

THE 1919 STANLEY CUP CHAMPIONSHIP

The One That Wasn't

By Frank Cosentino

IN SOME WAYS, THE STANLEY CUP SERIES OF 2002–03 was similar to the one played in 1918–19. It was after a war (Gulf War II), during a world-wide epidemic (SARS), and Ottawa made it to the second-last round before losing. This series too, was an east-west meeting but with a twist: Montreal represented the east, Seattle, the west. The biggest differences, though, were that no one was arrested, no one died and, not surprisingly, there was a Stanley Cup champion!

In the early days of Stanley Cup history, the two most common ways a team could win the trophy were by challenging for it or by playing in the same league and finishing ahead of the current Stanley Cup holder. It was a given in this era that the new champion of the same league as the then current Cup-holders was considered to have won the trophy as well. In addition to challenges and defeating league champions, there was also a third way to win the Stanley Cup: a trustees' decision. These first guardians of the Cup were newspaperman P.D. Ross and Sheriff John Sweetland, both of Ottawa. (William Foran took over from an ailing Sweetland in 1907). The trustees' decision came into play in determining a Stanley Cup champion on at least two separate occasions. The first was when the Montreal Amateur Athletic Association (MAAA) was simply awarded the trophy for 1893 because it was perceived by the trustees that the team played in the strongest league in the country, the Amateur Hockey Association of Canada.

The Stanley Cup series of 1919 was played during a transitional time in the trophy's history — a time when the original challenge aspect of the trophy was giving way to a time when only one league (the NHL) would be left to compete for it. By the early 1910s, challenges approved by the trustees were becoming less common. High profile leagues, such as the National Hockey Association (created under the direction of the O'Briens of Renfrew) and the Pacific Coast Hockey Association (the western league started by two former Renfrew

Millionaires, the Patrick brothers, Frank and Lester) had blocked that approach, arguing that their players were the best available. The NHA and PCHA champs began meeting in an annual Stanley Cup series in 1914. The NHL would continue this relationship after its formation in 1917.

Still, the trustees continued to have a voice in Stanley Cup affairs. A second occasion when the trustees had to determine a Cup winner arose at the end of the 1918–19 season. The Great War of 1914 to 1918 was very recent history and a flu epidemic was raging throughout the world. The combination had a disastrous effect: the series was abandoned, no winner declared, a player died, and Toronto, a team which had been eliminated from contention by virtue of a last-place finish in its league, remained the defending Stanley Cup holder for the next season.

In the first year of the NHL's operation in 1917–18, the Toronto Arenas defeated the Vancouver Millionaires to become Stanley Cup champions. The games were played in Toronto and were as much a source of curiosity as they were of championship hockey. Rules were not uniform. Games alternated between eastern six-man hockey and the western style of play: seven-man teams and a forward pass zone between the blue lines. It was a best-of-five series and it was obvious that each side felt more comfortable with its style of play; each team won under its version of rules. Toronto, being the host, played three games of the five under eastern rules and won the 1917–18 series and the Stanley Cup three games to two.

The next year, 1918–19, was not a good one for the Toronto team. It finished last with a 5–13 record. Top finisher Montreal defeated second-place Ottawa four games to one in a seven-game series. The Canadiens were the champions of the NHL, the league in which Toronto played, and according to tradition, therefore, the new holders of the Stanley Cup ... or at least one would have thought!



The 1917 Stanley Cup champion Seattle Metropolitans (l-r): Bobby Rowe, Cully Wilson, Jack Walker, Bernie Morris, Frank Foyston, Jim Riley, Roy Rickey, Ed Carpenter and Hap Holmes. All but Riley and Carpenter were back with the Mets in 1918–19, though Bernie Morris did not play in the Stanley Cup series with Montreal that spring.

The Canadiens were all set to journey to Seattle to defend their laurels but, in retrospect, it was the series that wasn't.

There were more than the usual twists and turns in the international showdown. Seattle was no novice to Stanley Cup play. It had won the Stanley Cup in 1916–17 as a member of the PCHA — the first American team to do so. Meanwhile, in 1919, the NHL had been ordered by the Cup trustees to declare a champion by March 12. Aware of that deadline, the playoff between Ottawa and Montreal was completed by March 6, six full days before Seattle and Vancouver began their series. As a result, it was a leisurely train ride to the west coast for the Canadiens who were to wait almost two weeks before meeting victorious Seattle for the coveted trophy.

The Metropolitans had defeated Vancouver in a two-game total-goals final, winning 6–1 at home before losing 4–1 in Vancouver. They had some outstanding players, among them goal scorer Bernie Morris. Their bad boy of the league, enforcer Cully Wilson, was guaranteed to cause the opposition to keep their heads up. The nets were guarded by the same Harry Holmes who had been

the goaler for Toronto when they won the Cup the previous year.

Bernie Morris was a story in himself. He had been a virtual scoring machine in Seattle's victory over the Canadiens in the Stanley Cup of 1916–17. He had won the PCHA scoring title that season and capped it off with 14 goals in the four games with the NHL's best. In 1918–19 he was leading his league in scoring right up until the last game when Cyclone Taylor caught him to finish with 23 goals to Morris' 22. His season ended abruptly, and in mystery, with the last game of the regular schedule, a 3–1 victory over Victoria on March 5.

Charles Coleman, in his book *The Trail of the Stanley Cup*, mentions that Morris, an All-Star, "did not appear in the play-offs or Stanley Cup series of 1918–19 and was possibly down with the flu which raged that spring." There is another explanation. According to Eric Zweig, writing in the Fall 2001 issue of *The Hockey Research Journal*, Morris, a Canadian who worked in the United States, registered with the military in both Canada and U.S. for the Great War (not the Stanley Cup, the other one). He had received an exemption from service but

when the Americans entered the War, belatedly, Morris' status changed. His draft notice was sent to his home in Vancouver. The Seattle player, who was working in northern B.C. at the time, claimed later that he never received it. He returned to his team for the hockey season. Once it was over, he was arrested, charged with draft evasion and convicted of desertion. His sentence was two years of hard labor to be served in Alcatraz.

There is no record as to whether he ever served it. What is known, however, is that once the 1918–19 regular season schedule was completed, Morris did not play in the PCHA championship games nor the Stanley Cup series! He only returned to Seattle one year later for the Stanley Cup playoffs of 1919–20 against the NHL champion Ottawa Senators. Ottawa chose not to dispute Morris being in Seattle's lineup even though he did not play a single game for them during the whole season.

There were many topics of conversation about the Stanley Cup series of 1918–19. The Canadiens were in the midst of their legend building. George Vezina was in the nets. Newsy Lalonde, Didier Pitre and Odie Cleghorn were among the top five scorers in the NHL. And they had their own version of Seattle's Cully Wilson. Joe Hall, known better as "Bad Joe" Hall, was the NHL's tough guy. In his pre-Canadien days, he had legendary battles with Newsy Lalonde, now his teammate. They were classic "knock-em-down, drag-em-out, last-man-standing wins," all to be forgotten when they were on the same side. Hall fought anyone and everyone over his career, including referees. He had been expelled from games and from leagues and once was arrested in Toronto for rough play.

Rules of the game were still not uniform in 1918–19. The west preferred the old game of seven-a-side hockey. Curiously, though, mostly because of the innovative Patrick brothers, Lester and Frank, they were advanced in their thinking enough to initiate a forward pass zone 40 feet each side of the center line. The ice might have appeared cluttered with 14 players a side, but it meant that teams relied on short quick passes. They were forward and back, the early version of the "give and go" in the zone and in the end created more opportunities for themselves, especially when players on the move caught their opponents flat-footed because of the new tactics. The east later decided to adopt the forward pass rule but stuck to their own version of six-a-side hockey, in vogue since 1910–11.

The 1919 series began in Seattle on March 19. Seven-a-side prevailed in the first game. Seattle moved with great skill; the Canadiens seemed confused. The ice appeared to be too crowded. There was always an extra Metropolitan player ready to poke check away the puck. Morris or no Morris, Seattle won the first game 7–0! The next game was played under eastern rules three days later and was won by Montreal 4–2. Newsy Lalonde scored all four Canadien goals. Back to western rules on March 24. Another easy Seattle victory, this one by a 7–2 score.

Lalonde had been neutralized. The fourth game, played March 26, has been described by some as the greatest game ever played on the coast. At the end of regulation time it was tied 0–0. An extra period of overtime solved nothing. The fifth game, under western rules, went to overtime too. The Canadiens had fallen behind 3–0 but rallied to tie the game 3–3. Odie Cleghorn scored at 15:57 of overtime. The Canadiens won 4–3.

Amid all of the excitement, there were ominous signs. The flu, in epidemic proportions throughout the world since the fall of 1918, was beginning to have an impact. Seattle's Cully Wilson had collapsed on the ice. "Bad Joe" Hall was in a state of exhaustion, too sick to continue. He was taken to the hospital where his temperature was recorded in the dangerously high range. Lalonde, Billy Coutu and Jack McDonald, along with manager George Kennedy, were ordered to bed.

The Stanley Cup championship was in jeopardy. Kennedy suggested that Montreal replace the sick players with members of the Victoria team. Seattle declined. No other compromise was acceptable; the last game of the series was called off and no winner was declared. On April 5, the hockey world was shocked to learn of the full extent of the ravages of the flu. Joe Hall had lost his last fight and died in the hospital where he was being treated.

NHL records show no Stanley Cup champion listed for the 1918–19 season. Some might argue that in keeping with tradition the Montreal Canadiens should have been declared the Stanley Cup holders. After all, they had finished as champions of the NHL ahead of the Toronto Arenas, Stanley Cup holders of 1917–18. But, obviously, trustees Foran and Ross still had the option available to them of making that determination. Under the circumstances, they chose to declare that there was no Stanley Cup holder in the season of 1918–19. It was the flu that reigned supreme.

Though the trustees did not formally relinquish control of the Stanley Cup until 1947, their influence over championship affairs were greatly lessened in 1926–27 when the NHL was left as hockey's only major professional league and the Stanley Cup became the Cup of the NHL.