



- Researched and written for the Manitoba Hockey Hall of Fame by John Jameson

125 years ago, Winnipeg and its Victorias hockey club were still basking in the glory of their stunning 2-0 upset of the Montreal Victorias earlier that year to win the Stanley Cup.



It was the era when the Stanley Cup was a challenge trophy and hockey fans in eastern Canada were deeply troubled that Lord Stanley's chalice had been taken by the "blizzards of the north" and taken West for the first time.

Within weeks of that historic match, the Montreal squad would win their league title allowing them to challenge Winnipeg in an attempt to return the Cup East.

The Montreal club and its fanbase were indignant at the loss of the Stanley Cup and pressured for an early re-match. However, warm weather would curtail a confrontation that spring and while Stanley Cup governors approved the challenge, it would be put off until later in the year in Winnipeg. This gave Winnipeggers ten months to savour the title of World Champions.

That September, joy of the victory had been clouded with the accidental death of Winnipeg Victorias forward Fred Higginbotham. The amiable Higginbotham was frolicking with a friends' family when he jumped on a small horse. As he playfully cantered across the yard the horse made a sudden turn and a clothesline caught Fred across the neck throwing him from the animal. Higginbotham suffered a broken neck. In a paralyzed state, he remained conscious before passing away in the early morning hours of September 7, 1896.



Winnipeg's sports community were stunned at the news. 'Higgy' was an extremely popular sportsman in the city. An outstanding athlete in lacrosse and hockey, he would be difficult to replace, but someone would be needed to fill his spot on the Vics roster.



Charlie Johnstone, a member of the local rival Winnipeg HC, was a gifted local athlete. He would be given the nod, and by November talk in Winnipeg would heat up over defence of the title.



Upon presentation of the Stanley Cup in 1892, Lord Stanley had assigned trustees to put in place and uphold the rules of the Dominion hockey championship of Canada;

- The Cup is automatically awarded to the team that wins the title of the previous Cup champion's league, without the need for any other special extra contest.
- Challengers for the Cup must be from senior hockey associations, and must have won their league championship. Challengers will be recognized in the order in which their request is received.
- The challenge games (where the Cup could change leagues) are to be decided either in a one-game affair, a two-game total goals affair, or a best of three series, to the benefit of both teams involved. All matches would take place on the home ice of the champions, although specific dates and times would have to be approved by the trustees.
- Ticket receipts from the challenge games are to be split equally between both teams.
- If the two competing clubs cannot agree to a referee, the trustees will appoint one, and the two teams shall cover the expenses equally. If the two competing clubs cannot agree on other officials, the referee will appoint them, and the two clubs shall also pay the expenses equally
- A league could not challenge for the Cup twice in one season.

On November 16th, 1896 Montreal representatives had visited the Stanley Cup trustees in Ottawa to confirm details of their challenge match with Winnipeg.

Montreal brought with them seven conditions for review, with the Trustees agreeing on three; that gate receipts will be split equally between teams; the referees will be agreed upon by both teams, and; there will be a right of appeal to the trustees on any question arising in Winnipeg in regards to the match.

Other conditions that could not be confirmed until Winnipeg were consulted, were; the dates of the challenge; whether it would be a best-of-three series or a single match; would the Trustees select the referee; and finally, a request that the championship be played under the eastern rules of the Amateur Hockey Association of the Montreal, Ottawa and Quebec league.

The Trustee's response on the final four conditions were; dates could not be confirmed without consulting Winnipeg but the challenge would occur between December 29 and January 2; consultation with Winnipeg, as the defending champions, would decide whether it would be one match or best-of-three; rather than the Trustees selecting a referee, each club was asked to submit three names for referee; and if the clubs could not agree on rules, it would be left to the referee to decide or the game would be played half under eastern rules and half under western rules.

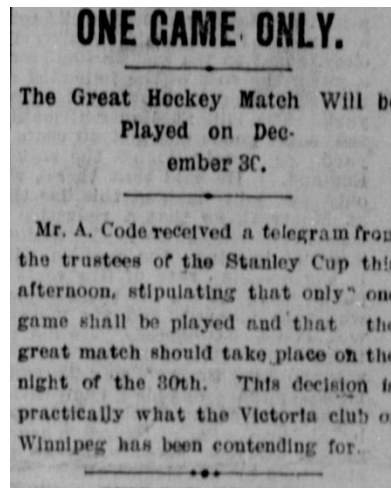
The Montrealers were hopeful that Winnipeg would agree on a best-of-three as the Eastern league schedule did not commence until the new year and they would not have played any games of meaning before heading West. Winnipeg would not be accommodating, however. Their first challenge back in February had been a single game in Montreal due to the home team having a scheduling conflict with their own league. Winnipeg had requested the Montrealers adjust their league schedule, but to no avail and a single game was played.



By November 19th, the Winnipeg Victorias had received the formal challenge which had been approved by the Stanley Cup trustees. Winnipeg was facing the same situation as Montreal had in their first challenge match, with their own provincial playdowns, and would only offer a one game title match. The Stanley Cup trustees tried their best to convince Winnipeg to play more than one game but to no avail.

On December 11th, the Winnipeg Victorias were at their home McIntyre Rink on Albert Street practicing their lifts and shooting skills when they received word that the championship would be a single game to be played on Wednesday, December 30th at the McIntyre. The teams could not agree on a referee so the Stanley Cup trustees had appointed Weldy Young of Ottawa to oversee the match. Western hockey fans would soon be gripped in excitement in anticipation of the match.

After a series of joint practices with the local Winnipeg team, the hometown Vics played their first Senior league match that winter against that same team on December 17th. Despite winning 3-2, Vic supporters were concerned over the inconsistent play of the Vics. Five days later, the two teams met again. This time the Vics moved their lineup around with Rod Flett stepping into the cover position. The end result was an 8-0 whitewash by the Vics and a happier group of fans.



The fifteen-member Montreal team were in high spirits when they boarded their train East on Christmas morning. Arriving in Winnipeg on Sunday evening, December 27th, the Montrealers were greeted at the CPR station by the Winnipeg club members along with a sizeable crowd of hockey fans. The Montreal team was taken by open sled and put up at the Manitoba Hotel.

The visiting Montrealers generated much excitement in the city with over 700 fans attending their practice at the McIntyre Rink on Monday morning. As the team went through its paces it was quite apparent to all that the Montreal team was fit and ready. The upcoming match would be the greatest display of hockey Winnipeg had ever seen.



Crammed into the backside of Albert Street close to Notre Dame, the McIntyre's seating capacity had been increased to 2,000. The Mac was an odd-shaped rink. One end was oval and the opposite end square. The home-town Vics would have the advantage of knowing how to play favourable bounces.

The game's reserved seats had gone on sale December 24th and were quickly sold out. By noon of game day a lineup had started to form for the Standing Room Only area. Some individuals who arrived early were buying lots of 25 tickets for friends while another enterprising fellow swung a deal for a ticket by trading 2 1/2 tons of coal for a seat. On the street, scalpers were doing brisk business. A hockey fan from Calgary was thrilled to secure a seat for an astronomical \$12. As game-time approached a small gate was opened and those fortunate to gain entrance raced to the prime spots in the rink.

The lively crowd began to chant and sing and at 8:15 the maroon jerseys of the Montreal Victorias made their way onto the ice to a warm welcome. Shortly after, the McIntyre Rink rafters rattled and shook as the pro-Winnipeg crowd greeted their hometown Victorias as they skated onto the ice looking resplendent in their famous Garnet jerseys with the Bison crest. The officials for the match were Weldy Young of Ottawa and Umpires – A. Shearer, Montreal; D. Clark, Winnipeg, and Shaw, Ottawa. After a very brief skate, Referee Young put the puck into action at 8:20 and the Stanley Cup awaited the winner.

In the first minute of play the Winnipeg boys took advantage of those odd boards and fired the puck into the Montreal end. Winnipeg's Dan Bain corralled a bizarre bounce of the end boards and fired the puck into the net. The McIntyre exploded as fans went wild, but Referee Young was using a whistle that could barely be heard and had called an offside. The goal was disallowed and a fast and even pace of play quickly resumed. Another offside goal was soon called back, this time on Montreal.

At the 6:30 mark, Dan Bain would be fed a pass off a Tote Campbell run and this time made no mistake in scoring. The McIntyre's roof would once again be tested in celebration and before the crowd could settle down, Campbell would take an Armytage pass and put Winnipeg up 2-0.



Back and forth action resulted in great saves by both goalies, Gordon Lewis of Montreal and Whitey Merritt for Winnipeg. A scrimmage in front of Montreal's Lewis resulted in the puck landing on the stick of Attie Howard who swiftly put the Winnipeggers up 3-0. The crowd was wildly roaring its approval.

Campbell was sent to the fence with an infraction for kicking the puck. Ernie McLea, who had been playing a great game for Montreal would finally get his team on the board. Corraling his own rebound off a hot shot, he fired it into the Winnipeg goal. Another penalty, this time to Charles Johnstone for tripping resulted in Montreal's second goal with Shirley Davidson converting a Graham Drinkwater pass.

The goalies continued their spectacular play and just before the first half ended Montreal was furiously dominating play. Suddenly, Bain stole the puck and he and Howard put on a masterful display of puck possession before Howard fired in his second of the night and Winnipeg restored their 2-goal lead as the 1st half ended.

After a fifteen-minute rest, both teams returned to the ice invigorated. Action was fast and hard and Winnipeg goalie Whitey Merritt was tested early. Play returned to the Montreal end and an apparent goal was waved off, much to the displeasure of the Winnipeg fans. The Montrealers brought the action back to Merritt and a shot by Davidson deflected off the edge of Flett's skate and slipped past the Winnipeg goalie. It was 4-3 Winnipeg.

Montreal applied pressure and forward Bob McDougall made a tremendous run towards the Winnipeg goal. His first shot was stopped by Merritt and the rebound went to McLea who passed it back to McDougall. Another tremendous stop by Merritt but this time McLea would not be denied and the score was tied 4-4.

Back home in Montreal, bedlam ensued! The Montreal Daily Star newspaper had arranged for fans to gather and receive up-to-the-minute game reports via telegraph. The Victoria Rink in Montreal was packed with revellers attending a carnival cheering on every report.

The Winnipeg crowd had been silenced by McLea's second goal but the home squad quickly broke out of their doldrums with pressure on the Montreal net. Lewis would not yield however, and Montreal's McDougall was becoming a handful for the Winnipeg defence.

The Montrealers were swift and determined. After a Lewis save, McDougall secured the puck and made the run of the evening resulting in a goal. Montreal had taken the lead 5-4!

It was now or never for Winnipeg and play was soon furious around the Montreal net. A broken goalpost caused a brief delay giving the teams a rest. With twelve minutes to play, Winnipeg Captain Armytage switched Rod Flett and Charlie Johnstone, putting Flett at Cover.

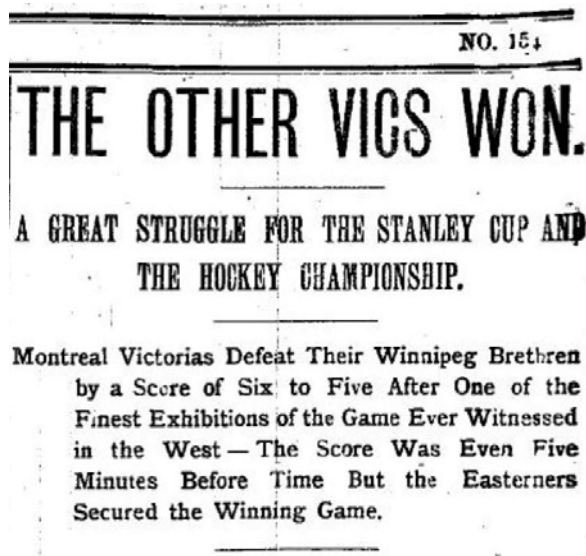
The intense play continued until Winnipeg Captain Jack Armytage stole the puck from McDougall and made a run to the Montreal net. Firing a shot on the Montreal goal, it was turned back by Lewis, the puck came out to Campbell who quickly passed to Dan Bain. Bain's shot found its way through the goal



and the McIntyre Rink erupted again with the crowd roaring its pleasure amid hats and handkerchiefs waving in delight.

With the home crowd's support loudly behind them, Winnipeg pressed the Montreal goal, only to be denied by Lewis. Finally, with time running out, Montreal's Drinkwater stole the puck and made a direct run to Merritt and the Winnipeg goal. In the dying seconds Drinkwater passed the puck to McLea, who had raced to catch up to him. McLea would notch the first hat-trick in Stanley Cup history, to seal a 6-5 Montreal victory.

The crowd stood and applauded the Montrealers on their win. They had just witnessed the greatest sporting event in Winnipeg's short history. After the game, players from both teams attended a dinner at the Manitoba Hotel and Montreal Victorias captain Mike Grant was officially presented with the Cup.



The Montrealers were full value for their efforts and effusive in their appreciation for how they were treated by the City of Winnipeg. On January 2nd, they took on the Winnipeg HC in a spirited exhibition, winning 3-2. They left next day with a new appreciation of Winnipeg as a sporting city.

The Winnipeg Victorias were left wishing they'd agreed to a best-of-three. However, despite their disappointment at losing the Cup, they would continue to dominate the Western Canadian hockey scene and returned to Stanley Cup glory twice more in 1901 and 1902.

Winnipeg Victorias – George Merritt Rod Flett (point), Charlie Johnstone Charles Johnstone, Dan Bain, Jack Armytage (Captain), Colin "Tote" Campbell, Tom "Attie" Howard, Bobby R Benson, Jack Sheppard (goal-played 1 regular season game), E.B. Nixon (President), Able Code (Vice President/Manager), J. Carter (Mascot/Trainer).

Montreal Victorias - Harold Henderson, Mike Grant (captain), Bob McDougall, Graham Drinkwater, Shirley Davidson, Ernie McLea, Robert Jones, Cam Davidson, David Gillilan, Stanley Willett, Gordon Lewis, W. Wallace.