

Vics reclaim Stanley Cup — beat Montreal hold off challenge by Toronto

by Bruce Cherney

The Winnipeg Victorias surprised hockey fans in Canada on February 14, 1896, when they wrested the Stanley Cup from the Montreal Victorias.

Just three years earlier, Lord Stanley of Preston, Canada's governor general, had established the cup for the amateur hockey champions of the nation. The Montreal AAA were the first to win the Stanley Cup followed by the Montreal Victorias, but it was the Winnipeg "Vics" who brought the cup to Western Canada for the first time.

"The Winnipeg whirlwinds swoop down on Montreal," Proclaimed the Daily Nor'Wester following the Vics' 2-0 victory. "Three cheers and a tiger for the Winnipeg Victorias! All Winnipeg today rejoices ..."

Unfortunately, the Winnipeg squad's claim on "the laurel wreath of victory" was short-lived. A few months later on December 30, 1896, the Montreal Victorias challenged and beat the Vics 6-5, reclaiming the Stanley Cup.

Over the next five years, Winnipeg tried three more times to lay claim to the cup. In 1899, play for the cup was decided for the first time in a three-game series. In that year, the Montreal Victorias beat the Vics two games to none.

In 1900, the Vics fared slightly better, taking the Montreal Shamrocks to a third game. The Shamrocks eked out a narrow 5-4 victory in the last game of the series.

But, 1901 was a turning point for the Vics. They had learned from past losses to their Eastern rivals. The team was reinforced and the stage was set for another challenge to take place in Montreal.

There were a number of changes to the Vics roster since 1896. Donald "Dan" Bain, a forward in the team's first Stanley Cup win, had taken over as captain and centre from Jack Armytage, who had become the team's president. Other players that hadn't played in 1896 were Burke Wood (left wing), Antoine "Tony" Gingras (right wing), Charles W. Johnstone (Rover), Magnus Flett (cover point), Art Brown (goal), John Marshall (spare) and Fred Cadham (spare).

Besides Bain, the other returnee was Rod "Doctor" Flett (rover), whose defensive play ensured the Vics won in 1896. Conspicuously absent in 1901 was George "Whitey" Merritt, who has been called the first great goaltender in Canadian hockey history. But, Brown seems to have aptly filled his shoes. In newspaper reports from the era, he is called a "wizard" for his spectacular saves.

One of the new faces on the team was Gingras, a Metis from St. Boniface. He started playing hockey in 1888, while attending St. Boniface College, by making a stick from a little tree and cutting a slice from a rubber lacrosse ball for a puck. In later life, he would become a minor league coach in St. Boniface and a scout for the Montreal Canadiens.

Bain, born on February 14, 1874 in Belleville, Ontario, was the overall athlete of the team. In fact, he is sometimes referred to as Manitoba's greatest all-time athlete, and has been inducted into the Manitoba and Canadian sports halls of fame, as well as the International Hockey Hall of fame.

At age 13, Bain won the Three Mile Roller Skating Championship of Manitoba. At 17, he was the province's all-around gymnastics champion, a title he held for three straight years. His skating skill is evident by his dozen figure skating titles, including pairs, fours and dance categories. He also won the Canadian trapshooting championship in 1903. Other sports he participated in were speed-skating, bicycle racing, snow-shoeing, lacrosse and golf. Bain

owned a successful grocer brokerage with headquarters at his Donald H. Bain Building "The Brokerage," 115 Bannatyne Ave., built in 1899 and now a municipally-designated heritage site.

Also absent from the 1901 squad was Fred Higginbotham who made a major contribution to the 1896 Stanley Cup victory. Higginbotham died in a freak horse-riding accident just seven months after the Vics' first cup victory. "He was an enthusiastic devotee of amateur athletic sports and was identified with the leading sports clubs of the city," reported the Manitoba Free Press on September 8, 1896. Higginbotham is buried in Bowmanville, Ontario, where he was born.

Wood and Marshall were defectors from the Stanley Cup champion Shamrocks, joining the Winnipeg squad for the 1901 season. Fred Scanlon, who played later in 1902, was also a defection from the Montreal team.

In the first game of the three-game series in Montreal on January 29, 1901, Wood netted two goals, while Gingras and Bain each scored for a 4-3 win. This set the stage for what would be the last and history-setting game of the series.

Just before the start of the January 31 game, Bain told reporters that all the players were feeling good about their chances of victory, a prophetic pronouncement. A CPR bulletin from the venue in Montreal said that when the Shamrocks stepped on the ice, the "applause was deafening" and the arena was "packed to overflowing." But, apparently not everyone was cheering for the Shamrocks, the Winnipeg Morning Telegram reported that "very early in the game it was plainly evident that the Winnipegs had lots of friends, and their colours were very much in evidence."

Bulletins were comparable to play-by-play accounts over radio today. People lined up outside telegraph offices, hotels or theatres to get near immediate word of the action on the ice. For example, this CPR telegram described the play on the ice in the final game: "Brennan secures; loses to Gingras, who loses to Trihey. Wood breaks a stick. Off side. Bain passes to Johnstone. Off side."

For 17 minutes in the first half (games were played in two periods), each team alternated in taking the attack to the other. "Then Bain and Gingras took matters in their own hands," reported the Morning Telegram. "Bain did the running, Gingras supported him." Gingras passed to Bain and the "puck flashed past McKenna (in goal for the Shamrocks), and Winnipeg had opened the ball" at the 17 minute mark. The Manitoba Free Press said Bain's shot was from 15 feet in front of the Shamrock net.

The game remained scoreless for the rest of the first half. The Morning Telegram said that the "Shamrock stock went up" in the second half "for they were playing a dashing, offensive game" which allowed them to tie the game at 1-1. The second half ended in a tie, setting the stage for overtime.

"The Shamrocks wanted a rest for 15 minutes (before the start of overtime), but the Winnipegs, knowing they had them going, would not listen to the proposition," said the Free Press. "It was a wise decision as the results would show. They had entirely the best of the play until Bain's sensational rush down the centre, unaided, settled the match and the series in favor of the Bisons (another nickname for the team, which was also referred to as the Winnipegs or Pegs). The overtime played was about seven minutes."

Bain's goal was the first overtime goal in Stanley Cup history. "... everyone was delighted that the man who did the trick was Danny Bain, captain of the seven, who had sacrificed so much for the time. He won the cup and the match with a dash which didn't differ from scores of others made by him during the game except that it resulted in winning a goal, the game, and the Stanley Cup.

"There was not a Winnipegger or ex-resident of the 'Bull's Eye' city at the game who under the excitement of the last few minutes would not have gladly given away a share of their earthly possessions just to see the 'wearers of

the red' (scarlet, actually was the colour of the Vics' jerseys) out the elusive gutta percha (rubber puck) between the posts, so anxious were they to see success crown the efforts of the Victorias."

When Bain scored the game-winner, the newspaper said half the rink sat in silence while the other half "rose as one man and broke into prolonged and frantic cheers." The Winnipeg supporters then poured onto the ice and "literally carried the boys into the dressing room, where they were hugged and mauled by their friends."

After the game, telegrams began to arrive in Montreal from Winnipeg, congratulating Bain and the Vics for returning the Stanley Cup to the city. "Danny you did it," said Jack Waugh in one telegram. "Delighted the honors came to a veteran. Please tell all the boys we are more than proud of them; they own the town."

"Bless your hearts. City is wild; crowds cheering on the streets," read another telegram.

The Morning Telegram was of the opinion that the Winnipeg squad had the advantage of play throughout the game. It also reported that the match was rough from the start "the play being for blood ..."

The Free Press was less kind in their assessment of the Vics' opposition, terming the Shamrocks as "effete" hockey players, although the "suspense was awful" until Bain scored the winning goal. The headline in the Free Press following the game was This Cup is Ours!

Like in 1896, the Vics would only hold onto the Stanley Cup for a short time. But unlike 1896, the Vics would successfully hold off a challenge. On January 21 and 23, 1902, the Victorias hosted the Toronto Wellingtons and defeated them 5-3 and 5-3 to retain the cup.

Reporting on the outcome, the Morning Telegram said: "After one of the hottest hockey matches ever seen in this city, after the supporters of the Victorias had been alternately plunged into the depths of despair and raised to the seventh heaven of delight, after the home team had played like champions and also like intermediates, the Vics pulled themselves together and won ... So far as the game is concerned, it was a peculiar one ... The Wellingtons have a style of play which is all their own. Some teams play for the man, some play for the puck. The Wellingtons do both, and on the side they use their own bodies a whole lot. This, combined with the fact that the Ontario rules were used, may to some extent account for the poor showing of the Vics in the first half."

Two months later, on March 13, 15 and 17, the Winnipeggers would lose the Stanley Cup at home to challengers Montreal AAA. The Vics took the first game 1-0, but Montreal won the next two games 5-0 and 2-1. "In spite of the fact that they had on Saturday evening (March 15) been beaten by the biggest score ever piled up against the club the game seven men came out last evening and put up the fastest, gamest exhibition of hockey ever seen here," reported the Morning Telegram after the March 17 game.

At the banquet in Winnipeg, following the last game of the series with the Montreal team and managers in attendance, Vics president Armytage said "the club had learned to take its medicine like men ... The Victorias had not duly appreciated the strength of the visitors until the other night and then they realized that they had to 'play ball,'" according to the Morning Telegram. "They had lost and won before and they hoped to win again."

But, a Winnipeg team would never again win the Stanley Cup, although challenges would be issued by local teams until 1909. (Before they left for Phoenix, the Winnipeg Jets made it to the NHL play-offs 11 times from 1982 to 1996, but never won the Stanley Cup. The Jets did win the Avco Cup, emblematic of hockey supremacy in the former World Hockey Association, three times in 1976, 1978 and 1979.)

In total, the Victorias competed for the Stanley Cup eight times, holding it three times. In 1903, they came close to winning back the cup, but fell in four games — 2-1-1 — to the Montreal AAA. This was the last time they

challenged for the cup.

In 1904, the Winnipeg Rowing Club lost their Stanley Cup challenge to the Ottawa Silver Seven, two games to one. The Brandon Wheat Kings also tried to bring the cup back to Manitoba in that year, but they too fell to the Ottawa team, losing two straight games.

The Kenora Thistles, although not a Manitoba team but playing their regular season in the Manitoba senior league, won the Stanley Cup in 1907 by defeating the Montreal Wanderers two games to zero.

The last time a local team challenged for the Stanley Cup was in 1909, when the Winnipeg Maple Leafs travelled to Montreal to meet the Wanderers. The Maple Leafs were out of their depth, losing 11-5 and 9-3.

The Maple Leafs, although members of a fledgling local professional league, demonstrated that Manitoba hockey teams could no longer compete for the Stanley Cup against professional teams from the East.

By the late 1900s, the ranks of Eastern teams were filled by the very best professional hockey players, hired guns who played for the highest bidder, moving across Ontario and Quebec to whatever team made the best offer. In Manitoba, professional "teams could not generate the revenue to pay the kind of salaries that were being paid by Eastern clubs," wrote Brandon University history professor Morris Mott in the Manitoba Pageant (summer/spring 2002) article, An Immense Hold in the Public Estimation: The First Quarter Century of Hockey in Manitoba, 1886-1911.

"Two seasons later, in 1911-12, the Patrick brothers, Lester and Frank, established a major professional league on the West Coast using the first Canadian artificial ice arenas, and the competition for good players became even keener."