick. There was always the possibility of a trade and getting back involved if they felt strongly about a player.

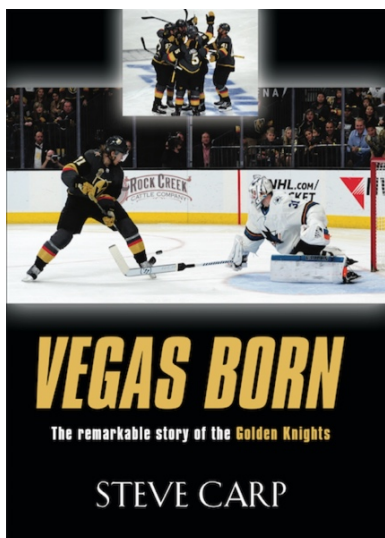
The Knights had drafted 12 players in the 2017 Entry Draft and the majority of them remained in the team’s future plans. Certainly the top four picks — Cody Glass, Nick Suzuki, Erik Brannstrom and Nicolas Hague — were making progress in

their development, and they were not about to be traded anywhere anytime soon.

Most of the team gathered near the D Las Vegas on June 13 for what was termed a “Stick Salute to Vegas” event. Originally, the team did not want to do anything, but after fans weighed in on social media that they wanted to show their appreciation, the team reconsidered.

“Once we had a chance to step back and really think about how this community supported our franchise every single day, it felt like, ‘You know what? We’ve got to do something’”, team president Kerry Bubolz said. “We just put our heads together and started thinking through what that would look like ... and we’re going to do an official stick salute to our fans.”

The temperature was in the triple digits, but more than 7,500 fans showed up to pay tribute to their heroes. McPhee and Gallant were there along with the players. Schmidt told the crowd: “I tell you guys, this is the most fun time I’ve ever had in my life. All of you are a part of it. These guys behind me, I just wanted to say thank you so much.”



*The Vegas Golden Knights were the most successful expansion team in the history of professional sports, making it to the Stanley Cup Finals in their first year. They also helped a city heal after a horrific mass murder at a concert before the season. Their success united the community and turned ordinary people into hockey fans.*

## **Vegas Born:**

### **The Remarkable Story of The Golden Knights**

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